

Count On It!

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The Third Sunday of Advent
Reception of New Members
Holy Communion
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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-9, 19-28

“For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.” -- Isaiah 61:11

One of the disagreements we Christians had back at the time of that big family feud now known as the Reformation was about the sovereignty of God’s will.

That’s the theological way of asking, “Is God in charge or not?” Another way to approach the topic – and the way that actually contributed to the break-up of Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth century – is to ask, “Can you get God to do what you want God to do?” or, even more crudely, “Can you manipulate the divine?”

You might remember, from the church history we learned in confirmation class, that one of the abuses the church had fallen into during the Middle Ages was the selling of indulgences. An indulgence, religiously speaking, is the remission of temporal punishment for sins already forgiven.

We don’t have time this morning to go into the theological intricacies of sin and punishment – or what had become various sins and their sundry punishments in the theology of the Medieval church – but whatever the merits of the system of indulgences, by the time of the rebuilding of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome that started in 1517, the system was being grossly misunderstood and flagrantly misused. People were making themselves rich by selling what looked increasingly like bogus indulgences, and the folks who protested this abuse said that God’s will is sovereign – God’s in charge, and we’re not – and God cannot be manipulated by our acts of piety or contrition, including prayer.

So praying for a dead loved one to a particular saint at a particular shrine during a particular pilgrimage for a particular sum of money did not reduce that person’s time in purgatory by days or years or even centuries. The reformers said that not only was the system of indulgences not based in Scripture, but purgatory itself was not scriptural and both ideas needed to be scrapped.

And the reformers took as one of their scriptural touchstones Jesus’s famous words in the Garden of Gethsemane, “If it be thy will, let this cup pass from me.” Jesus’s fervent prayer that he not undergo martyrdom was conditioned on God’s will: “If it be thy will.” As we all know from the story, it was not, and Jesus was crucified.

Jesus predicted both his death and resurrection, but believing that he would be raised from death didn’t change his wish and prayer to avoid it. Jesus did not get what he wanted, except to remain faithful to God’s will – he got that. He did not want to suffer and die, but that’s what happened, because it was God’s will that it should.

That’s always been a hard idea for Christians to grasp, and not just Christians, but everyone with a sensitive conscience. Why would God will Jesus’s suffering and death?

Any parent today who did such a thing would be considered sadistically deranged, and thinkers going back at least as far as the writer of the book of Job have wrestled with this problem of trying to justify God's will in what often seems to be a very cruel world.

Rabbi Harold Kushner made a notable attempt at addressing this problem in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, and he faced the problem head-on: innocent suffering is not supposed to be the way the world works, and yet it does, and the answer religious people have come back to again and again is that it's a mystery why the world is this way.

Well, mystery isn't a very satisfying answer for a lot of people, and they can't force themselves to believe in a loving and powerful God who allows such terrible things to happen in the world as fill our headlines almost on a daily basis. If it isn't Ebola in Africa, it's the carnage in Syria or a twelve-year-old child being shot by police. Sweetly singing "Jesus loves me" in the face of realities like those is too much for some people to stomach, and they disavow religion altogether. They want nothing to do with a "name-it-and-claim-it" sort of theology that says if you pray with just the right words and perform just the right rituals and live just the right sort of life, God will give you a happy life. A lot of serious, thoughtful, compassionate thinkers don't believe that. I don't either, and I hope none of you do. It's not true to experience and it's not true to the whole witness of Scripture.

But this is: "For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations."

That's the prophet Isaiah expressing his belief in the sovereignty of God's will. He doesn't say that God will give us what we want, unless what we want is righteousness and praise – and justice and peace and holiness and mercy. Those, and not the emotional and creature comforts derived from our way of doing things, is what God wills. And because God wills them, they will happen. You can count on it.

That's one of the prominent themes of Advent. God can be counted on. God is faithful. God's promises can be trusted. It's not always easy to see God's will at work because we live so close to the details, and the details can be tough. The Kansas farm wife knew this when a tornado came roaring through her part of the state and reduced her barn and chicken coop to piles of rubble. When she and her family emerged from their storm cellar, she surveyed the damage around her and said, "There's got to be a blessing in here somewhere."

That's faith in God's ultimate will, and it's not blind. It's confident and firm and useful. It's the kind of faith that sees you through the troubles that are an inevitable part of life. Robert Schuller titled one of his books *Tough Times Never Last, Tough People Do* and that's the sort of person a faith grounded in God makes you – reliable, resilient, flexible, creative.

This sort of faith doesn't say that everything is wonderful or that everything that happens is God's will. An abusive partner is not God's will, nor is a car full of teenagers slamming into a telephone pole, nor is a baby born to live just for hours or days or months. The particulars of our lives are not the same as God's will any more than a single tree constitutes the biosphere. The events of history, including our histories, occur within the context of God's will, which is far broader and deeper than our limited experience and imagination can apprehend.

And that's why we have faith. It takes serious faith to trust that behind the chaos and the suffering and the pain is love, but the alternative is to trust in nothing except ourselves or a nihilistic despair. For Christians, who take both nature and human nature seriously, neither of those alternatives is a viable option. We know we didn't create

ourselves, and we know that human beings eventually let you down. Those two facts, it has seemed to some serious thinkers, are very good reasons to believe in God, the God who inevitably touches the lives of women and men across the ages with a Holy Spirit, and righteousness and praise spring up as reliably as cabbages and the lilies of the field.

Friends, we all know that there are uncertainties in life, and plenty of them. But we also know that behind and beneath those uncertainties is a fundamental goodness that keeps pushing its way into our midst. And no matter how much suffering we experience – or inflict – that goodness returns, again and again, with or without our cooperation and participation.

There will come a day, sooner or later, when the fighting in Israel and Palestine will stop. There will come a day, sooner or later, when all the people on this planet will have what they need to survive and flourish. There will come a day, sooner or later, when the systems that depend on violence for their survival will be gone for good. The goodness to which we aspire, which we know in our bones is right, is the life we and all the planet will live, one day, sooner or later.

That's God's will, and it is sovereign. We can see it all around us, every day, in countless expressions of divine love, if we'll allow the eyes of our hearts to be opened to it. It's there, and you can count on it.