

Hospitality and Providence

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

Columbus, Ohio

October 23, 2011

Isaiah 25:6-9 NRSV

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the LORD God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.

It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

John 2:1-11

At the beginning of his gospel, John takes pains to let us know just who we'll be dealing with as the story unfolds. He identifies Jesus as eternal God. He identifies Jesus as the Spirit-anointed Son of God. He identifies Jesus as the long-awaited king of Israel, who begins to gather a new people.

On the third day, there was a wedding celebration in Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there. Jesus and his disciples were invited to the wedding, too.

When the wine ran out, Jesus' mother said to him, "They don't have any wine." Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does that have to do with you and me? My time hasn't come yet." His mother told the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Six stone water jars were there, each holding about twenty or thirty gallons for use in Jewish purification rites. Jesus told them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up. Then he said, "Now, scoop some out and take it to the master of ceremonies." And they took it.

When the master of ceremonies tasted the water, which had become wine – though he didn't know where it came from, but the servants who scooped out the water knew – the master of ceremonies called to the groom. He said to him, "Everyone puts out the good wine first, then the cheap wine, when the guests are drunk. You – you saved the good wine until now."

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana in Galilee. He revealed his glory, and his disciples put faith in him.

Sermon

I realized something on my way home the other day. I was heading north on Interstate 71. A steady rain was falling, obscuring visibility and making the pavement slick. But there I was, hurtling along at sixty-five miles an hour, taking my life in my own hands. All around me were other cars and other drivers, giant tractor trailer rigs, too. I was surrounded by people – who

knows how distracted? – people who also were taking my life in their hands. One wrong move by any one of us, and my life could have been over.

That’s when I realized that I’m terrified by the providence of God.

I think the providence of God is supposed to comfort us. According to the Heidelberg Catechism, providence is “the almighty and ever present power” by which God “upholds heaven and earth and all creatures” so that “all things . . . come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand” (A 27). So in the end, it’s not my skill behind the wheel – which I’ve been questioning lately – and it’s not the attentiveness of the other drivers. It’s not weather conditions and road conditions. In the end, it’s the providence of God and only the providence of God that brings me home safely.

But at the same time, if I had gone into a deadly spin, that too would have been the providence of God.

Earlier that day, I was listening to a podcast. It was about the suffering of soldiers in the Iraq and Afghan wars. One story was about a hum-vee that was blown up by a bomb. Out of the five soldiers on board, only one survived. By the providence of God, one lives. But by the same providence, four die. That’s how it works. We never really know if we’re going to make it home. Even though God “upholds heaven and earth and all creatures.”

The Catechism says that both “rain and drought” are within God’s providence. So too are “health and sickness, prosperity and poverty,” and more (A 27). In other words, good times and bad times, life and death – it’s all in God’s providential hands. But there’s no predicting providence. And on any given day, we don’t know whether providence will bring us home or to our grave. No wonder I’m terrified by the providence of God.

God’s providence is our bulwark against blind chance or fate. Providence means that somehow whatever happens is within God’s will, within God’s purpose and plan. And so, because of providence, “we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea” (Psalm 46:2).

But On December 26, 2004, a massive earthquake shook the sea floor of the Indian Ocean. Within hours, a quarter of a million people were dead, swept away by massive walls of water. And it all happened within the providence of God. So I’m terrified, terrified because God’s providence provides no guarantees.

It’s a scary world out there. Dangerous. Yes, God sends rain upon the just and the unjust alike (cf. Matthew 5:45). But God also sends floods and freak accidents. Maybe there’s no way around that.

One of the hardest things to negotiate in life, I’ve found, is when you have conflicting obligations that you can’t reconcile. For example, when you’re supposed to be in two different places at the same time. There’s no way to fulfill both obligations. So you’re stuck.

Well, what about that earthquake? The Indian Ocean earthquake was caused by the motion of tectonic plates, huge chunks of earth that rub against and collide with one another. When conditions are just right – or just wrong – those tectonic plates break loose, and all

hell breaks loose with them. Can't God stop those tectonic plates from moving? Sure. But maybe not.

