

Genesis 215-17, 3:1-7
February 26, 2023

Providence

Last Sunday I had the privilege of worshipping and sharing fellowship with the people of the First Baptist Church in America. Dating back to 1638, the church was founded by a group of believers led by Roger Williams, who was also the founder of the Colony of Rhode Island, and the city where the church is located, which he called, "Providence," because, he said, after having been banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, God has provided for them a place to be.

I had never really thought about the word, "providence," much. As an idea it means that God is active in the lives of people and in the world, not only providing the basic needs of life, but also a meaningful journey, taking care of circumstances, preparing tasks for people and people for tasks; preparing places for people, and people for places; and then matching them up.

Providence is the theological word that refers to what we mean when we say that God has a plan, to the idea that God has a will, what Paul called a pleasing and perfect will. It is a way of saying that, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, life makes sense.

But I had never really thought that much about what the word means. Sometimes you have to bear with me while I get into a little etymology. The word, "provide," sits inside the word, "providence." It contains two

words, "pro," which is a pronoun that can mean, "to," or, "for." The second word is the root for, "video (Latin videre)," which means, "to see." That is what I had never "seen" before, ironically. The root of the word, "video," is in the middle of the word, "providence," meaning, "to see to," "to see for", or even, "to see about," "to see before." It all really means, "to tend to something."

It was by chance that I was leaning towards a Lenten study in the Book of Genesis, if there is such a thing as chance in these situations, and began studying in that direction. I ran across a commentary on Genesis by Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman (I mentioned him last time). If it turns out that these ideas are helpful, I would like nothing more than to be able to claim them as my own.

If they turn out to be useless, or even worse, hurtful, then I don't mind admitting that I received them from someone else. Either way, honesty compels me to mention Dr. Brueggeman's name, and integrity compels me to take responsibility for my use and understanding of them.

In any case, the idea of Providence is that God is, "seeing to it," that people have all the resources they need to live, and to thrive, in every sense of the word. In our text this morning there is possible an alliteration (and I offer an *Ibid.*). It is an interesting one:

Permission
Provision

Prohibition

Right there in these verses we are given the conditions of life. Human beings are placed in a garden that has everything in it necessary for life, and are allowed to partake. Not only are there plenty of resources, but there is meaningful work. The Lord placed the man in the garden of plenty to work and take care of it, and gave permission to eat from any tree in the garden.”

But there is also prohibition, “you must not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, for when you eat of *it*, you will surely die.” Permission, provision, prohibition.

Certainly we are meant to see beyond the literal idea of a tree with forbidden fruit on it. These are not arbitrary prohibitions. In the metaphor of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil God reveals the dangerous realities of life. There was/is no way to escape these realities, or the consequences when people decide to live outside the restraints that are symbolized by this Tree. They are built into the fabric of things.

Knowing about Good and Evil does not seem to be the problem. The presence of the tree is not problematic, but partaking of it is. Which leads us to the 2nd part of the Genesis text, which is the familiar story of the Serpent and the deception of Adam and Eve. It is clear in this presentation that human beings from the very beginning have refused to live within the restraints that have been set for them.

The first people, by consuming the fruit of the forbidden tree, made it clear that they did not trust God to provide and to guide them into life. Thus the history of the world is the history of conflict, of seemingly insurmountable problems, violence and war.

The general characteristics of the human situation have not changed; we are still given life on a planet that has all the necessary resources for everything we mean when we say, “meaningful life.” We do have geographical and temporal constraints, that is, we only live one life, here, now, and can neither be in two time periods, nor two places at one time, but here we are, alive.

In-between birth and death we are permitted to experience love and beauty; to see the wonder and the majesty of life in all its forms. At the same time we experience the pain that has resulted from living outside the divine restraints.

In a message about Providence, one could emphasize the particular sense that each has been given a place in God’s design, there is a will and a plan, a vocation for everyone. Our New Testament reading points in the direction of another emphasis.

In view of the human refusal to live within the divine restraints, a great chasm has been created between human beings and God, and by extension between human beings and other human beings, between

human beings and the natural world. We learn that not only has God provided for the basic needs of our lives, and given to each a time and a place and a vocation, but God's provision extends to the level of the eternal, and God has provided for us the possibility of a new birth.

That is, God has seen to it that the spiritual resources are there to be reconciled to God and each other. God has tended to the great ultimate questions of the meaning of our lives; questions regarding life, death, and eternity, guilt and forgiveness, the struggle for the good in the presence of evil, which is also the struggle for health in the presence of illness and disease.

The answer is to trust . . . which is what it means to "believe." The problematic side of trust is that we are required to play it without conclusive empirical evidence; to trust God's Providence even when the preponderance of the evidence questions it.

The first human beings did not so trust. Will we?

The truth is that most people trust to a certain extent but not completely, thus there is an inner conflict. That is our heritage. The gospel proclamation is that in the sacrifice of Christ, towards which the Lenten season points, the conflict is resolved, wholly by grace.

It is what Providence means!

Trust in it!

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