

Words for an Emerging Church

Wednesday, October 6, 2021

Beyond Our Understanding

"I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted... Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know." —Job 42:2, 3b

He's got the whole world in his hands. —African-American Spiritual

Two years ago, who would have imagined that a flu would have become a partisan matter. Now I stay up late at night wondering whether I had the democrat or republican strain! I suppose that everything has become political in our day as various factions make their impassioned appeals, explaining their understanding of the present crisis and each using their own partial set of facts. This is not a pleasant time. While I do stand clearly on the side of getting the vaccine (with the rare exception of those with special medical conditions) I am disturbed by the level of the villainizing of the unvaccinated. It is also unsettling to hear that despite the cure-all claims of the avid vaxxers, the virus persists even in countries who have been thoroughly inoculated. It is still wise to take the shot, but it may not be the complete solution to the problem as had been hoped. These continue to be confusing and unnerving times.

In this world where so many people seem to be convinced that they hold the answer to the matter, I was surprised and refreshed to hear the insight of a radio host. While I anticipated hearing a more partisan view on the pandemic, this radio host stated soberly, *There is probably much more to this virus than any of us understand.* The words initially sent a chill through me. Like most of my fellow humans I do not like to hear of things being beyond our understanding. Life seems much safer when we can convince ourselves that we have things all figured out. It is a humbling and unsettling experience to confess our ignorance, especially in the face of a dangerous foe. We cling to our opinions and theories with a great certainty, trying to convince ourselves that we have this figured out. But perhaps we do not. Let us be clear that confessing that there is much mystery surrounding a matter does not free us to ignore the many reasonable conclusions which we can draw from the evidence. It is a confession that there is much more to the picture than we can see and understand. We still need to pursue the work of study and reason, but let us do so with a deeper sense of humility.

This all brings to mind the Book of Job and the mystery of Job's suffering. Job was a godly man who suffered mightily and for reasons which he never came to understand. He called out to God, pleading his innocence, and was eventually granted an audience with God. Though he never learned the reason for his misery Job came to trust in God and in God's plan and control, remarking, *My ears have heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes* (42:5-6). He repented of his pride before God and gave praise to the Almighty, rejoicing that he had been able to so closely encounter God. Job was not wrong in his contention that he was suffering unjustly, as God pronounced him right while condemning the accusatory remarks made by his adversaries. Job was both vindicated and overwhelmed by the mystery of it all.

Like Job, a suffering world seeks desperately to understand this plague that we might bring it to an end. We have learned a great deal. Let us not despise that knowledge and may we listen carefully to truth wherever we might hear it, but let us also learn to humbly accept the mystery which still prevails through these strange days. Like Job, may our search lead us to a deeper and humble faith which can temper our opinions. There is a sense of loss and surrender as we confess that we are mystified, yet such a confession made before the Living God soon leads us to a greater gain. As we leave the matter in God's hands, we can find a new peace in our own lives.

As my A.A. friends commonly say, *Yesterday's history—Tomorrow's a mystery*. And to that I joyfully add, Amen. God is in control of that mystery, and in that we can rest!

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

Let our mouth be filled with thy praise, O Lord, that we may sing of thy glory, for that thou hast counted us worthy to partake of thy holy, divine, immortal and life-giving mysteries: preserve thou us in thy holiness, that we may learn of thy righteousness all the day long. Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia. —Liturgy of John Chrysostom and Basil the Great