

PENTECOST 20, A – October 18, 2020  
SCRIPTURES - Isaiah 45:1-7; 1 Thess. 1:1-10; Matt. 22:15-22; Ps. 121

*...you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. 1 Thess. 1:10*

We modern people so easily think that things today are very different – that we are very different – from the way things were, and people were, in Biblical times. Oh, how arrogant, how full of ourselves, we are to think this! Today's Gospel reading shows how similar we are: a question about tax payments is used by the Pharisees to entrap, and so bring down, Jesus, whom they oppose. Gee, did you ever think that, maybe, the *NY Times* reporters get ideas for their stories from the Bible?

The Bible is relevant because God is relevant. The Bible is living because God, its ultimate author and the focus of its words, is living. He is the focus of our readings today.

People today are similar in how they view God to the people in Jesus' day, and also those who lived before Him. How? Well, Paul commends the Christians who lived in Thessalonica, a city bordering Greece, with ***"[turning] to God from idols to serve the living and true God."*** The Greek and Roman gods they had formerly worshiped – and you're familiar with some of them, like Zeus and Aphrodite – were less like gods than like super humans. They were powerful, certainly; although, they could oppose and limit one another. They were eternal, in the sense of not dying... but they also had beginnings, births and creations. The way the gods were most like humans was that they were self-focused and emotional, and so argumentative, fickle, and uncaring. You needed to entice and persuade them to help you. The gods worshiped by other peoples, such as Baal and Ashera, were similar: often unaware of and/or uninterested in their worshippers, and so needing to be coerced to help.

Today, people credit events and acts more to science and laws governing the world, and even to chance, than to God. They focus more on their own resources – such as their own, or others', wisdom and knowledge... wealth... medical science and resources... governmental aid – than to God. There are also many people who view God as a designer. He has set up the universe kind of like a line of dominoes. Events happen that lead to others, like dominoes falling into one another. God merely pushes the first one.

God speaks of Himself so very differently in our Scriptures today! He ***"made heaven and earth,"*** says Ps. 121, our Introit. ***"I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity,"*** He says in Is. 45. He is ***"the living and true God,"*** Paul says in 1 Thess. 1. He is present and active in doing and working and making Himself known.

What does this mean for us? That's a good Lutheran question. The answer is one which you may not like to consider. That God **"forms light and creates darkness, makes well-being and creates calamity,"** means that He not only causes "natural" disasters like deadly storms and fires, but also diseases like Covid19. But, isn't it a Chinese virus? Didn't it originate there, and maybe even from their scientists? Perhaps. But, if we take seriously what God says, that **"I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity,"** then we cannot leave Him out of it. Only an atheist, or a Deist who views God as an uninvolved originator of events that fall like dominoes, can comfortably leave God out of it. We Bible believers have to wrestle with His involvement.

What purposes could God have for a pandemic? Well, since He is eternal, He certainly has a much longer focus in mind than we do. And so, perhaps God is using this pandemic to draw our focus away from finding personal security and worth in temporary things like wealth, or work, or medicine and the health care industry, or man's wisdom. Unfortunately, the way a pandemic draws our focus away from these things is by tearing them down... by tearing us down... and so showing their and our ineptitude and inability and uncertainty, and finally, our mortality. Now, I'm not saying that God wants you to believe to the extent that you reject medicine and ignore the advice of doctors and scientists... oppose all governmental decrees and suggestions as useless, politically-driven only, and perhaps even detrimental and godless. Not at all! God makes very clear in the Bible that people and institutions and governments – even godless ones like Caesar's – can be used by Him to accomplish His purposes. **"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's,"** Jesus says. And, even though Cyrus is a king who does not know God or believe in Him, God calls him **"[My] anointed, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations and to loose the belts of kings."** God will use him to accomplish His purposes! So, consider man's wisdom and contributions, but trust in God above everything else. He alone is our hope and our life!

For, God is true and living, Paul says. This means that He is a personal God. Psalm 121 promises, **"He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber... The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore."** And so, we believers in Jesus, the Son of God whom the Father sent to rescue us – you and me – from our sins, our death, and our hell... well, we believers don't just believe in a God who can help. We confess: **"My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."** The living God is my God, my help, for He has been – and remains – involved in my life! **"God has chosen you,"** Paul says with certainty, **"because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."** That you believe in Jesus as God's Son and your true Savior and believe, and so want to hear, His Gospel is the work of God, the blessing of His Holy Spirit! He is present with you and is working in your life!

So: what is God doing, or can God do, for you and with you when it comes to the Coronavirus? Do not think it's all about we can do. It's not, and so I don't hound people about how they wear their masks and who they associate with and what they do. Keep

in mind that you don't know other's minds and hearts. You don't know breathing issues they may have that make mask-wearing difficult, or other steps they may actually be taking to help people. No, when it comes to the Coronavirus, if you believe what God says in Isaiah 45 – ***“I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the Lord, who does all these things.”*** – then this means that He can keep you well... or He can allow you to get sick. If you do get sick, do not be afraid. ***“The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life,”*** promises Ps. 121. Perhaps He has in mind the witness to His presence and His salvation in Christ that you can give to another who is afraid. Perhaps He is allowing you to become sick so that, if He blesses you with a full recovery, you can provide blood and plasma to help those who are sick. Such are very likely things, for the odds are great that, if you get Covid19, you will not die. The recovery rate for those who get it who are under 70 and have no underlying medical problems is over 99%. It is not a death sentence.

And what if you are the cause of someone's illness? What if you unknowingly carry the coronavirus to someone else? That can happen with this virus, as you can have it and yet have no symptoms and so not know it. This is why we take precautions. Still, if this were to happen... then give it to God. He is the One who ***“forms light and creates darkness... [who] makes well-being and creates calamity.”*** You cannot carry sickness to anyone unless this is God's will. If you feel guilty or feel responsible, then pray for God's forgiveness and know that you have it. Jesus alone fully rendered unto God the thing which is God's: His holy life, which He offered up for the forgiveness of your sins. And His life covers your life. Jesus covers every one of your sins, no matter what they are and what they bring about! He also rose from the dead to live forever and plead for us forever. There is holiness and life eternal, and not sin and guilt and death, with Him!

Still, many have died after contracting Covid19... including many Christians, I imagine. We who believe in the living and true God are not spared the travails that fall on people in this world. But, we are God's. He keeps ***“our going out and our coming in from this time forth and forevermore.”*** (Ps. 121) And so, like Paul and the Thessalonian Christians, make it your goal above all ***“to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”*** Serving and waiting: this is to mark our lives and be our ultimate focus, not just living – and living well – here. Lift our eyes to this, Lord! Keep our focus on You, the living and active God, and the eternal life You have given us in Jesus! May He come soon and deliver us into that life which will never end, and which no disease can trouble or touch! We ask this in His name. Amen.