



September 6, 2020

Romans 6: 1-11

Psalm 124

Hindsight in 2020

The Reverend Melissa Anne Rogers

“Hindsight is 20/20,” the old saying goes. When we look back, we see more clearly. With the passage of time, we come to understand a past that informs the present and shapes the future. Our progress as a people depends upon our learning from the past. Hindsight is essential as we strive to avoid making the same mistakes and inflicting the same pain. Who wouldn’t give their right arm for hindsight now about this particular year in our history — even though it means we’d all be older — for at least we would be beyond it. Right now a full life, and unfettered enjoyment of it — is rather hard to come by. This particular year has brought, for some, mere discomfort and necessary flexibility — but for others, it has been true agony. Nevertheless, we feel each other’s pain, and carry it — leaving us all with a kind of multi-layered pathos my colleagues have preached about this summer using the word “lament.” And there is so much to lament—personally, collectively, globally, morally. Someday, we won’t be where we are at this moment— with our nation in deep political turmoil, with a raging global virus dictating our every move, unable to ignore unconscionable disparity that leaves people of color disproportionately imprisoned and more vulnerable to death, staring at a steady rise in poverty, food instability, and global temperatures— and the deleterious effects on schools, sports, domestic violence, the very air we breathe, and more. Someday we won’t sing without our entire gifted choir supporting us. Someday we won’t have to remember to unmute ourselves. Someday we’ll sit side-by-side in the Big House — the Michigan one, and this First Pres sanctuary. How we long for that someday, to look back, to see just how and why it was this way, and what we did or did not do to change it. What will perfect hindsight show us? What will we do with a 20/20 vision of 2020? Imagine your answer. In hindsight, we were so wrong about “fill in the blank.” I can imagine that in hindsight, we’ll say those confederate statues were a dumb idea. In hindsight, masks did save lives. In hindsight, small businesses deepened our sense of community. In hindsight, taking so long to embrace and celebrate our differences in race and gender and sexual identity — was wrong.

How about some hindsight *in* 2020? Applying our perfect vision of the past to the now? Bernie Sanders tried to launch his run for president with that slogan. What do we know now by looking back at the last four weeks, four years, four decades, four hundred years? Insightful people look at the past to shape the present and guide the future. This congregation is full of the reflective and the wise. In a deeply personal way, looking back over your

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choices, and the decisions made both for you, and by you — what you've learned in hindsight significantly influences how you endure the now, and the not yet.

Hindsight can be a powerful personal self-help tool. In hindsight, I should not have smoked. In hindsight, being hard on myself about my body, or my wrinkles, was a total waste of good time. In hindsight, dad did the best he could with what he had. I love the meme I see often on Facebook — “On particularly rough days, when I'm sure I can't possibly endure, I like to remind myself that my track record for getting through bad days so far is 100 percent and that's pretty good.” Hindsight so often serves to give us strength for the present moment. God knows we are capable of learning things, and doing something with what we come to know.

Hindsight isn't limited to the personal or political. Hindsight is a kind of spiritual gift, one that we must utilize in a very contemporary and contemplative way. As Christians, hindsight sources how we know and understand God. We are a people with a story, with a written Word, and an oral history recounted in hymns, psalms and spiritual songs. We draw from that elaborate web of all that has happened to more thoughtfully contribute to and craft our own unfolding story. From the beginning of creation, the story takes shape year after year and wisdom emerges, truth is clarified, grace is bestowed. From Jewish Midrash to papal edicts to protestant preaching, God's Spirit is still revealing pieces we might have missed. Aren't we glad we Presbyterians know that? One thing that keeps Christianity divided into camps is that some people of faith resist hindsight. What they have long held onto must not change — their whole house is built on it— and the passage of time and new wisdom aren't of value to them. While others hold onto a version of the Bible so permeable and mutating that it becomes purely metaphorical as a story — which is both a faith disempowered, and thus, disempowering. But utilizing hindsight is critical -- and it is a gift the Spirit must help us to use.

Our First Pres logo has a road driven up the center of the lower half of the cross because even as we focus on where we are going, with a new mission and vision and a soon-to-be-finalized strategic plan to make God's love visible, we regularly peer in the rearview mirror to remember where we've come from. Our denominational PCUSA logo includes the flames of Pentecost and the burning bush on either side of the centered cross as obvious reminders of how the old holy ground our ancestors stood upon fertilizes the soil from which the PCUSA stands and engages the Gospel today, how fiery tongues and speaking the same language and the strong willed Holy Spirit are necessary when putting our faith into action. Our Presbyterian General Assembly gathers every two years to capture a new vision for who we shall be — one energized by openness to who we have been. The church reformed is ever reforming precisely because we learn from the past, and are changed by it.

When you remember your darkest days of sin as a person, or recollect how you were nearly destroyed by tragedy, hindsight shows you how God threw you a lifeline, and how you somehow, by grace, took it. With 20/20 hindsight, we see that God adhered to us and kept us glued to one another despite our misguided efforts, our self-inflicted calamity, and the serious errors of others that impacted us. In them, even through them, God was near. Hindsight lets us see our flaws, and how we responded to them, or, learned to live with them. Hindsight keeps us humble. Hindsight reinforces our salvation.

The Psalmist in the 124th Psalm is utilizing hindsight in a liturgical confession of gratitude. And in hindsight, she sees that God WAS on Israel's side. Even though they doubted it then, that's the only reason they survived to tell about it, to worship, endure, and ascend to Jerusalem. The author voices the words of a group of people collectively looking back, overwhelmed with gratitude, confessing their faults and God's deliverance. It is a memory of rescue, in rapid-fire sequence, six different descriptions of certain death for them, and six verses of being saved—the imagery in the psalm of wild uncontrolled waters and hordes of people intent on ravaging our land and bodies. It is a documentation of wonder and joy at triumph. Remembering that God liberated them, the psalmist's current anxieties are clarified, and her priorities reordered. Remembering that past now, the current moment looks different to the Psalmist, as one full of hope and assurance. The God who was with them then is just as much with them in the author's current assessment and predicament. They may not have known then that God was on their side -- but they know it now. And so everything is different. Friends, surely we know ourselves. This Psalm speaks right to us, reinforcing what we've long believed. God is on our side, too.

The concept of God being “on our side” has long fascinated me, from my years as a cheerleader in Alabama, when before the football games, our squad prayed with the coaches and football team that God would “give us a victory.” We believed that God surely wanted our team to win, and not our motley cross-town rivals. I've read articles by anti-abortion activists who believe God is on their side because the Supreme Court looks more like them today than twenty years ago. This is human nature.

But the concept of God taking sides has a troubling aspect, too. To take one side leaves others unprotected, unpreferred, unchosen. I certainly don't want to get on God's bad side. If God takes sides, whose side is God *not* on? The faithless? The feckless? The freaks? The free Methodists?

Most of us silence the question, ignoring it, burying it, or merely accepting this answer — faith means God is on my team. It's at the heart of Christianity. We believe we are chosen. We trust and believe God is in fact now and always on our side. In the liturgy designed by our founding Reformer John Calvin for use in Strasburg and Geneva, the service always began with these words. *Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.* Calvin said that in these words was the most important truth that any congregation gathered for worship needed to hear. In the past, in the present, and in the future, God is on our side — so go and live and serve. Accept it. Assume it. God is on the side of First Pres — no matter what happens on this day in the history of us, we will persevere — on the side of the self-study, the strategic plan, the future pastor search committee, on the side of the staff, the Deacons, the session, and a congregation that does not all think the same way or believe the same things. When we look back over our church's history, we will look back and say, God was clearly on

our side. God is on the side of the church universal — united and divided, faithful and flawed, both powerful and paradoxical.

Hindsight's byproduct should be spiritual maturity— that kind that comes in being able to see that even in failure, God took your side. God was still rooting for you and had plans for you when you failed to get into Harvard, or married the wrong person, or got that DUI, when cancer came your way. You know now — God being on your side will never be a guarantee of things going well. In fact, things not going well may be, in hindsight, a sign of God's favor for you. Attaining an awareness that God is on your side in a time of suffering, trial, and loss may feel impossible, but your inability to know and feel it doesn't make it any less true. Someday, you will all look back to see that. No matter what, you will come to know that God was on your side.

But I wonder if true spiritual maturity also means engaging this question — maybe just maybe, God does take sides, for that is, in God's great wisdom, God's prerogative. The great father of Liberation Theology, Gustavo Gutierrez, centered his faith on this — God does take sides. Or at least, sometimes God prefers a side. Gutierrez broke theological barriers by pointing out that God has a preferential option . . . for the poor. God is more on the side of the economically poor, the poor in spirit, all those who struggle. Because God is on the side of the poor, we must be, too. We must struggle and stand shoulder to shoulder with them, and bear a cost. Through the lens of extreme poverty and systemic injustice in Latin America, Gutierrez read scripture, he saw Christ's presence among the oppressed everywhere, including North America. Poverty means being marginalized, being insignificant, and an early and unjust death. Liberation theology illuminates that Christ thus came to live as a poor person not because poverty itself has any intrinsic value but to criticize and challenge those people and systems that oppress the poor and compromise their God-given dignity. What does that preference mean for us? "Blessed are the poor," Jesus said. He didn't say blessed is poverty. He did not say cursed are the rich. When Gutierrez says poor lives matter to Jesus — he is not saying all lives don't matter to Jesus. Because I'm the side of more breast cancer research, it doesn't mean I could care less about testicular cancer. All cancer matters. As a 50-year old woman, one means more to me right now. Who matters to God *the most* just now?

I wonder sometimes if we, in our Ann Arbor bubble, in the castles of education, wealth, and privilege we admit we both inhabit and sometimes regret, don't care much for this idea that God prefers some — unless those some include us. For we have done for the poor — Rotating Shelter, Cass, Friends in Deed, Alpha House. We see the marginalized. We reach out. We have banners. We've done more than just something. The Gospel tells us though that to serve God is to do justice unceasingly and at a personal cost. If I'm honest with you, there are times when I bristle at this theology that calls me to let go of my privilege and join Christ more completely in the struggle for justice. I repent of this — *I like my privilege*. And that's the problem. Others have bristled, too. I was once talking on the phone with my cousin, an upper middle class Southern Baptist. To quote a t-shirt, "She loves Jesus but she cusses a little." We got into a debate about these topics, affirmative action, and welfare. I said, "As a pastor, I have come to know that Jesus always stood on the side of the poor." Click. The phone hung up, her privilege hung on. It was too much to hear, to take, that God being on suffering's side also meant God couldn't somehow be on hers, that during the Civil War, President Lincoln was once asked if God was on his side. His reply was, "It is not — is God on my side, but am I on God's side?"



Are we on God's side? The side working for justice? Are our preferences the same ones we believe God's to be? We might wake up each day and before we get out of bed, pray "show me how to be on your side today. Even if I don't like it. Even if I am uncomfortable with it." To listen for and follow the heartbeat of the Gospel as it is expressed in this world. Every day, a new beginning.

Paul, in Romans 6, puts it in New Testament terms— Yes, God is on your side. What are you going to do about it? Take forgiveness for granted? Trust you'll be a winner? Heck no. Do your work to get on God's side. Peterson's biblical paraphrase puts that thought this way — if we've left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there? Or didn't you realize we packed up and left there for good? That is what happened in baptism. When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace—a new life in a new land! Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we're going in our new grace-sovereign country. Could it be any clearer?"

Let me close with a P.S. for you, dearly beloved ones, a gentle reminder. God being on our side doesn't change the fragility of life, the vulnerability of your spirit, that evil has power in this world. Our being on God's side means that in spite of that truth, we are not afraid of those things, paralyzed by the risk, and we don't spend our time and effort boosting our own position, hedging our bets, building our own wealth and running from our own deaths. This is the journey of life. Letting go of us and taking more and more the shape of the one who saved us. It takes morsels of bread and sips of juice to fuel this journey. It takes every year we are lucky enough to be granted, and every day that our lungs still have air in them.

Today ends our summer series on "new beginnings" and this last month's emphasis on perseverance. Lord knows, we have persevered through the summer of crazy conventions and COVID and George Floyd and protests and looters, wind and fire and unemployment and who's Zooming who. God was on our side for all of it. Have we been on God's side? Next Sunday, our series turns to stories in Exodus, with the theme, "Getting There." Remembering where we've been, and who was with us, what now? How does hindsight give way to better foresight? As faithful people, as a church, as a nation, as a world — we go forward with many more days to look back, and direct our course accordingly.

Thanks be to God.

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