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## **God Sends People**

**Text:** Hebrews 11:29-12:2

While there are certainly more than just two great questions at the existential heart of the Christian faith, there are two that keep popping up all the time when we reflect on faith. The first is “Why did God let this happen?” The second, which follows closely on the heels of the first, is “So why doesn’t God do something about it?”

Now, at its root there is certainly something of living religion in the way one asks such questions. Anyone who asks these two questions is *not* entertaining a God of the philosophers. She is not entertaining an abstract deity, nor only positing a universal mind brooding over the universe. Nor is one positing a God who is the inspiring inner side of the world of nature. To ask these questions, rather, is to think about and to deal with a God who can do things, and who is expected to do things. And it is to think and deal with a God who can be and who is willing to be involved with people. For these reasons, therefore, these two questions, “Why did God let this happen?” and “So why doesn’t God do something about it?” are good religious questions. A religious mind can and does ask these sorts of questions all the time.

However, if they are good religious questions, they by themselves are not great religious questions; or, rather, they are not perfectly asked religious questions. For if what they are asking were all that should be asked, it would mean that the questioner assumes that God will always *do* something about things and that God always should do something. That is not quite true, at least not in the way that many people assume that God will do something. For example, these two questions can be asked in a quite juvenile way. Too many people when asking them not only

assume that God can do something about what has befallen them, but also assume that that is the whole point of God and religion. They assume that God is just there to pluck their feet out of the net, as the psalmist says; they assume that God will just reach in and pull us out of any water that is over our heads. In short, they assume that the world pretty much revolves around them, and that God is there to make sure that the heavens don't lose their center, namely, us.

Asking the questions this way also assumes that God what God does, and primarily if not exclusively does, is to provide miracles.

Yet, it doesn't always work that way. Oh, to be sure, God does work miracles. The Bible is full of them, and if you discounted them all you wouldn't have much of a story left or many places to where you could point out that God has interjected himself into human lives. I dare say that miracles, too, are not just confined to the Bible, and that even people of today can point to miracles that have taken place among us. But, while God does perform miracles, and while God does in the most direct fashion pluck one's feet out of the net from time to time, the fact of the matter is that miracles are not God's usual medium for being present with us. Rather, they tend to be something more like a way of getting across the *message* that God is with us. Miracles can *witness* to God's power, they can provoke wonder and awe, they can provoke gratitude, trust and belief, and they can give us comfort. But just as a real personal relationship cannot be based strictly on one person's always pulling another's fat out of the fire, so, too, a God that is involved with people deeply cannot *just* keep rescuing them. No, if the point of faith is the interaction between God and women and men, if the point is, as Thomas Aquinas suggested, that God and we become *friends* then God needs to reach us and touch us in such a way that we can deal right back with God, and that we can deal right back with other women and men, too.

Thus, I want to suggest, that while God certainly does perform miracles of the most

extraordinary sort from creation to resurrection, God does not perform miracles all that often. What God does do all the time, though, is that God always sends people. So therefore when we ask what is God going to do about something or other, we need to realize that God may not, that God probably even will not, do anything like performing a physical miracle to help us. But God will always send somebody.

That is the point of the lesson we read this morning from the *Letter to the Hebrews*, where our author tells his readers in order to encourage them that, since we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, we should run with perseverance the race that is set before us. The recipients of the letter, tired, perhaps even persecuted, were asking “what is God going to do about it?” Our author simply replies, “God is going to do what God has always done about such things. God is going to send people. God is going to make people great by giving them great people.” To be sure, in citing the great cloud of witnesses, our author cites any number of wonderful things that each of those witnesses has done – crossed the Red Sea as if it were dry land, breached the walls of Jericho, shut the mouths of lions, put mighty armies to flight, and the like. But his point isn’t those things – it is the men and women of faith who have always existed, and who continue to exist as examples and as witnesses so that others may go on, so that others may have faith, too. God has always sent people, he says. Therefore, take their example seriously. Learn from them. Be like them.

Now, what was true back then is just as true now. Almost always, whenever we are desperate and looking for a miracle, almost always when we are convinced that we are lost unless there is some kind of miracle, and which we think is the only thing that God could do to help us, God doesn’t perform a miracle. But God always does send somebody and in that we are almost always amazed when we realize what has happened. It is because God sends people that

we learn to see our situation and its possibilities in new ways. I suspect if we always just got bailed out, our imaginations would remain terribly shrunken.

A couple of years ago this thought first dawned on me when talking to an old friend from Princeton Seminary. Recently her daughter had given birth her second child. But only a couple of months later, the pediatrician told her that the child's skull, instead of having the broad, soft places between the cranial plates that allows the brain to grow without being constricted, was solid and that there was no room for growth. Needless to say, panic set in for mother and grandmother immediately, and it was hardly relieved when the doctor said that the condition was operable. Operable, maybe, they thought, but dangerous and certainly something darkly ominous. What would life be like for him in the future? How could God let this happen? What was God going to do about it? Now, as Carol told me this story, she also went on to say, that a week or so later she had lunch with an old friend who was only in town briefly. He had been a brilliant student at Princeton Seminary, and now worked at an upper level office in the PCUSA headquarters in Louisville. More importantly, he was a great guy. She told him her story, and did not leave out any of the considerable anxiety which she had generated since the diagnosis. He simply laughed, bent his head over towards her and pulled back his hairline to show her the scar which had been left when he had had the same operation some thirty-five years before. She wanted a miracle; God sent her a person and God's wisdom is proved in that.

