

## **Under Protection**

Genesis 21:8-21

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 10:24-39

June 22, 2014 Pentecost 2A

Today I am so very aware of how blessed I am. A week ago last Friday, I underwent surgery and all went well. Sandy and I have shared life together for 49 years as of last Thursday, and we are truly life partners, and she is truly a partner in ministry with me. We have raised 3 children, and have 3 grandsons and wonderful friends. Oh, there have been economic reversals and health crises, but we are intact and we can still enjoy this wonderful life that God has given us. We believe that God has been watching over us.

Yet in my work as a pastor, I know many people who have lived through very difficult times; those who deal with tragic loss or life-threatening illness or family crisis. Sometimes when times get tough, people wonder; why should this happen to me? They may become angry at God, or they may blame themselves. Sometimes, they come to realize that one valid answer to the question of "Why me?" is the question, "Why not me?" Jesus reminds us that the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. Bad things do happen to good people. We try to find grace, strength, and courage to cope. Sometimes through our life's crises, we even witness to others.

Remember Jack Buck? What a wonderful career he had; he touched the lives of so many people, both through his broadcasting and with individual people. When he lay terminally ill, his wife Carol asked him what he would say to the Almighty when he died. His response was quick. "Why have you been so good to me?"

Things happen, and we wonder. Why me? Why him? Why her? Why us? Why not?

This one thing we know—God cares for us and guides us. That's an emphatic message of our scriptures for today and of the Bible as a whole. We love the story of Abraham

and Sarah, how God took an old couple and led them to a new land and gave them a promise that they would have more descendants than a beach had grains of sand. But we often forget or overlook the story we heard today. Before Sarah herself became pregnant, she had made arrangements for Abraham to have a child, an heir, through a surrogate mother, Hagar, an Egyptian servant. They did, and Hagar gave birth to Abraham's first son, named Ishmael. But after Sarah gave birth to her own son, Isaac, she became jealous and wanted to be sure that Isaac would be heir to their family's fortunes and to God's promise. So she convinced Abraham to send Hagar and her son Ishmael out into the desert alone. God assuaged Abraham's guilt into giving in to Sarah's vengefulness, by saying that Hagar and Ishmael would remain under God's protection. But still, they were alone in the dry desert. Then, as Hagar felt that her child would die in the desert, God spoke to her there. God promised to be with them. God provided water. God promised that Ishmael would himself be the father of a great nation. So God took a bad event and helped make good things happen from it.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus is preparing the disciples to face persecution. "Don't be afraid of those who can kill the body," he told them, "but only of those who can kill the soul." God cares for the sparrow, and even more for us.

But sparrows fall, as do we. The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike, Jesus said, and so does everything else. Good happens to good people, to bad people, and to in-between people. Bad happens to good people, to bad people, and to in-between people.

Those seem to be contradictory statements—that God cares for us intensely, deeply, passionately, and watches over us and protects us—and yet we can still experience cancer or heart attacks; yet we still lose our jobs to automation or outsourcing; our bodies fail us and we still end

up in a nursing home, or someone we love does. Life happens, and it can be intensely difficult, painful, frightening, and deadly.

But still we affirm that God does watch over us and care for us, as God watched over Hagar and Ishmael. God watches over and cares for us, just as God watched over the disciples when they faced persecution. God watches over us and cares for us when we face our own particular times of testing. That's the promise of scripture; that's a reality of life.

When we pray, we don't pray to some impersonal cosmic force, we pray to a personal God who listens and cares. Through our prayers, and through the prayers of others, healing comes. Sometimes it isn't physical healing that we receive, but spiritual and emotional healing that will help get us through. Sometimes miracles of physical healing happen. But God is just as present, just as loving, just as caring, in one as in the other.

Our baptism is a sign and seal of God's care, a reminder that no matter what happens, we are blessed and beloved children of God. Baptism isn't just a sign and symbol of new life, it's also a sign of death. That's one thing that isn't always as visible with baptism by sprinkling as it is with baptism by immersion. Both work. Both are valid. Both are symbolic of God's grace given to us. But when you do it like we do it, and go under the water, there's that little visceral fear of drowning that's completely irrational, but it's there. And that little visceral fear reminds you of something—that you are dying to your old life, and rising to new life. We remember St. Paul's words to the Romans 6. "Therefore, we were buried together with him through baptism into his death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too can walk in newness of life. If we were united together in a death like his, we will also be united together in a resurrection like his. This is what

we know: the person that we used to be was crucified with him in order to get rid of the corpse that had been controlled by sin. That way we wouldn't be slaves to sin anymore, because a person who has died has been freed from sin's power. .... Death no longer has power over him. ...you also should consider yourselves dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 6:4-11, condensed)

Martin Luther was a strong, courageous man willing to stand up against the total weight of the institutional church; willing to risk his own salvation if he was wrong. But the book of Romans gave him what he needed, the message that we are saved by God's grace through faith. But even the strongest, most courageous people get worn down sometimes; get depressed sometimes; get discouraged sometimes. Martin Luther was no exception. During such times, he would place his hand on his head and remind himself, "I am baptized." He would remind himself not of who he was, but whose he was. Then he would go on.

Remember your baptism. For when you do, you will know that no matter what happens in this life, you are a beloved child of God. You will know that God will never forsake or abandon you. You will know that the very gates of hell will not prevail against you. God loves you. You are under protection. In this life and the next, God guides you and God guards you. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon