

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church (First sermon after Hurricane Florence)

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalm 116:1-9

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

09/16/2018

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

27Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." 30And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.31Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

34He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

### **Prayer**

Let us pray,

Amen

### **The Problem of Theodicy**

“14 now dead from Florence, nearly a million without power as storm batters Carolinas.”<sup>1</sup> That was the headline from The News and Observer that I saw last night on my phone... A reading from the Psalms:

*“I love the Lord, who has | heard my voice,*

*and listened to my | supplication,*

*2for the Lord has given | ear to me*

*whenever | er I called.*

*3The cords of death entangled me; the anguish of the grave | came upon me;*

---

<sup>1</sup><https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/article218421790.html>

*I came to | grief and sorrow.*

*4Then I called upon the name | of the Lord:*

*“O Lord, I pray you, | save my life.”*

*5Gracious is the | Lord and righteous;*

*our God is full | of compassion.*

*6The Lord watches o- | ver the innocent;*

*I was brought low, | and God saved me.*

*7Turn again to your rest, | O my soul.*

*for the Lord has dealt | well with you.*

*8For you have rescued my | life from death,*

*my eyes from tears, and my | feet from stumbling;*

*9I will walk in the presence | of the Lord*

*in the land | of the living.”<sup>2</sup>*

That seems like a contrast doesn't it? While we might resonate with the words of today's Psalm, would those in North Carolina do the same? Today we wrestle with a tough question. Now, I had a lot of time to work on my sermon this week and I had this grand plan that would work its way around to the start of the Sunday school season and it was centered around teaching and the role of learning based on the readings. The hurricane looked like it was going to miss us, and so I figured I could continue with that sermon... but then I heard something yesterday that made me throw that whole thing out. It was a response to potential damage from Florence, and

---

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 116:1-9 NRSV

this person was safe, and their house was without any damage whatsoever. They said “We are so blessed!”

Now... I do believe that we are blessed... but does that mean the 14 who died weren't? What kind of God would do that? Is that the God we claim to believe in? If it sounds like I've discussed this before it's because I have. If you were to boil down the focus of my theology it would be trying to answer the question of evil. The fancy theological term for what they call “the problem of evil” is *theodicy*. I'll be honest, I was torn with what to do today, but then Joe Kruckow pulled me aside this morning and shared with me that he was unsure of what to offer up in his prayers of intercession. How do we give thanks for the storm missing us but lament that it still hurt so many? I could go along with what I had planned, and maybe have a decent sermon, but my heart felt pulled towards this question. But in order to do it justice, I need more time. I also don't think this is a question we'll ever have an adequate answer for, and I think think it's a question that falls on this whole community to answer. And so we're going to play everyone's favorite game of “Grab a Partner!” I'm going to hand out a sheet of paper and I want you to grab a partner, someone you really feel comfortable talking with about this, and talk about how you would answer the three questions. Write down your own responses and feel free to put your name on it, it's not a test. Don't exclude children from this, and I'll be walking around playing devil's advocate.

*The questions are:*

- 1. Is God the creator/source of evil?*
- 2. Why or why not? If God isn't, then how did it come about?*

3. *Why do bad things seem to happen to good people? Why do we get hurricanes?*

All right. I hope you had a chance to really dig in. It's some heavy stuff. I want this to be an ongoing discussion in our community, and so I'll be doing either another sermon or a newsletter article on this topic. But now on to some good news. Regardless of the problem of evil, I think we truly are blessed. The words of the Psalm today are so captivating and true because they speak to the very core of our experiences with God and with one another! One commentator writes that one of this Psalm's theological themes is the communion of the saints. He writes: *"I am... thinking... of the creedal affirmation, namely, that God's people throughout all time and place experience real fellowship through our union with Christ. Psalm 116 may originally have expressed the gratitude of one Israelite worshiper... but it becomes our song through the unity of the church..."*<sup>3</sup>

He ends his commentary with this: *"It seems fitting that a service in which Psalm 116 is the sermon text would create the time and space for worshipers to offer testimony to answered prayer and to intercede for those who are still waiting for answers."*<sup>4</sup> Fitting indeed. I've got questions, and if you're honest with yourself, I'm sure you do too... so let's pray to a God I know can handle those tough prayers. Amen.

---

<sup>3</sup>[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3773](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3773)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid