

“God is Active in the World Today”

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Reflection for the 7th Sunday of Easter, May 24, 2020

St. Paul's, Hamilton

Today is the 7th Sunday in the season of Easter. Earlier this week, on Thursday, May 21, we celebrated the day of ascension. That's the day when the resurrected Jesus ascended into heaven. It marks the end of the forty days of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. The day of ascension is necessary in the story of Jesus because the post-resurrection appearances cannot continue for the rest of human history. If Jesus continues to pop up in various places forever then it becomes difficult for Jesus to be in all places at once. The day of ascension means that we are now entering a new stage when Jesus will be with us in a different way.

Jesus' ascension into heaven leaves a big gap in the Christian community. The disciples ask, "Who will look after us now? Of course, the great answer will be given next Sunday, May 31, on the day of Pentecost. That's the day when we celebrate the presence of God's Holy Spirit with us. Pentecost says, "In a sense, the resurrected Jesus is with you no longer, but now my spirit is with you, so you are not alone." We have been struggling with the pending absence of Jesus for the past few weeks. The disciples are in despair, and Jesus has been saying to them, "I am with you, I will not leave you." Today in John 17:1-11 Jesus pleads with his Father to take care of his people. At John 17:15, Jesus says to the Father, "I do not ask you to take them out of the world, but I do ask you to keep them safe from the evil one."

Today, we are asking the questions, "Is God with us? Is God active in the world today?" Perhaps we are asking the questions with an even greater sense of urgency in the year 2020. I believe that God is active in the world today. Before we look at the true way in which God is active in the world let's look at some of the wild theories about how God is active in the world.

Rev. Ralph Drollinger, leader of the White House Bible Study Group (It should send shivers up your spine to think about the Bible Study group that Donald Trump attends) claims that Covid-19 is the wrath of God brought down on humanity for our acceptance of lesbians, homosexuals, environmentalists and other depraved people.

Pastor Ronnie Hampton of New Vision Community Church in Shreveport, Louisiana, claims that the governmental shut down is Caesar's attempt to destroy the church, and that Christians are protected from Covid-19 by the blood of Jesus. He also claims that the covid-19 vaccine will contain a micro-chip that will be the "Mark of the Beast" described in Revelation 13:18. Pastor Hampton died of Covid-19 on March 24. We grieve for his family and those who loved him.

Bishop Gerald Glen of New Deliverance Evangelical Church in Virginia claims that God is larger than this virus and will protect us from it. Bishop Glen died of Covid-19 on April 14. We grieve with his family and those who loved him.

Pastor Tony Spell of Baton Rouge in Louisiana stated that his congregation could gather for worship because when they gather, the Holy Spirit comes in and protects them from Covid-19 and heals all their diseases. He is suing the state for stopping his church from worshipping. The case is on hold because Pastor Spell's lawyer, who is also a member of his congregation, is in the hospital with Covid-19.

In all, at the time of writing, thirty ministers of the Pentecostal Church in the United States have died of Covid-19. Most of them opened their churches on Easter Sunday, April 12.

My initial response to the absurd claims about God's intention to intervene and save us from Covid-19, independent of the efforts of science and medicine, and independent of our need to physically distance, isolate, wear face masks and practice good hand hygiene, is to laugh. Surely these are the views of a tiny radical fringe and we do not need to take them seriously. But when I am faced with the statistics revealing the number of people who take these theories seriously, then I am shocked. If rational, faithful, intelligent Christians do not speak against these theories then our silence might be seen as tacit consent to them. We must speak up. It is likely that someone in your sphere of influence is starting to think that there is a grain of truth in these theories. If these theories are not challenged, they may well create devastating results among the most vulnerable in our society. These theories are certainly not legitimate expressions of how God is active in the world.

- 43% of Evangelical Protestants in the United States believe that Covid-19 is the wrath of God in response to persons who are lesbian, gay, environmentalists or other depraved persons.
- 43% of Evangelical Protestants in the United States believe that the blood of Jesus can protect them from Covid-19. Another 30% believe that this is somewhat true.
- 50% of mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics in the United States believe that God will intervene in some way apart from science and medicine to save us from Covid-19

It is likely that someone close to you thinks in these terms, or thinks that there is some truth in these ideas. If intelligent, compassionate and faithful Christians like you do not speak up then your silence may be construed as consent. People who do not attend church may judge the whole church on the basis of these ideas, and conclude that the church is entirely insane, evil and corrupt. How can we restore the church in North America if people outside of the church hear only the voices of persons who are incompetent, malevolent and corrupt speaking for the church?

