

Our World Belongs to God

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
Columbus, Ohio
June 10, 2007*

1 Timothy 6:13-19

In his first letter to Timothy, the Apostle Paul warns his young friend about the dangers of false teaching and about the perils of the love of money. Then he turns Timothy's attention toward positive pursuits.

As God's person, you ought to avoid these things. Instead pursue justice, piety, trustworthiness, love, patience, gentleness; put up a good struggle for the faith; and take hold of the eternal life you were called to and declared your allegiance to before many witnesses.

Before God, who gives life to all things, and Christ Jesus, who testified about his allegiance to Pontius Pilate, I order you to obey the commandment in a way that is pure and beyond criticism, until our Lord Jesus Christ appears, at his own time, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the only immortal One, who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or is able to see, to whom be honor and strength for ever. Amen.

Order those who are rich in the present age not to be arrogant and not to hope in uncertain wealth, but in God, who abundantly provides everything for our enjoyment, doing good, being rich in good deeds, being generous and ready to share, accumulating for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of real life.

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As followers of Jesus Christ,
living in this world
which some seek to control
and others view with despair,
we declare with joy and trust: Our world belongs to God.

Our world, fallen into sin,
has lost its first goodness,
but God has not abandoned the work of his hands:
Our Maker preserves this world,
sending seasons, sun, and rain,
upholding all creatures,
renewing the earth,
promising a Savior,
guiding all things to their purpose.

Children's Story

One hot summer evening, a tornado landed on the Great Forest. All the animals could tell it was coming. Most of them ran for shelter. But two of the animals had different ideas.

Peter the Possum knew the tornado would destroy the Great Forest. It was hopeless. It was the end of the world! In a few minutes there would be nothing left!! So Peter dug a shallow hole, stuck his head into it, and screamed.

Bernice the Bear did something else. Like Peter, she knew the tornado would destroy the Great Forest — unless she scared it away. So she ran to the edge of the forest, stood up on her hind legs, and let out a giant roar.

Well, as it turned out, Bernice the Bear didn't scare the tornado at all. It ignored her roar and tore a path right through the Great Forest. Now Bernice knows she ought to be afraid of tornados.

And Peter the Possum? He never saw the tornado. It spun him around and around. But by the time he pulled his head out of the hole, the tornado was gone. The Great Forest was hurt — Peter was right about that — but it wasn't the end of the world.

Sermon

Tom gets up at six o'clock every morning. He takes a quick shower, pours himself a steaming cup of coffee, and spreads cream cheese on a poppy seed bagel. Then he turns on CNN to get his morning dose of violence, tragedy, and Paris Hilton. Gina, on the other hand, gets up around seven most days. She puts on her favorite robe, brews a cup of Darjeeling tea, and fixes one egg, over medium, on buttered whole wheat toast. Then she takes her breakfast out onto the deck and eats it there among pines and petunias, chipmunks and finches. Tom and Gina don't view the world in exactly the same way. None of us do.

Some people view the world with despair. CNN serves up enough long-distance bad news to plant a frown on the face of the most determined optimist. Even when the main story presents a brief respite of good news, the bad news keeps crawling across the bottom of the screen: floods and fires, bird flu and bird-brained power brokers, and the ever-mounting death toll, whether of the latest disaster or of the same old war.

For people living in the middle of this news, which we only see on our TV screens, despair seems like a sensible reaction. The BBC recently reported from Iraq that “exhaustion and despair hang over the country.” Is it any wonder?

Despair also lives on a smaller scale. N. has her own despair at the mixed-care facility where she has been living for a number of weeks now. She tells me that the four walls of her room are closing in. She tells me that she wants to go home. Somehow. She wants to be in her own place. She wants to be living her own way. N. despairs because, now more than ever, her world is not under her control.

And people do try to control the world. Some people say that corporations, big ones at least (and they're getting bigger all the time), want to control the world. That they use bribes and brainstorm, greed and fear, war and famine to gain control and to maintain control, not over the whole world, but over certain resource sectors and market segments.

Some people say that the United States wants to control the world, to control it militarily, economically, and culturally. The official and popular line in response runs something like this: “American dominance in the world is an accident of history, not evidence of some hegemonic design. US military bases may straddle the globe (so that the sun never sets on the US military), a US-style economy may be promoted all around the world (sometimes with heavy-handed tactics), and US movies and HBO TV series may be on screens world wide . . . but let's not call it *control*; call it *influence*.”

