

Living for Christ in Uncertain Times

Myrna Hiebert, May 24, 2020 (Slightly revised by eliminating references to service flow.)

Part 1, In Times of Uncertainty, We Call to God

Reading: Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35

When I initially read the four passages which the Revised Common Lectionary lays out for us today, I planned to focus primarily on the 1st Peter passage as we have been doing the last few weeks. However, I was struck by the realization that all four passages are speaking to people who are living in uncertain times and dealing with unpredictable change. Arguably most of the Bible was written during times of uncertainty. In any case, reading these verses during our present uncertain times invited me to notice this aspect of the context of these verses and led me to explore what each passage has to say to us about living for Christ in uncertain times.

Right now, we are living in strange and uncertain times. History does contain elements that correspond to some of what is happening now, but in many ways the world situation we find ourselves in is without precedent. I don't mean that we live in the worst time ever; I think in many ways, and especially here in Victoria, we still live in one of the best times ever. However, the rapidity with which things have changed since the emergence of COVID 19 has not only shaken many practical aspects of our lives but it has shaken our trust in our ability to predict or control our futures individually and collectively. We find ourselves in a strange period which we know is not going to last forever, but is also not going to settle into anything that feels normal, even a "new normal" for quite some time yet. Within our church community, this is impacting us in some ways which we share: we are not able to meet together as we are used to, we have to be more careful in how we connect even to provide care and are reaching out in new ways, we follow directions to maintain safety and the next week they change again. In other ways we are impacted very differently. Some of us are quite physically isolated and may be finding it hard to fill all our free time while others are working full time from home, in some cases while also taking care of children's needs 24 hours a day. Some are in jobs which have become much heavier while others may find work lighter and others may suddenly not be working at all. I hope that we have all had times when we have enjoyed the opportunities our collective shut down has brought as it eliminates some of the commitments which previously crowded our schedules. I think most of us, at least at times, are also missing some of the activities and routines that we used to take for granted. And, of course, right now we remain aware that there are quite a few within our church family who are dealing with serious

health challenges during a time when every contact with the health system is more complicated, sometimes significantly delayed, and often without loved ones being allowed to have their usual degree of involvement. As Damian Barr put it so well in part of a poem that I saw on FaceBook: “We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm.” And we are realizing that this storm is going to last for longer than we initially expected and leave unpredictable and uncontrollable debris behind when it eventually passes.

Although the details of our unprecedented and uncertain times are very different from those of the early church, our passages today speak to us not only because they were written for the God's people for all time, but also because they were written specifically to God's people in unprecedented and uncertain times. These verses invite us to reconnect with fundamental truths of our faith that will help us to hold on to what is most important as we live within strange times and prepare for an uncertain future.

Psalm 68 is a Psalm of David. Knowing his turbulent history, we know that it was written in a time of change and uncertainty, a time when the people of God had been dealing with threats from outside and political upheavals internally. Within these difficult times, the Psalmist calls out to God for his strength and his compassion and names him the defender of his people, the one who cares for the most vulnerable . We hear: God is “father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing”. God provides for his people and and he brings justice. We, and all of the earth, are instructed to praise him because “The God of Israel gives power and strength to his people.” Today, we echo the call of God's people throughout the ages, especially in times of suffering or uncertainty, a call of need and of confident praise to the God who knows our needs and provides for them.

Part 2. Protecting Foundational Connections

Reading John 17:1-11

As we look at Jesus' prayer in John, we remember that this is part of the teaching and prayer Jesus shares after he has his last supper with his disciples before his death. Judas has already left to tell the chief priests and pharisees where they can arrest Jesus later that night. Jesus knows what is about to happen and prior to this prayer he has been teaching the disciples many things which he says they will understand later, when he is no longer with them. The part of the prayer which we are looking at today, is also clearly in this preparatory vein, giving his disciples into his Father's care, and also laying out the

most important things for them to hold on to. The disciples were certainly already living in an unprecedented time as they traveled with Jesus throughout his ministry. But only Jesus knew that things were about to get even stranger and more difficult and so he gave them what he knew would be vital in order for them to carry on during a time of shock and uncertainty beyond anything they could imagine.

In Jesus' prayer, he begins by stressing that the foundation of everything is his relationship with God the Father. Then Jesus explains that by accepting what he taught and the eternal life he is giving, a firm and lasting relationship is established between Jesus and his followers. Finally, he completes the connection triangles by concluding that this also, necessarily, means that his followers are bound in relationship with the Father and with each other. Jesus and the Father are one and so when we are united with Jesus we are also united with the Father and with each other. Jesus prays that all of those who are connected in this way will be protected from having these relationships broken. Nothing is more important than these mutually connected relationships, formed through Jesus Christ. They are the foundation upon which we build at all times. We can trust these relationships to hold fast during the strangest and most uncertain times because Jesus himself has asked the Father to protect us in them.

I don't know how to scratch the surface of how enormously incredible this truth is. The author of Romans tried, and does better than I can, when he wrote: he wrote in Romans 8:35, 37-39, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." The only thing that can separate us from God is if we let go of our faith and so that is what Jesus' teaching and prayer focused on protecting us from, so that fear, doubt or untruth do not cause us to lose faith.

[Due to time constraints, I did not elaborate on the importance of the fact that our faith is rooted in relationships rather than ideas or behaviours but I believe this is a very important concept which deserves further meditation.]

