



The Whole World in His Hands

Act 17: 22-28

May 24, 2020

I am going to admit something to you: I have struggled a bit with faith in this pandemic. Not in my belief in God or serving, but who God is. The struggle and questions are in the back of my mind – in other words, not controlling my thoughts, but there in the back wondering, questioning, asking such things as:

Why? Why does the world have to struggle so much? Why at times is this beautiful world so difficult? Why this pandemic? Yes, much good is coming out of it: families are learning to be together again, the earth is healing, people are learning to be more creative, people are caring more, people are appreciating those who keep us alive and allow to live the way we do.

But do so many people have to die to have such good? I remember when everything first started and the prediction was 100,000 deaths by August. At that time, we had a couple thousand deaths in the U.S., and I thought no way will it reach 100,000.

Yet, here we are, over 90,000 deaths and it is only May. And so I wonder.

But the one thing that keeps me going, that keeps me trusting, that gives me hope is this: the sovereignty of God.

What do I mean by the sovereignty of God? And why does it give me and you and the world hope?

When I do the new member class, I talk about those things that make us Presbyterian, such as the way we govern the church, how we worship and how we think about God. How we think about God in our denomination is called reformed theology.

There are two things I love about reformed theology. One is the emphasis on the grace of God. The grace of God is the unconditional love of God that is given to with no strings attached. Grace is the theme of my life. I preach and teach on it any time I can.

Another emphasis in reformed theology is the sovereignty of God. Whole books have been written on the sovereignty of God, but I am going to give you a very short definition of the sovereignty of God. And it is this: God's will will be done.

We pray about this every time we say The Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Contained in this very brief definition of sovereignty is the fact that God is in control.

It is these two facts: God is in control and God's will will be done that keep me going, that give me hope in the midst of a pandemic. This is what I want to talk about today. I pray that this sermon on the sovereignty of God will give you hope and peace and faith even though the world is struggling right now. And that you can share the hope that is within you with others who are struggling right now.

So, we turn to our scripture passage today. It comes from a speech from the Apostle Paul. He is visiting Athens, and as he wanders around the city, he is troubled by all the statues of idols that the people of Athens worship.

One particular sculpture catches his eye. Most of the idols are named, but this one says, "To an unknown God." This becomes Paul's starting point to talk to these people about Jesus. Katie Sayre will read the story from Acts 17. (It is appropriate that Katie is reading this passage that takes place in Athens, because she and I were supposed to travel to Athens in June. Of course, it has been postponed. So we will read about it instead.)

Before she does, let us pray: Holy Spirit, speak through these words today so we will have hope and encouragement that will deepen our faith and relationship with you. And that we can be a light for others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Read scripture passage: Acts 17:22-28

Katie read to you the beginning of Paul's speech. It talks about the sovereignty of God: that God made the world and everything in it; that God gave breath to everything living; that nothing can contain God; that God does not need anything; that God sets our length of days on earth.

In other words, He's got the whole world in his hands.

This is God's sovereignty. Another way to say the sovereignty of God is to say the sheer "godness" of God.

I love a prayer from St. Augustine, who lived around the year 400 and is considered one of the Church Fathers of the Christian faith. In this prayer, he describes the sheer "godness" of God: "Most high, utterly good, utterly powerful, most omnipotent, most merciful and most just, deeply hidden yet most intimately present, perfection of both beauty and strength, stable and incomprehensible, immutable and yet changing all things, never new, never old, making everything new....always active...supporting and filling and protecting, creating and nurturing..."

Isn't that beautiful? Amazing words to describe the sheer "godness" of God. Rather mind boggling, too!

But this is what we do: we tend to think of God from the bottom up – that is, from my experience to who God is. We tend to create a God in our own image. So when something happens that we don't like and we question God, it is because we are defining God in our own image or in our own experiences, or in our own personality.

This God-of-our-experience or God who is made-in-our-image is very different from the God revealed to us in scripture. There can be a vast difference between our view of God and the reality of God. In the process, we lose or question the sovereignty of God.

God says in scripture: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” (Isaiah 55:9).

God is not a being that is greater than us. God is a different type of being altogether. God is other, holy, set apart. God is the Creator, not the created.

Going back to Augustine, what was so different about his view of God was that he first thought of God as one who is not like us. He started from the top (God) and then worked his way down (to humanity).