The fact is, almost nobody ever wants to control the whole world, not even Bill Gates. The stereotypical James Bond villain (and Dr. Evil, too, for that matter) is less interested in controlling the world than in collecting a hefty ransom payment for defusing some doomsday bomb (complete, as always, with a large digital read-out, in red of course!). In 1985 the band Tears for Fears sang that everybody wants to rule the world. But that's simply not true. Everybody does not want to rule the world. Except perhaps on a smaller scale. Controlling the world — your own corner of it, at least — has some appeal.

The Black Flag company makes pesticides and insect repellents. Their web site shouts “Control Your World!” They claim that phrase as a trademark. Stanchion Depot sells crowd control barriers. “Control your world” with our products, they say on their web site. MHS Technologies makes interfaces for audio and home theater systems, for heating and cooling equipment, for lighting and security systems, and more. Their marketing headline? “Control your world” — presumably with the push of a button on an integrated remote control.

When we can’t control all that much of the world, we do try to control part of it — and more than just bugs, crowds, and thermostats. In the realm of sexual performance and politics, men try to control their world with help from Pfizer Corporation, and women try to control their world with help from Victoria’s Secret. Because the football has got to go through the tire swing! And because leering eyes can be and ought to be exploited. And then there’s the world of designer children. We’re just at the leading edge of this one. But drugs and genetic manipulation are the new tools we can use to make our children taller, faster, smarter, prettier. New tools to control at least part of our world. The only other option is despair. So it would seem.

But we in the church of Jesus Christ declare with joy and trust: Our world belongs to God. Yes there is randomness in this world. There is disorder and chaos; there is the freak accident. So a man in a wheelchair can go for a five mile ride hanging from the grille of Kenworth. So a strong storm can batter ships and shoreline at the east end of Australia.

But the world is not out of control. It’s out of our control, but it is not out of God’s control. There is order and structure to the world. There is summer and winter, seedtime and harvest. You do reap what you sow (though there are exceptions to every rule). And there is a purpose at work in this world. Not the blind purpose sometimes invoked by hyperventilating scientists as they attempt to recast fierce natural selection as a benevolent deity. No, behind the disorder and confusion, beyond the pain and sorrow — and there’s plenty of all that, and so plenty of reasons for despair — behind and beyond all that, there is a direction, a movement, toward a world so renewed that it’s better than new. This direction is set and secured by Jesus Christ, who entered the mess we’re in, suffered the mess we’re in, and sanctified the mess we’re in.

That’s why, by faith, we can thread the needle between despair and control. We have faith through Jesus Christ that, as Paul wrote to Timothy, God gives life to all things. And that real life is not about wealth or performance or being in control, all of which is so fleeting and uncertain. Real life is about pursuing what matters in this world that we don’t control. Real life is about pursuing gentleness and generosity, piety and patience, justice and love and obedience to God, and doing it all with hope in God. Let me give you two examples.

My friend N. has had a host of serious health problems in recent years. Now he’s fighting colon cancer. He’s not in control. He’s not trying to be in control. But he’s not in despair either. He has faith in God. And he has confidence that God’s purpose for him is good, that God will not forsake him. That faith and confidence may be severely tested in the coming weeks and months. But N. begins there, with faith and confidence — not in control, but also not in despair.

Then, on a much larger scale, consider global warming. (If you’re a global warming skeptic, humor me for a few minutes for the sake of making a point.) How should we respond to global warming? We could run for cover, crying out as we go, “All is lost!” We could carry on as usual, not changing a thing, confident because God is in control. We could enact heavy-duty regulations to slow global warming, to stop it, maybe even to turn things around. And I suppose there are lots of other options.

Here’s the heart of it, though. Our task is not to play God, as if the world is in our control. Our task is not to fall into hopeless despair, as if the world is out of God’s control. Our task is to be stewards, who work with God, who work as servants of God. God entrusted the world to us, not to control it or to

despair over it, but to care for it. The world is not ours. We may use it, but we must pass it on, or we must return it, in as good or better condition than when we received it, as far as what we have done to it. So, in the face of global warming, our response is neither pride (we are not in control) nor despair (God is in control), but stewardship, neither wasting nor spoiling a world that, by God's grace, has a long future before it.

Tom and Gina (remember them?) don't view the world in exactly the same way. None of us do, influenced as we are by butterflies and Fox News. But

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And that makes all the difference.