Part 3, Loss, Acceptance, Waiting and Prayer

Reading: Acts 1:6-14

In the story from the first chapter of Acts, we see Jesus and his disciples after he has risen and had a

brief time to teach them again. The disciples seem to think that now that those strange days are past they know what is coming next but their question shows they are still holding on to old expectations: Acts 1:6 says “So when they met together, they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the Kingdom of Israel?’” and his shows that they still don't understand. As he has already said before, the future remains in God's hands and they will not get to know the dates and times he has chosen to fulfill all of his plans. Instead, he promises to send the Holy Spirit and give them the power to be his witnesses throughout the world. Then he leaves again, taken up into heaven. Apparently they just stand there staring at the empty sky until two men in white, who clearly understand more about what is going on, ask them why they are still just standing there like that. They make it clear that although Jesus will come back again sometime, the disciples can't just stand there staring at the sky until he does. Jesus has already given them their directions: to wait for the Holy Spirit and then go tell the whole world about him. What follows is another time of shock and uncertainty as they try to comprehend the sudden loss of the Saviour they had only just regained and wait for the promised Holy Spirit without knowing what that even means. During that waiting time, they don't know really know what they are waiting for, but they set us an example of what to do during such times: they join together in prayer and they do what they were told. They wait for the Holy Spirit and prepare as best they know how for the task of witnessing, which is coming next. We cannot do better right now than to follow their example. Like the early church, we can accept, as they seem to have done, that we cannot predict or control what the next weeks, months or years will look like. We can remember that we share the same Spirit and the same task that they were given. We can join each other in prayer, even when we do so while physically separated or only connected through technology, and we can wait to see how we are led in God's time.

[I appreciated Ben S's comment after the service where he pointed out that even though the disciples did not understand, Jesus trusted them to follow him as best they could.]

Part 4, Suffering and Living for Christ in These Uncertain Times

Reading: 1st Peter 4:12-16, 5:6-11

This passage from 1st Peter takes us forward several years after Christ ascended into heaven. We find the followers of Christ still facing difficult and uncertain times. They are engaged in the spreading of the gospel as they Jesus commanded and expect that the promised return of Christ could come at any time. In the meantime, they are experiencing not the triumph of the Kingdom of Heaven but the opposite; they are suffering persecution because they follow their Lord. The Spirit of wisdom and comfort is with them and in them, but they are learning the hard way that when Jesus prayed for the Father to protect them, it did not mean that they would be kept safe from suffering, not even from suffering persecution by others who wanted to stop them from doing what Jesus told them to do. You might think that it would only be fair that a loving God would protect his children from suffering occurring specifically in response to them doing what he told them to do. But Peter says that the church should not to be surprised by even that kind of suffering. Suffering happens. Christ suffered and so will we, in many ways. Peter says that hopefully we will experience suffering while doing what is right and glorifying God rather than suffering the consequences of doing wrong. Either way, there will be things which we cannot control and we will suffer at times. When we suffer it is not because God has failed us or is punishing us. Suffering is part of the wounded and groaning world in which we live. How we respond during difficult times is an important part of our witness to this wounded world.

The second part of the 1st Peter passage which Susan read, 1st Peter 5:6-11, gives us some specific encouragement with regard to how we should respond during such times. We are to humble ourselves under God's mighty hand. Humility means knowing ourselves honestly, both our value to God and our need for him, our capacities and our limitations both submitted to his will. Then Peter says: "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." Peter knows that uncertain times and threats that we can't control make us anxious. He doesn't tell us to not feel anxious; he tells us to turn our worries over to God and remember, as we heard in our Psalm earlier, that God cares for us. At the same time, he goes on to remind us that trusting God does not mean totally dropping our guard. Rather, we are to "be self-controlled and alert." He says not to let the devil get us away from standing firm in our faith. I'm sure we could spend a good deal of time talking about how to apply the ideas of self-control, alertness and what types of ways the devil may use to deceive us these days but I don't plan to go on that long. I will just say that to me both self-control and alertness speak to the importance of focusing on our own responsibility, doing what is right and staying aware of what is going on around us, without trying either to control everything or to run from everything. When I think about the ways that the devil might try to devour us, I think of the reminder C.S. Lewis gives us in *The Screwtape Letters* that not all

temptation is extreme and obvious, we need to stand firm against whatever might shake our faith. There is an interesting paradox here because talking about how the devil prowls like a raging lion could cause fear and fear is one of the things which can shake our faith. Peter is not trying to shake our faith and he immediately reminds us that we do not have to stand firm under our power alone. We can rely on God's help to protect us as we hear in 1Peter chapter 5:10-11: "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen."

To summarize the main points of what today's verses have to say about what we can be certain of when we are living in uncertain times:

First, we can remember who God is and because of who he is, we can and should call on him with confidence and praise because he cares for us.

Second, we can know that no matter what else may change, we know that we remain secure in our relationship with Jesus Christ and through him with the Father and with each other.

Third, even when we don't know what is going to happen next, we do know our basic calling and what to do while we wait. We are called to share the good news of God's love and salvation and, when we don't know when or how, we can wait for the Spirit to lead us and we can pray together.

Fourth, times of uncertainty and things we can't control are part of life. Suffering of many kinds is also part of life. God is with us in these times and when we hold fast to him we bring him glory. We are responsible to hold on to what is true and to do our best to follow his commands and we can trust God with the rest.

And the God of all grace, who called us to his eternal glory in Christ, after we have suffered a little while, will himself restore us and make us strong, firm and steadfast. To him be power forever and ever. Amen.