So let’s start from the top and work our way down. Here are some scripture passages that uphold the sovereignty of God:

Isaiah 46:9-11 (God is speaking)

I am God, and there is no other;

I am God, and there is none like me.

¹⁰ I make known the end from the beginning,
from ancient times, what is still to come.

I say, ‘My purpose will stand,
and I will do all that I please.’

¹¹ From the east I summon a bird of prey;
from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose.

What I have said, that I will bring about;
what I have planned, that I will do.

This is a marvelous description of God’s sovereignty. That is, God’s purposes will stand. God’s will will be done. God is in control.

In other words, God has the whole world in his hands.

Isaiah 55:11 “so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

He’s got the whole world in his hands.

From Colossians 1:16: Christ is before all things and in him all things hold together.” Isn’t that nice to know in a pandemic?

He's got the whole world in his hands.

From Ephesians 1:11 God "who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will."

He's got the whole world in his hands.

Job 42:2 I know you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted." All things.

He's got the whole world in his hands.

From Revelation: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End." You want to know how it will all end? It will end with God.

He's got the whole world in his hands.

And we could go on and on. Scripture is filled with the glory and majesty and sovereignty of God.

That is where we start. God's will will be done; God is control. So here is the question: how does that help us in the midst of a pandemic? Now we are bringing it down to humanity.

It is in our scripture passage today: Verse 27: "God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'"

This God who is above all and over all and reigns over the universe and whose purposes will stand....is near. God wants us to reach out to him, to live in him. We are God created, which means our identity is in Christ. "In him we live and move and have our being" is another way to say,

He's got you and me sister in his hands.

He's got you and me brother in his hands.

He's got everyone here in his hands.

He's got the whole world in his hands.

This sovereign One who is high and "other" is the One who comforts us. This is the One who can be counted on to keep His word because He does not change. This is the One that no matter what happens to us in this life, God will be the

same. God is the first; God has been there before us. God is the last; God will have the last word.

We can be fearful, but God's sovereignty is our comfort because God is near.

Now, I realize I haven't answered the my question of "Why?" Why do things like this pandemic happen? Why doesn't God stop it? At least, at the moment.

I don't have an answer. At least one that directly answers the "why" question. Because God is sovereign, the ultimate answers to life are known by God...but only by God. Yes, we know a lot. But I believe that full, all-comprehending knowledge is more than we can bear. Sometimes God just says, "Hush, child. You will not understand." Some things are for God and God alone to know.

Remember, God is "other" than us. "My ways are not your ways. My thoughts not your thoughts."

So when people ask us "why," we can give an answer. It is the person of Jesus, who reveals a loving God and shows us the presence of God with us today in the midst of the whys and the pandemics and the sufferings.

Do not fear, Jesus said in his last words to his disciples. I am with you always.

So when asked, why does God allow this to happen?" You will have to admit, "I don't know, but I do know that God is right in the middle of it." God is near. God is there with the people who die alone in the hospital. God is there with those who grieve. God is there with those who wonder how they are going to put food on the table. God is there with all those who have worked tirelessly in harm's way.

We can fortify our faith by looking for examples of God in the middle of this global pandemic. It's all over the news.

God gets us through things, and God will get us through this one.

Weeping may stay in the night, but joy comes in the morning. (Psalm 30:5)

Why? Because God is sovereign and God is near.

He's got the whole world in his hands.

So, let's go to this God in prayer and pray for our world.

Pray with me:

Sovereign Lord, we look to that name and find comfort that your will will be done and you are in control. But we also know that you, who runs the universe, is near to us. What a relief. We can leave this situation in your hands, knowing that you are nearby.

We pray for this world – for a cure for this virus, and a way back from isolation, a way that is safe. Show our leaders the way. And when this is over, may we be a better people, nation, world. Guide us with your grace.

And as we wait, supply the needs of those who are struggling. Give them this day their daily bread. Lead them out of despair and into hope. Guide us with your grace.

May we be a people of compassion as we reach out to our family, friends and neighbors with the hope of Christ. Use us in extraordinary ways and guide us with your grace.

God, we acknowledge that you spoke the world into being and continue to sustain it with your Word. We trust in your wisdom, power, and goodness. Thank you that you have the whole world in your hands.

Praying together, we say, Our Father.....