

Sermon: Sunday, October 10 2021: **Good Grace Hunting**  
Hebrews 4:12-16

I have a word for tough times. We are not strangers to tough times. The psalmist was no stranger to tough times: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Job swallowed the entire template of tough times: "Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning." And then Job had to endure the condescending words of his "friends," interrogating him like detectives and attempting to force from him a confession that he was having a tough time because he was guilty. The friends of Job, pile on words that are useless, unhelpful, and unctuous. And they say it "loud and proud". In Zora Neale Hurston's first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Lucy, the long-suffering wife of an awful preacher, says to a friend: "Ah done been in sorrow's kitchen and Ah licked out all de pots. Ah done died in grief and been buried in the bitter waters, and Ah done rose again from the dead lak Lazarus." Tough times. Approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace in tough times."

In tough times, preachers should provide words of grace, words that sustain, not words that defame and mock God's goodness. We should reach for words that enable us to sing "It is well," words that enable us to lift our eyes to the hills from whence comes our help, words that help us face the darkness without fear, words that lift drooping heads. I've never met a word I was afraid of, but plenty that left me cold and outraged – pious, pretentious words, those preachy, highfaluting words that frighten people or make them feel guilty and lost and hopeless. When a preacher appeals to "God's mysterious ways," as if that explains anything, I roll my eyes, because that suggests that we can't trust God to bring us through tough times. I spare no amount of disdain for the sadistic bellowing of preachers who attribute tough times to God's wrath. They seem to exult in their descriptions of God's cruelty. As a child I never minded the preacher preaching on hell, but I didn't like it when he was grinning and enjoying it.

Marina Levina writes: "As I think back to my childhood tormentors, I do not think of them as sad, or disempowered, or ugly in any sense of that word. I know that being cruel brought them joy—the glint in the eyes, the straightening of the posture, the smirk—the joy of the oppressor is what makes cruelty so effective as a tool of oppression" (Levina, "Whiteness and the Joys of Cruelty," 75).

I keep bumping into people who think God causes hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and volcanoes or gives people cancer and heart attacks. The depraved nonchalance with which some preachers insist that suffering is the result of our sins takes my breath away. These misstatements about Christian faith, backed with an insensible insistence on the alleged authority of a literal Bible have spread across our land like an oil spill off the coast of California. The toxicity of these words has created an epistemic disaster on a par with the ecological disaster of the oil spill. Of all the variations in the theme, nothing is more difficult to hear than the words of a preacher intoxicated by the grandeur of divine sovereignty and insisting that every disaster, every disease, every bad thing happens is a direct result as a direct expression of God's will. And this has such a grip on the minds of so many, that, especially at funerals, I hear otherwise strong believers

in free will, make mumbling statements about God's will as if they were in a trance and couldn't think of another word to say to the grieving. Look, if you want to believe in that kind of predestination, I understand the tendency, but you don't have to believe it. You can embrace a world created with risks, contingencies, circumstances, and even luck. You can believe in free will as I do. I'm not insisting I'm right; I'm insisting that preachers ought to be more careful with their words.

"It has taken the church centuries to develop habits of speech that help us say no more than needs to be said," says Hauerwas. Persuasion rather than coercion, humility rather than arrogance, permission rather than authority, reticence rather than bombast, soft words rather than harsh words – all these are the lessons of those who would speak for God. Preachers, like historians, need to do our research, doublecheck our sources, and ask more questions before leaping into the fray like Peter walking on water.

The perorations and tirades of moralists implicating God for natural disasters is incredibly cold and calculating to me. Sure, I get that a plethora of evangelicals are angry and disturbed about gay rights and women's rights and immigrant rights and an assortment of Others. I understand that they are angry that privilege is being stripped from them without permission, but that still doesn't give them the right to implicate God in their charade. I know they are pining for the good old days when "preachers could be preachers" just like "men could be men."

Therefore, I offer another way of talking about God and God's relationship to creation. God is God and we are not. Saying less instead of more may be our way. I'm sure you want me to apply that to the number of words in my sermons. There are more caution lights than green lights in the valley of darkness. Sometimes our only response to suffering, death, disease, and disaster is a horrified silence, a respectful silence. Our words are not profound, but honest: "I'm so sorry." "My heart breaks for your loss." "Let us pray." Let goodness energize our words. God's goodness! God is good! God is generous! God created a good world! God wills the good for us! God's grace is greater than all the sufferings of this world.

Guess what? God's billions of years of patient creating require a universe of the very size, scale, and age that we see around us. This is what I mean by prevenient grace – God's advance guard, God's advance preparation for our very existence and all of it is baptized in sheer goodness. God's creation is the first gift of grace. Aquinas insisted that creation is ongoing, after all. In the words of physicist Freeman Dyson, this is a "universe that knew we were coming." This means that each of us is "the result of a thought of God."

Revel then in the goodness and graciousness and generosity of a universe that "knew we were coming." We occupy a special place in the universe as a result of God's free grace. I am convinced that God has done God's part and continues to do her part on our behalf. God has given us everything we need not to be dominated by fear, despair, or bitterness.

We are in the praise of God's magnificent, overwhelming grace business. Now, that's a theological-scientific perspective I can live with forever. We have confidence, assurance, that God is good. I stand with the prophet Habakkuk: "Though my body is ravaged with cancer, and my life is cut off in its prime; though the economy crumbles and my portfolio dissolves to zero; though the rain falls and the wind blows; though I am left without resources and my job disappears, yet I will rejoice in God, my strength." To the choirmaster with stringed instruments. This is our response to disaster and death. Let the orchestra play with all its might.  
Amen.