The people who speak in such thoughtless and unmeasured terms have a desperate desire to believe that God intervenes in the affairs of humankind today. I want to express to you that I believe that God intervenes in the affairs of humankind today, but not in the terms described by so many evangelical Christians. There are better ways to think about God's action among

humanity, ways that are biblically sound and faithful. In John 17:15 Jesus says to God, "I want you to keep them safe." How is God honouring Jesus request today?

The answer may lie in our definition of God. If God is only an external mighty force then the only way in which God can intervene is as the above-mentioned evangelical Christians have stated. But God is more than that. God may, at times be an internal reality, working in the hearts and souls of humankind in such a way that we begin to believe in the dignity, eternal worth, and equality of all human beings, and to act on the basis of that belief. With that view in mind, all action that upholds the dignity, eternal worth, and equality of all human beings is a manifestation of the presence and power of God in the world. That means that in the midst of a pandemic, we see the intervention of God in the following:

- In medical researchers seeking a vaccine
- In Doctors, Nurses and hospital staff, working to heal and restore the ill
- In front-line workers, risking life daily to maintain a society that is safe for all
- In essential workers, maintaining the establishments that are important to our community
- In families caring for loved ones
- In families missing loved ones in isolation
- In families grieving for a loved one
- In people who have lost employment and are seeking new ways to be productive
- In people reaching out to neighbours to bring groceries or to provide support as needed
- In musicians posting songs of hope and joy
- In teachers posting lessons to help their students
- And in any person who is contributing in any way to the health of their community

I also believe in the *direct* action of God in the affairs of humankind, but it is dangerous to try to name or identify such actions, and we tend to do so in terms that suit our corrupt purposes, not what is truly God's action. For example, if tragedy befalls our enemy, we are tempted to label it as the punishment of God. If tragedy befalls us, we tend to label it as random chance. Or, most sadly, when tragedy befalls anyone, we tend to assume it is God's punishment, and then look for some means by which to rationalize God's action... *they must have been sinful for that to happen.*

To attribute negative events to the punishment of God is mere superstition. We must shift our thinking to the understanding that God's will is always to uphold the dignity, eternal worth, and equality of all people. If we do that then we have a consistent standard by which to recognize the actions of God in the world. Any action that upholds the dignity, eternal worth and equality

of humankind is the action of God. Any action which diminishes the dignity, eternal worth, and equality of humankind is not God's action.

We know that God's will is to uphold the dignity, eternal worth and equality of all people because that is what Jesus does in scripture, and it is through the actions of Jesus that we know God. God may act directly in the affairs of humanity, but the greatest action of God is working in the hearts and souls of his people to affect change in the world.

One of the challenges of this point of view is that if the person through whom God acts is not a Christian, then it might be an insult to them to tell them that God has acted through them, and there might be Christians who find it unacceptable to say that God has acted through a non-Christian. For example, what if the Medical Researcher who discovers the vaccine for Covid-19 is an atheist. What if the Doctor who brings you to health and healing is a Moslem, what if the first-responder who saves your life is a Sikh? Is it appropriate to say that the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ has worked through them?

Early in this sermon I stated that, among other things, God is the dignity, eternal worth and equality of all people. If someone who identifies as an atheist believes in those things, and acts accordingly then they believe in the same thing that I believe in. They may call it by a different name, but God is in the substance and not in the name. I happen to express my faith in the dignity, eternal worth, and equality of all people through a series of stories about a man called Jesus, but if someone else has come to hold the same beliefs through some other journey, or some other series of stories, then they believe in the same thing that I believe in, they simply call it by a different name. It is the substance that matters, not the name. I may always believe that the stories of Jesus are the best way to come to a belief in the Good News of the dignity, eternal worth, and equality of all people, but there are other ways to come to the same belief. I have certainly met persons who identify as atheists who have dedicated their lives to upholding the worth of all people, and I have certainly known persons who identify as Christians who have dedicated their lives to actions that diminish the worth of others.

In John 17, Jesus asks his Father to be active in the world and to protect humanity. God has certainly complied with Jesus' petition. But the action of God in the world should not be interpreted as sending a pandemic or curing faithful people outside the scope of medicine or science. God acts in the world through all ordinary people who act to preserve and uphold the dignity, eternal worth, and equality of all people. The world is filled with such people. You are one of them. God is working in you. Christ lives in you. You are changing the world around you by the power of God.

What was remarkable about the life of Christ was that he lived in a context in which the worth and dignity of many people was systematically diminished, even by the church. But he went to all the people whose dignity had been diminished and whose equality had been questioned, and he fully restored them to a state of full dignity, eternal worth, and equality. This is how we recognize that Jesus was and is of one substance with God, and this is how we recognize where God is active in the world today. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.