It was in things far more minor, but just as revealing of how God actually works, that my youngest daughter, Elspeth and I discovered this same truth this summer and a little bit of how it works. Walking five hundred miles in the middle of a Spanish summer is a daunting task in the prospect. Actually doing it is hard, though, in ways that are difficult to imagine until you are actually faced with them. Blisters, sore knees, and physical fatigue all take their toll. They make

it hard to walk, but it is even harder to start walking each morning, and harder even yet trying to figure out how you are going to do it for some thirty or more days. One would, indeed, like a miracle, some quick fix so that you can get on with it. That, of course, never happens. But what does happen is that other people show up. For example, one Swedish couple of my age or so, came to our rescue and showed us how to deal with certain kinds of blisters. The help was most appreciated, but more important was the lesson that we had to learn: we actually needed others in order to make this walk. It was also particularly fascinating to learn from numerous other pilgrims that we kept running into in the early days of the trip who had had various different problems, and who all kept talking about the Swedish couple who had helped them deal with it. Nobody ever got a quick fix, but God did seem to send people.

It wasn't just that couple. People kept showing up, and saying things that made you look at your problems in a new light. One episode that was emblematic of the whole idea came one hot afternoon as we were trekking across a great flat, hot plain when suddenly an adobe hut came into view. It was surrounded by *nothing*. But in front of it was a tent, and the lone resident of the hut had under that tent set up a stand to give weary pilgrims juice, water, and even some organic watermelon – *gratis*. When we thanked him, he said, “No, thank you for making this pilgrimage.” People like that make it possible to go on.

As such people showed up and as people helped and gave each other encouragement, there was actually a little community of pilgrims formed. In that sense, the great revelation didn't come at the end of the trip as a reward for the hard work; the great revelation was the community that formed itself as a pilgrim community in response to the people God sent. It hardly needs saying that the church is just like that.

Indeed, it hardly needs saying but it is worth saying anyhow, especially here and now and

to this congregation. You have just elected a new pastor. It is important to recognize that when she comes she does so as one whom God has sent. In the years of transition you have gone through, and the anxiety about the future that it has brought, a lot of people just wanted it over. One always just wants to have it fixed. Well, God doesn't work like that. But God does send people, and in the pastor you have elected you need to keep that in mind.

But there are a couple of things in particular that you do need to keep in mind about the truth that God sends people if you are going to make this work.

First, is to recognize that God sends *people*, and people are not miracles, no matter what their talents. Your new pastor comes to you to work with you and to lead you. She is not, however, the answer. Her presence is not miraculous, and simply being here will not change anything if you don't respond to her leadership as a person. It has been my experience over the course of the years that we may well have a crisis of good leadership in the church. Really good leaders, deep leaders, are not easy to come by these days. But at the same time, there is also a profound crisis of followership. Churches want great leaders, they want people with imagination and ideas, they want a great future charted, but far too often the folks in the pews just won't listen and follow. And when they don't, it all simply falls apart. Things do work, though, when you work together and don't expect miracles of a pastor, or expect the pastor to be a miracle. What you are going to get out of her is ideas, an example, care, imagination, a way of living, a person willing to dare. All of those things are crucial to making an good community. But they only work, when you are the sort of people who respond to them. So listen to what she has to say, do something about it, and above all don't be passive.

Second, also remember that if God has sent people, that God also sends you. That is true, of course, in the sense, that if this community is going to be an example of living from God's

Word, then you, in response to the leadership that God sends you, need to go out and let yourself be sent to others. But it is also true in a more subtle, and far more local way as well. If God has sent this person to you to help you think, and will, and imagine and love better, well, consider that perhaps God has also put you in place to help her think and will and imagine and love better. By that I don't mean that you should start telling her how to be a better pastor even if you are full of good ideas to help her. Churches do far too much of that as far as I can tell. But you can encourage her, you can lift her spirits and let her work out her salvation in this place simply by responding to her with intelligence and faith and love. As a pastor I can tell you that the most wearing thing in the world is to preach with everything you have in you, be told you are doing a great job, and then week after week watch people change absolutely nothing in their lives. The greatest thing in the world, on the other hand, the thing that convinces me that there is a God and that God cares for us, and will do something about our problems, is simply when people are more caring, more reflective, more quiet, more active. One of the great parts of my experience here has been the Monday Night Bible Study, and the reason is simply because so many people have used it to ask good questions, questions that matter to them about good and evil, love and death, grace and reconciliation. By doing what every person of faith ought to do, you, then can be someone sent to her.

God, of course, does perform miracles. But the greatest miracle of all is in the way that stubborn and ignorant human hearts come by grace to think differently, to live life differently, to imagine love and friendship differently. And that is a miracle that does not come about by God simply plucking our feet out of the net time and time again. It is something that only comes about by our thinking and willing and living, and loving. And that is why God always sends people. For it is people that challenge us and teach us think, will and love. Let us therefore

always stay aware to the fact that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. And I pray especially for you that you keep this in mind in the coming years.