

Spokane Friends Meeting
May 26, 2024
“Hope, part two: Yes and No”
Johan Maurer

The message I’m giving today began as a reflection on someone else’s sermon. Last Sunday, on Pentecost, our pastor at Camas Friends, Matt Boswell, preached on the passage in Romans chapter eight that refers to all creation groaning and awaiting its liberation. I’m sure that some of you are familiar with this passage, which continues:

Romans 8:24 For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? 25 But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.

So, last Sunday, Matt invited us to consider how we’ve dealt with pain and growth, and how we’ve experienced the Spirit interceding for us. As often happens these days, my thoughts went in a direction that some of you might have predicted: how some very specific parts of Creation are groaning, namely Ukraine and the Gaza Strip.

I’ve talked about both places before in my messages, and maybe sometimes I’ve wandered close to the boundary between preaching the Word and preaching politics. That’s not where I hope to go today. My blog post [this past Thursday](#) considered the subject of what my guiding principles would be if I were to write a public statement on Gaza, on behalf of one or another faith community or Quaker organization, and that was the right place to express my politics in light of my faith.

I have a different purpose here today. I want to consider how God's Spirit intercedes for us when we run out of ways to pray. It was almost five years ago that I applied to Christian Peacemaker Teams to serve on their team in Hebron, Palestine, and, somewhat to my surprise, I was accepted. I served there the last quarter of 2019. Somehow, even during the most violent episodes of those three months, I didn't fear for my own safety. By the way, I'm not a total idiot; later on, and even now when I look at pictures from those months, I get retroactively scared, if you know what I mean. But while I was there, I realized that the purpose of my service in Palestine was not to be some sort of hero of nonviolent accompaniment, but to learn what it means to pray without ceasing.

All the same, I'm not claiming to be a very effective practitioner of nonstop prayer, because no matter how hard I prayed during those three months, lives kept getting lost, houses kept getting knocked down, and different groups of people, all equally loved by God according to my own theology, kept insisting on seeing each other as implacable enemies.

Father Emmanuel Charles McCarthy, a Catholic lawyer and theologian, once gave a sermon whose theme was, "Apathy in the face of preventable suffering is radical evil." In that sermon he used this vivid phrase: "History is a butcher's bench." I'm pretty sure I've quoted him on this subject before. Among the people he has counseled over the years is Father Zabelka, the chaplain of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bomber crew. Father Zabelka's conversion to Christian nonviolence a quarter century later was a powerful witness, but the reality is that those crews made it to their targets. On this Memorial Day weekend, we should also acknowledge that the Japanese crews that flew to Pearl Harbor also reached their targets. And the chain of violence and retribution stretches back to Cain and Abel. God loves us but does not necessarily restrain our violent hand.

Of course it is true that we don't necessarily know when God's intervention *did* happen, only when it apparently *didn't*. So God *didn't* restrain the hands of Russian soldiers in Ukraine, though we have to wonder what happened in the minds and hearts of the thousands of soldiers who have apparently deserted. As I said here last

month, God *didn't* prevent the loss of thousands of innocent children in the Gaza Strip since the Hamas attack. It just doesn't seem right to me to say that all of us who prayed our little heads off for peace and reconciliation just weren't using the right words, or we failed to mobilize enough people to pray enough times day and night to finally persuade God to act. Ever since we ate those apples in the Garden of Eden, too many of us humans think we know better than God how to fix conflicts by eliminating our enemies, and God hasn't seen fit to set us all straight.

So: Creation continues to groan. And we continue to search for the words of authentic prayer, and the assurance that, even if we fail, the Spirit will intercede for us.

Today I read a remarkable blog post by Kristin Kobes Du Mez, reporting on a sermon she had recently heard, given by Len Vander Zee. Some of you probably recognize Kristin Du Mez's name as the author of the book *Jesus and John Wayne*. Her blog quotes Vander Zee as saying,

What is the calling of the church? You know what that is. Take up your cross and follow me. The church is called to follow its king in self-sacrificing love.

Somehow the church tends to pick up the idea that we're supposed to win. That our place in the world is not one of suffering love, but victorious power....

It's so easy for the church to forget that Christ did not call us to rule but to serve. He called us, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, to come and die. The church's role in history is to live the way of the King, the way of the cross, the way of self-giving love.

Now, Kristin du Mez goes on to confess that she may have had some other things going on in her mind as Vander Zee continued with his sermon. Here's what she says about that:

As I listened to the sermon, I was thinking about steeling myself for the months ahead. I thought of the organizations and networks I was involved

with, of the posts I had planned here, of the traveling I would be doing, of the projects (some yet to be unveiled) that I'd be dedicating my time and energy to. My mind was wandering, but I was still following along with the sermon. And then I heard the words that jarred me. Len was quoting Celeborn and Galadriel in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, saying: "together through the ages of the world we have fought the long defeat." Tolkien expanded on this in a letter to a friend: "I am a Christian....so I do not expect history to be anything but a long defeat, though it contains..... some glimpse of final victory."

