

“But where shall wisdom be found?
And where is the place of understanding?
Mortals do not know the way to it,
and it is not found in the land of the living.”

Job 28:12-13

Loss of Control

I feel like I talk about COVID more than other people, but I think it was a watershed moment for us. It announced a significant change in our understanding of our own power, and its impact has been perpetuated by other events that prove to us, sometimes in brutal terms, that we are not in control of our lives or the world around us.

As Christians, we should know that this is true, and thank God for being infinitely better positioned to guide the universe than us mortals. But we North American Presbyterian Christians, especially those with some privilege, have often played the role of worldly manager in our world. Presbyterians have often been in leadership roles in our nation’s history, based on status, education, wealth, and/or the theological perspective that it is appropriate—even expected—that we practice our faith in the public sphere, using our privilege to make the world better for all. We have accomplished this through hospitals (like Columbia Presbyterian in New York City), education (like Occidental College and Princeton), government (John Witherspoon, the only clergy to sign the Declaration of Independence; and many politicians at all levels of governance, including many presidents and members of Congress), science (multiple stars in the history of NASA, including John Glenn, Katherine Johnson, and of course Sally Ride), and business (Sam Walton). Former Stated Clerk J. Herbert Nelson II was often asked by other Black church leaders why he was Presbyterian. He would point out that he was born Presbyterian, that his family has been Presbyterian for several generations, but also being Presbyterian gave him access that others did not have. He mentioned being involved in a labor issue that led to a strike, and he was one of several pastors to lead a protest. The CEO of the company would not speak to any of the clergy, until Rev. Nelson arrived; the CEO would only allow the Presbyterian in to meet with him, so Rev. Nelson went in.

I’m sure that every denomination can name distinguished members. But research has shown over the years that Presbyterians are better educated and wealthier than members of most other Christian denominations. Even in the aftermath of the Eaton Fire, our churches were able to show generosity to their members and the community, and most of our church members who lost their houses had insurance that is helping them through the crisis.

Generally, many of us have enjoyed some level of privilege that cushioned us from the bumps and turns that the rest of the world feels much more directly on a regular basis. The privilege that the United States enjoys as a nation is referenced in the saying “When the United States gets a cold, Mexico gets pneumonia”—and I think this is true for more than the economies of these two nations. We have had this privilege for so long that we don’t see it as privilege—it’s just the way life is. In most circumstances, we have been able to steer the course of our lives away from danger, or we have resources that allow us to minimize any problems we might encounter.

And then COVID hit. And while wealth enabled some to access medical care, the virus was unknown enough and swift and serious enough that everyone was impacted by it. And COVID’s impacts such as long COVID—and now, by the way, COVID is rising again—keep coming up.

Then, a few years later, some of us were hit by the Eaton Fire. And gun violence has grown to the point that our church sanctuaries are not sanctuaries anymore, and children are trained how to act when there's an active shooter at their schools. And we have a federal government that is unpredictable at best, with severe cutbacks in many departments that support the well-being of all people. Changes in policies leave senior citizens concerned about their Social Security and Medicare benefits. Agencies such as FEMA and the Small Business Administration struggle to continue providing assistance to survivors of natural disasters with smaller staffs. And the targeting of immigrants—or anyone who looks like they might be an immigrant—impacts all of us; we have minister members leaving the USA for calmer nations, and we have lost neighbors, workers, caregivers, vendors, friends, and peace of mind due to the ICE raids.

These events, and many others, have taken away from us any illusion that we are in control of our lives. We are now facing the uncertainty that burdens the rest of the world, but our past privilege has impacted our ability to adapt and deal with these on-going disruptions to life as we have known it.

So what do we do? A few things come to mind:

- Exercise our faith in God, even when God's actions are not predictable or even understandable. As Job learned, God does not answer to us or our concepts of justice, and God's not asking for advice on how the world is supposed to be managed. Thank God that God has so much greater wisdom and compassion than we have—as we pray!
- Mister Rogers (otherwise known as Teaching Elder Fred Rogers, minister member of Pittsburgh Presbytery) told his young viewers that if they are in a crisis, “look for the helpers.” What this means for the rest of us is to be the helpers our children look for.
- Sometimes all we can do is sit in ashes with everyone else. As pastors and chaplains, we are reminded that we don't always have the answers to fix the crisis facing others—and sometimes folks aren't looking for answers, just someone who listens and acknowledges that things are bad. And maybe even go one step further, and try to be kind, even when things are going badly—even very badly. I've seen recently both Red Cross volunteers and DMV workers carrying out their very stressful jobs with great patience and kindness, and at a recent 3+-hour visit at the DMV(!), kindness was a great exercise to practice.

We can all gather together, praying to God, being the helpers, and practicing kindness and the ministry of presence for each other. We can do it in our local churches, in our families and work, and in our next Presbytery meeting, tomorrow night at 7 pm. Even by Zoom, we are strengthened whenever we gather as one. So let us be one as a Presbytery . . . one in love and service . . . one in Christ.

See you tomorrow,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Wendy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.