

FILLING OUR BIBLICAL BACKPACKS FOR THE JOURNEY: COMING HOME  
TO GOD

A sermon preached at Broadview Community UCC  
April 6, 2014 Rev. Gail Crouch

Scripture: Romans 8: 31-39

For five weeks we have looked at some important scriptures that we might place into our biblical backpacks to help us on our journeys as Christians And we have looked at them through the following lens:

**God loves us and came to us in Jesus to show us how to love, that all might have life and have it abundantly.**

So we talked about the *Exodus* story from our Judeo tradition and how we all have times of being lost, of wandering in the wilderness; but we linked that story with the powerful image of God becoming one of us as the *Word was made Flesh* and lived among us.

Then we examined some scriptures that call us to live and work for *justice* as both the prophet Micah and Jesus called us to do.

Next we looked at the two *commandments* Jesus shared with us as we seek to live faithful lives: The Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son.

The image of the church as the *Body of Christ* was last week's lesson as we strive to be the most faithful community we can be honoring the gifts of everyone.

This, my last Sunday with you, I want to ponder one of the most beloved and reassuring scriptures in the whole Bible: the promise that *nothing can separate us from the love of God* as Jesus showed us. It is the passage, along with Psalm 23, that is most often read at funerals or memorial services. It is the passage that carries us through the dark night of the soul.

Now eight scriptures, while important, cannot be considered the end-all of important biblical passages. I did not talk about the Psalms, but for me, and I know many of you, they are powerful testimonies of God's presence in our lives. And what about the creation stories; the 10 Commandments; the stories of the last week of Jesus' life with the crucifixion and Easter morning; Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit, and many, many more scriptures that we know by heart or read through our tears, or cling to in tender times? The ones I have offered in these past weeks are far from a comprehensive list. That is why I asked each of you to prayerfully consider which scriptures your list might include. I am delighted that you will share those during your Maundy Thursday evening together. And because I will be gone, I hope every much, that someone will collect those scriptures and send them to me. I would cherish that gift from this faith community.

These past couple of weeks we have all been saddened by the outcome of the enormous landslide in our neighborhood to the north in Snohomish County. The number of lives lost, now given as 30+ with others missing, is reason enough to mourn. But as we learn more, we also wonder if human error in allowing building permits, logging, other activities, was part of this disaster. So feelings of anger, guilt, and bewilderment add to our grief.

Today's scripture from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, speaks of this very situation. For Paul, God's love for the world does not mean God controls everything that happens. In a tragedy such as the landslide, one often hears, "Why did God allow this to happen? What kind of a God would kill innocent children and adults? Why? Why?" But Paul reminds us that God created the world and then left the world and its people intact to make their own choices. God did not "cause" the earth to slide. The laws of nature, with which humans have tinkered, caused the disaster. But where then is God's presence and love for us in this painful loss? I do believe that when all those lives were lost in the landslide, God's heart was the first to break. God grieves with us and for us and does not abandon us.

Paul's bottom line in this scripture is this: Who or what can cause a separation between God's love for humankind? Paul lists the who: can hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril or sword separate us from God? And then he punches home: "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present nor thing to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth nor anything in all creation, can separate us from the love of God known in Jesus." Eugene Peterson translates this section to read: "I am absolutely convinced that nothing – nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable, absolutely *nothing* can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus has embraced us."

Paul is emphatically clear: not only are human actions unable to bring about separation from the love of God, but even those powers which go beyond merely human (death itself; natural disasters) cannot separate humanity from Christ's love. This is a powerful message one we need to hear again and again until it soaks into our body.

When I was growing up there was a small sign on the foot of my bed which read: "God loves Gail. Mommy and Daddy love Gail." Every night it was the last thing I saw as I went to sleep and the first view I had in the morning light. Year after year that message seeped into the marrow of my bones until it became part of me. I have had my quarrels with God over the years; felt distant and separated from God. But I have never doubted that I was God's beloved child. That great gift from my parents has sustained me over many years of life, some difficult and many joyful. I am eternally grateful for it.

Henri Nouwen, an author and priest who wrote many, many books, used to talk about the permanence of love. He wrote: "Hope and faith will both come to an end when we die. But love will remain. Love is eternal. Love comes from God and returns to God. When we die, we will lose everything that life gave us except love. The love with which we lived our lives is the life of God within us."

But this kind of love is not the wishy-washy sweet love of Hallmark cards. It is also tough love that demands something from us. God's love is free, lavish and never-ending. But because we are given that gift, we then have the ability and I would say responsibility, to do something with it. There is no sentimentality in this love. Rather it is wrapped up with compassion and sometimes love and compassion demand confrontation. The love that is of God lies on the far side of justice.

William Sloane Coffin, a pastor, writer and prophet said: "No sermon on love can fail to mention love's most difficult problem – how to find effective ways to alleviate the massive suffering of humanity. What we need to realize is that to love effectively we must act collectively and also engage the powers of the world that threaten life for so many. Until we confront the truths of inequality, we shall be as lap dogs trying to keep up with the wolf pack. The true purpose of Christianity – which is primarily a way of life, not a system of belief – is to love one another." But that means living out our love.

It is appropriate and heart warming that the community response to the mudslide in Oso has been compassion. Tons of supplies, human skills and presence, machines, all of these responses are needed and show how much love and care people have for one another. Love demands compassion and it has been generously offered. But ultimately, the other side of love which is justice must also be present. We will need to ask the tough questions about how our human footprint added to the natural disaster. Should less logging have been allowed? Should fewer home building permits have been issued? What can be done to lessen the possibility of another similar tragedy of this kind? It is not "mean" or "unfair" to ask these questions at an appropriate time, because compassion and justice are both faces of love.

It has been difficult for me to choose these few scriptural passages to share with you over the past weeks without including some Psalms. What I love most about them is that they are clearly written in our human voice. They are individuals addressing God with their anger, grief, pain, joy and trust. In almost every Psalm, even those that express deep anger and pain, the Psalmist ends up acknowledging the goodness of God.

As I have prayed for the people up in Oso these past couple of weeks, I have read a Psalm of Lament that was written by poet Ann Weems. While she writes in contemporary language she uses the Psalms format of crying out in pain and bewilderment and then coming home to rest and trust in God's love. Listen to her words:

*O God of my heart, it is your name I call  
When the stars do not come out.  
O God of my soul, it is to you I turn  
When the torrents of terror drown me.  
O God of mercy, it is for your hand I reach when I stumble  
On the stones of sorrow.  
O God of justice, it is to you I cry when  
The landslide of grief buries me.*

*I am left alone beneath a starless sky  
With a starless heart that barely beats.*

*Will your stars never shine again?  
Will they never again speak of your mercy?  
Will they never again sing their songs to my soul?*

*O God of my heart, peel back the night and let the starlight  
Pour out upon my upturned face.  
Let my eyes drink a sky of stars.  
Let my heart bathe in the stunning light  
Until my soul sings again with the conviction of the faithful.*

*In your mercy and justice, O God of my heart,  
Call me by name, and the stars will shine once more,  
As they did on that morning  
When they first began to sing.*

In the midst of immense pain and grief, God's love is there for each one of us. Nothing, not death nor life, the thinkable or unthinkable, powers, or mudslides of unfathomable loss, nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God shown to us in Jesus. That, my friends, is an incredible gift, given to us all. So as we gather at Christ's table, where all are welcomed, we come to receive the bread of life and the cup of blessing, reminders of God's extravagant love for us and with joy we come home to God.

God loves us and came to us in Jesus to show us how to love, that all might have life and have it abundantly. Thanks be to God.