Tectonic plates are part of the structure of this earth and of life upon it. The way the earth is put together – I learned this recently – the way the earth is put together, there would be no air to breathe if it weren't for those dangerously moving plates. Apparently we can't have life at all without also having an earth that shivers and shakes and potentially unleashes massive death.

That's the way things are. And it's all within the providence of God. And it terrifies me. Especially now that Kristi has moved out to San Francisco. (The other day she felt her first California earthquake, just a little one!)

By now you can recognize my ambivalence. Maybe you share that ambivalence. I don't find the doctrine of God's providence all that comforting. Certainly not in the short run. I know what the Catechism says. Because of God's providence,

we can be patient when things go against us,
thankful when things go well,
and for the future we can have
good confidence in our faithful God and Father
that nothing in creation will separate us from his love.
For all creatures are so completely in God's hand
that without his will
they can neither move nor be moved. (A 28)

Nothing can separate us from God's love. I believe that fervently. That's really our only hope.

But many things can separate us from home. Many things can separate us from our loved ones. Many things can separate us even from ourselves. About these things, God's providence provides no guarantees. So we can only hang on to ultimate hope and, on the way there, hang on to our hats, because it could be a rough ride.

The Catechism talks about patience and thankfulness. I'm not so sure. Sometimes the outcome of God's providence seems like the luck of the draw or the result of our decisions. On the one hand, we're lucky not to live along the rim of the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, it's your own dumb fault if you move to San Francisco, because we all know the "big one" is coming. And can anyone be patient when the city collapses on top of them or when the ocean rises up against them?

Maybe my problem is that I'm too focused on the here and now. Maybe my problem is that God's providence doesn't fix all the mess and brokenness that just "is" in the world. Jesus didn't heal every sick person. And he didn't rescue every beggar. Why would God's providence keep us from all harm? Why would God's providence remove all harm from the world?

When you come down to it, providence is forward-looking. God is always looking toward the ultimate good of those he loves. Even if that means trouble and pain here and now.

The prophet Isaiah had a lot of bad news to bring. Bad news for Israel. Bad news for Israel's neighbors. But nestled within the bad news reports, there were gleams of hope, hope of a better day that was coming. And so in chapter 25, the prophet describes a vision of divine hospitality. God is preparing a feast, a great feast, a feast for all people. Yes, there are struggles and afflictions here and now. But that's not the whole story. God is moving everything forward. And there will be a great celebration. Why? Because the ultimate enemy, the enemy that wounds us in a million ways, the enemy that sweeps all life away – death itself will be swallowed up in victory!

At Cana, Jesus told his mother, "It's not my time yet." Likewise it's not time yet for everything to be changed, for everything to be put right. It's not time yet for every calamity to be prevented. But one day, and the day is coming – one day everything will be alright.

Meanwhile we know where to turn when things look bad. We know where to turn when our hope is challenged. We know where to turn when the sadness and pain of our own lives or of this world threaten to overwhelm us, to steal away the last bit of our joy. We turn to Jesus, who changes water into wine.

What a social catastrophe! To run out of wine. At a wedding celebration. That would be a story to remember. A shame never to be forgotten. But when the wine ran out, Jesus took action. Jesus, sovereign over heaven and earth and all creatures, sovereign over water and stone, sovereign over grape juice and fermentation – Jesus supplied wine. Good wine. Plenty of wine!

Hospitality means you see to it that your guests are well taken care of. God's providence is a means of divine hospitality both in and beyond a broken world. Whatever trouble or pain may come, in the end God will see to it that we have what we need, what we need beyond anything and everything else. When all is said and done, this is what the providence of God means for us.

It means that nothing – not slippery roads or bad driving habits, not Indian Ocean tsunamis or San Francisco earthquakes, not breast cancer or clogged arteries, not dementia or blindness, not the loss of arms and legs – nothing – not a flush investment portfolio or a flash car, not five healthy grandchildren or a satisfying job, not a flat stomach or a clear complexion – nothing, nothing whatsoever can separate the children of God from the love of God, the love of God that is ours in Jesus Christ, the love of God that sees us through every good time and every bad time, through every challenge and every conquest, through life itself, and through death – nothing can separate us from the love of God that sees us all the way through to the everlasting kingdom – where the wine never runs out!