

Where is the Hope?

Psalm 14
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First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

Steve Jobs, the innovator behind the iPhone, Apple Watch, AirPods and hundreds of other tech devices, was sitting in his garden one day reflecting on death; he hadn't been feeling well.

"I'm about fifty-fifty on believing in God," he said. "For most of my life, I've felt there must be more to our existence than meets the eye. It's strange to think that you accumulate all this experience, and maybe a little wisdom, and it just goes away. So, I really want to believe that something survives, maybe your consciousness endures."

He fell silent for a very long time and then said, "But, on the other hand, perhaps it's like an on-off switch. 'Click!' and you're gone."¹

"Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'" That's what our Old Testament lesson tells us. And, yet, Steve Jobs is no fool, at least not by worldly standards.

But today's scripture lesson is not speaking of worldly standards. It's talking about God's standards, God's point of view. "They are corrupt," says the scripture, "they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good."

Yes, from God's point of view, that's true. We are all sinful, all corrupted by the fall of humankind, when we were expelled from the Garden of Eden for wanting what we wanted when we wanted it, with little or no concern for God.

The Fall is the reason we can relate to scripture when it says, "The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one." We are all prone to rebelling against God, in and of ourselves.

So, where is the hope for this world to be found? I mean, the words "corrupt" and "perverse" used in that passage are the same words used in Exodus to describe humankind when God sent the flood, which destroyed everyone except Noah and his family, the same words used to describe those who created and worshiped a Golden Calf. We're talking about God's response to serious rebellion here.

¹ Walter Isaacson, concluding words of his biography, Steve Jobs (Simon & Schuster, 2011), 570-71.

And then there's the rebellion God was looking down upon at the time this scripture was written. Sadly, that's the same rebellion plaguing the earth today – people doing things that are just plain evil and misguided in the sight of God.

Speaking of such people, scripture says, "Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon the Lord?"

Chewing people up and spitting them out – there's a lot of that going on these days. Having no regard for the Lord – there's also a lot of that these days. There are people who truly don't believe in God and there's people who claim to believe but fail act like it, fail to turn to the Lord and follow his lead, his instruction, particularly when it challenges us a bit.

It's like the climber who fell off a cliff and caught hold of a small branch on his way down. "Help!" he yelled. "Is there anybody up there?"

A majestic voice boomed through the gorge: "I will help you, my son, but first you must have faith in me."

"Yes, yes, I trust you!" cried the man.

"Let go of the branch," boomed the voice. There was a long pause, and then the man shouted up again, "Is there anybody else up there?"

We are more than happy to listen to God when it suits us. But let it take a little courage, a little self-sacrifice, a little giving-till-it-hurts for the sake of others, and that's when we start looking for a loophole – is there anyone else, is there any other way?

This is true for each of us individually, and it's true for humankind across the globe, throughout our nation, in our community, and in our families. We all succumb to moments of faithless attitudes, thoughts and behaviors directed at others.

In response to this, scripture tells us, "There they shall be in great terror, for God is with the company of the righteous. You would confound the plans of the poor, but the Lord is their refuge."

The use of the word "there" to start that statement, where it says, "There they shall be in great terror" – that's interesting. It's as if God is saying that in the midst of doing evil, of disregarding the poor, of failing to seek God and follow the Lord, that's when we are subject to great terror, that's when things have gone terribly wrong and it seems there's nothing we can do about it.

Have you ever felt that way – that sudden realization that something's terribly wrong and there's nothing you can do about it? Maybe you feel that way now, when it comes to a great need you have or just the state the world these days. It can be a pretty hopeless feeling, with no end in sight. And yet, scripture tells us that God is our refuge, God will protect us and deliver us from all evil.

But when? When will God set things right? When will God deliver you from your feelings of hopelessness, your certainty that things can't and won't get better – whatever it is that you're struggling with, or whatever your greatest fear is?

When, God!?! That's what the ancient Israelites were asking at the time today's scripture lesson was written. "O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion!" they plead. And then they add this, saying, "When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad."

These are the shouts of joy that are heard whenever God's people are delivered from evil and lifted up from the struggle that beats them down.

This was true going all the way back to Noah emerging from the flood, the Hebrew slaves delivered from Egypt, and the faithful spared God's wrath at the Golden Calf. It is in God's nature to disrupt the plans of evildoers and to bring his faithful to a bright, new day of peace and prosperity, comfort and love.

So, when will that day come for you, for your loved ones, for our nation, for the entire world? God only knows. But the good news is the day of deliverance from evil will come, and it is even now coming into being. We know this because God has redeemed the world through Jesus Christ. "It is done," said Jesus on the cross.

And if you don't yet see it and feel it and experience it as fully as we would like, as fully as we need to, then it is just a matter of time before we will.

Today's entire scripture lesson is summarized in one of the most well-known and beloved passages in the Bible:

"... God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ... And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."

And still, "... God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

When will God once and for all wipe evil from the face of the earth and set all things right? God only knows. But we who are faithful, we know that he will; and woe to those who work evil in this or any age, for their hell is already upon them, even if they don't yet feel the heat. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of great love, we confess that we so often fail to remember that no matter where we are, we are surrounded by your love. We rush through the busyness of our days, and are imprisoned by our schedules, instead of letting our schedules give us freedom.

We are in the throes of despair, or in the midst of a stormy time, and we forget that no matter where we are, you are there also. So, in these moments of quiet, let us be still and know that you are God.

In the certainty of your love, we pray for those who are ill, and for those who care for them. We pray for those who work for peace, and who bring help to those in need. Might their gifts be a tangible reminder of your enduring love.

Grant us the courage to give into your hands the burdens we carry: the resentments ... the anger ... the fear. Take these things away that rob us of you and, in their place, let peace prevail.

Free us, O God, from the things that bind us, and help us to relax into your love.

In the certainty of your care, let us pray the prayer of your Son, Jesus the Christ, who also walked this earth and who triumphed over difficulties, sin and death.

Let us pray together now, raising our eyes to heaven and our voices in song:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.