"A long defeat." Sounds pretty dismal, doesn't it? Yet, on some level, it does match the record. Despite all evidence that it never works in the long run, the myth of redemptive violence keeps chugging along, generation after generation. Here's how Du Mez interprets this "long defeat" for herself, in the context of the campaign she sees herself waging, against the heresies of white Christian nationalism:

We all think our cause is righteous. And when you refuse to allow for the possibility of losing, it changes what you're fighting for. It changes how you fight. And it changes who you are. ...

As much as I want my side to win this next round, it's not a given. The cause is urgent, and (I think) good. But we are not called to win, nor should we necessarily expect to.

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't work diligently to protect the good of our nation and our fellow citizens, and, for those of us who are Christians, to fight against what we see as a dangerous distortion of our faith. I'm planning on spending the next several months working to this end. But it also means that we need to be grounded in something deeper than winning the next battle. If we are, I think we'll find the resilience to grapple with whatever the outcome of the next battle might be.

I began this message intending to address how we pray when we see Creation groaning beyond our apparent ability to intercede. First of all, I do trust that the Holy

Spirit intercedes for God's people, as Paul says in Romans 8. But I'm a verbal person; that's how I express my faith, however clueless I may be at times. Here's where my second Scripture of the morning helps me:

2 Corinthians 1:19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silas and Timothy—was not “Yes” and “No,” but in him it has always been “Yes.” 20 For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God.

I've spoken on this passage before, so forgive me for the rerun. The context is Paul explaining why he changed his itinerary on his way to meet with his audience, and that he did so not for trivial reasons, as if there were no difference between “yes” and “no.” When I first read this passage as a new Christian, a freshly minted Quaker in Ottawa Meeting, it struck me deeply, and as a result, the word “yes” became my lifelong one-word prayer. To put it another way, I see Jesus as the “yes” to God's promises. The most important promise, in my view, is that God never abandons us. The world is not in a position to guarantee our safety, but the world doesn't get to separate us from God.

For me, the word “yes” implies another one-word prayer, “no.” We don't have magical powers against violence, racism, greed, cruelty, elitism, and the demand that we see others as “enemies,” but when we have said “yes” to the Prince of Peace, we have the right to say “no” in his name to any force that seeks to harm those he loves.

I am not pleading for this list of one-word prayers or against that. I love the three one-word prayers that Anne Lamott suggests: “thanks,” “help,” and “wow.” When all is said and said and said, I want and need to fall back on Paul's promise that the Spirit will intercede for us through wordless groans, as if the Spirit, too, knows and understands this “long defeat” that the Spirit is equipping us to endure.

Nor am I saying that wordless prayer, or one-word prayer, is superior. Our prayers reflect our temperaments—some of us are severely practical, some of us are mystical

and live in constant awareness of God's presence, some of us are verbal, some visual ... you get the picture. For many of us, the Lord's Prayer keeps us well-rooted in God's promises. Anthony Bloom says that our prayer life should be as transparent and intimate as we are with our wives, husbands, our best friends. Douglas Steere, the Quaker philosopher, says that when we begin a time of prayer, it may help to pause at the threshold and consider whom you're about to meet.

There is no hurry, however, about plunging into prayer. We may well linger in the portico to be awakened, to remember into Whose Presence we are about to come. If one of us were to be ushered into the presence of one of the great spirits of our time—Albert Schweitzer, or Alan Paton, Vinoba Bhave, or Helen Keller—we should be glad for a little time in the portico to collect ourselves, to adjust, not our clothing, but our spirits, for meeting this one whose reputation we cherish. During this waiting period, we might well think of how this person had lived, of how he or she had spared nothing to give of himself to some great human cause, and of how drawn we were to have the blessing of conversing with him. If this time of recollection is precious preceding a visit to a contemporary, how much more suitable and necessary it is before coming into the presence of God.

[Dimensions of Prayer.]

This kind of pausing is, I think, already prayer, a prayer of relationship and reverence.

Finally, I'm also not saying that we must never pray for miracles. I've prayed for many people to heal from terminal diagnoses, and I will keep doing so. I've told you before that, when the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began and the missiles began flying, I would pray that God would send angel armies into the skies over Ukraine. I still sometimes find myself praying for those angels to be sent. No matter how often my prayers seem foolish even to myself, I have a standing testimony against cynicism. But, however you and I pray, the Holy Spirit knows how to intercede *for* us. I'm just grateful to God for this. It means, after all, that we don't have to adopt a piety that pretends that a good outcome will happen in this hurting world just because we finally find the right words.

Queries:

- 1. Is the idea of history as a “long defeat” helpful or unhelpful to you? Do you sometimes see, with Tolkien, a “glimpse of final victory”?**
- 2. What would it be like for you to pause at the threshold and contemplate the wordless communion or the conversation you're about to enter?**
- 3. When (or if) you say “yes” to God, what else might that lead you to say “yes” to? What might that lead you to say “no” to?**