

Faith Formation Resource - Week of 8/2

Note: There is no Children's Church resource this summer. Instead, you are invited to check out our summer storytimes on Youtube!

Based on the results of our survey of families, we are experimenting with the Faith Formation resource - gearing it to better serve teens and adults, rather than young children. Please continue to let us know what you think!

This week's Faith Formation Resource is about Providence!

So, what is Providence, anyway? The Oxford dictionary defines it as, "The protective care of God or Nature as a spiritual power." Wikipedia defines it as, "God's control of and intervention in the workings of the universe." I guess I would say it's the sense that God is watching out for us - either in a general sense, by being in charge of Creation, or in a specific sense, by intervening directly in our lives.

Wikipedia explains the meaning of Divine Providence in the context of several different denominations: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_providence

Something to read:

OK - so here's the big question about Providence: If God can intervene in the universe, and guides its events, then why do bad things happen to innocent people? Why do good people get cancer, for instance?

In his books God Can't (for general audiences) and The Uncontrolling Love of God (for theology buffs) author Thomas J. Oord says that a perfect love is inherently uncontrolling. God loves everyone and everything, so God can't control anyone or anything. This means God cannot prevent evil singlehandedly. God can't stop evildoers, whether human, animal, organisms, or inanimate objects and forces. But God can squeeze good from the evil God didn't want in the first place. God uses pain and suffering without willing or even allowing it.

Want the full explanation? Read the books!

God Can't: <https://www.amazon.com/God-Cant-Believe-after-Tragedy/dp/1948609126>

The Uncontrolling Love of God:

<https://www.amazon.com/Uncontrolling-Love-God-Relational-Providence/dp/0830840842>

Something to watch:

There are amazing examples in history of special providence - that is, God miraculously intervening in the lives of individuals. Could you trust God to provide for all of your needs? Here's the story of George Muller, who did just that: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jL0rQIDYGL8>

Need to know more? Here's George Muller's Wikipedia page:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_M%C3%BCller

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Something to do:

We are sometimes the instruments of God's providence - God uses us to help others. One of the stories in the Lectionary readings this week is the feeding of the 5,000. It is usually seen as a reminder of the fact that God can use our small gifts to create great benefits. The Christian anti-hunger organization, Bread for the World, refers to this story on its homepage: <https://www.bread.org/> How do you provide for others?

Something to listen to:

Another story of Divine Providence in the Lectionary this week is that of the manna God provided for the Israelites during their wandering. One of the oldest American hymn tunes, "Holy Manna," references this story:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8sn63HCOVc>

Something to pray:

This prayer by Thomas Merton is a statement of deep trust in Providence:

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

A prayer practice to explore: Prayers of Petition!

OK, let's be honest - you don't need me to tell you how to ask God for something - which is what a prayer of petition is. But the mere act of doing that is, in itself, an act of faith in Providence. You wouldn't bother asking without a hope of actually receiving what you're asking for, right?

And how you ask says quite a bit about how you view Providence and how God works in the world. Whether you mean to or not, you're making theological decisions every time you pray! Consider, for example, how you might pray for a person suffering from cancer. There's a lot of theological differences between the person who prays:

"God, we ask you to destroy the cancer inside this person's body with your miraculous power..."

And the person next to them, who prays:

"God, we ask you to guide the hands of the surgeons as they operate. Glve them focus and sharpen their skills..."

And the person who prays:

"God, we know all lives are in your hands. Help us to find peace in this moment, as we trust that you hold us and love us in this time of trial..."

What do these different prayers say about the person praying them, and their belief in how God moves in the world? What do they say about their belief in free will, and whether God controls human behavior? About God's ability to up-end the natural laws that govern our world?

Any prayer of petition - even if you're just asking God to send you a parking space on the next go-round of the lot - is an opportunity to check in with what you believe. Happy praying!

If you want to read more on the subject, I'd suggest Terrence L. Tiessen's Providence and Prayer: How does God work in the World? Link below:

https://books.google.com/books?id=kW4uDwAAQBAJ&pg=PA29&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false

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