

A sermon by Rev. Randy L. Johnson, First United Methodist Church, Saint Cloud, Minnesota

## “What in the World is God Doing?”

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Luke 21:5-19, Isaiah 65:17-25

All of us have probably wondered at some point in our lives if the world as we know it is coming to an end. As a child growing up in the 50's and 60's I recall sermons which warned us of the twin evils of communism and nuclear warheads – I was a frightened 11 year-old boy during the Cuban missile crisis – at Roosevelt Elementary School in Ames, Iowa we practiced preparing for the nightmare of a nuclear holocaust or a Russian communist takeover. My pastor was a master at exploiting our fears – he railed against godless communism and challenged us to decide if we would name the name of Jesus if confronted by the atheist communist tyrant and forced to choose between death or denying our faith. That I survived childhood before the end times actually surprised me – I knew as a youngster that all the signs prophesied in the Bible were in place – it really was only a matter of time before the trumpet would sound and the faithful would meet their Lord in the skies, leaving sinners to face a world in tribulation and turmoil.

I was reminded of my childhood fears this past week while reading a novel called At Paradise Gate by Jane Smiley. Like my childhood, the story of the novel also takes place in central Iowa. At one point in the story the granddaughter, Christine, shares with her grandmother, Anna, why she doesn't want to be married and pregnant.

“Grandmother.” Christine leaned forward, intent. “Everything they say about Todd and my being pregnant is predicated on the notion that things will go on as they are. But they can't, you know. They really can't. Since we got married, I've all the time been catching myself thinking, well, if it happens, we've got the garden, and all these canned goods, and we don't live all that near Chicago, and the wind blows west to east. I think if I had a baby I'd be crazy, wanting to reinforce the concrete walls of the basement, or hoard water containers and cyanide pills. Whenever I think of having a baby, I think about pictures in old *Life* magazines about the war, these women walking out of Warsaw with babies in their arms, just completely powerless with love and fear. I don't want to be like that.”

Today children in our schools no longer prepare and practice for possible nuclear disasters. Young adults don't usually worry about which way the wind blows when considering having children. But perhaps more than any other time since my childhood I sense peoples' growing

discomfort, uncertainty and anxiety about the current condition and future of this world. Global warming, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the constant conflict in the Middle East, the civil wars in Africa and the devastating forces of AIDS and world hunger and clean water shortages. Add to these concerns the growing gaps between rich and poor, the shrinking middle class, the mortgage foreclosure and housing crisis, the rising price of gasoline, on-going domestic, school and workplace violence, the scourge of racism and overt hate crimes of violence and vandalism along with natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, floods and droughts. This past Thursday's St Cloud Times reported that a recent survey discovered that "nearly one third of Americans have at one point worried about becoming homeless and many more are taking in friends and relatives needing a home." This in the richest nation the world has ever known!

As people of faith we might stop and ask: "What in the world is God doing?" Now this question is ambiguous – that is, it can mean two different things depending on how it is asked. One way to ask this question is "What in the world is God doing?" with the intent to figure out how God is currently involved in what's going on. The second way to ask this question is: "What in the world is God doing?"

with the intent of blaming God and challenging God to do something different.

Both of these questions have been asked by people of faith over the centuries. The later question, "what in the world is God doing?" was on the minds of the people addressed by the prophet Isaiah in our Hebrew Scripture as well as on the minds of the people addressed by Jesus in our Gospel lesson.

In 587 BC the city of Jerusalem was attacked by the Babylonians and the precious Temple built by King Solomon was totally destroyed. The Hebrew people were taken from Israel and put in exile in Babylon.

The message of Isaiah is given to these people who had given up hope – they believed that life as they knew it had ended and they would never again return to Jerusalem. With their house of worship razed to the ground, God had apparently abandoned them. Faith offered them no consolation or motivation.

Centuries later, after the Hebrew people had returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Temple, Jesus predicts the unthinkable – once again the precious Temple is going to be destroyed by a foreign conqueror. Immediately the people ask Jesus: "Teacher, when will this take place and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" I suspect that they were also thinking to themselves: "What in the world is God doing?"

It is natural to wonder what God is doing when the forces of evil threaten the very existence of our world as we know it. Like the Hebrew people of old, our faith in a good, loving, and powerful God is challenged. And so today we see all the bad things happening and we wonder “what in the world is God doing?” The Scriptures answer this question with a clear and confident message of hope, a message about what in the world God is doing.

The truth is that God is doing in the world what God has always been doing – God is providing the vision, opportunities, and power for people of faith to stand up and help make a difference – to work for a more just and caring world community.

Most of us can remember and name heroes of the faith who have had the vision and power to make a difference in our world. People of faith like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Archbishop Oscar Romero, and Mother Teresa. But what God is doing in the world is much bigger and broader than calling forth a few select individual leaders. There is a growing movement today among average people of faith – people who on the outside appear ordinary but who have extraordinary vision and power and who are responding in faith to the opportunities to make a difference that God is creating today in abundance.

Several such individuals have recently inspired me. One is named Jacqueline Belzer – Jim Towler and I heard her story this past Thursday at an ISALAH Great River Interfaith Partnership meeting. Jacqueline is originally from Mexico – she tearfully shared how for over 10 years she lived in a marriage of violence, abuse and fear. Finally, at the urging of her mother, Jacqueline left Mexico with her 9 year-old daughter and fled to join her mother in Minnesota. During the past 10 years Jacqueline has become a US citizen and has become part of the ISALAH staff, working for justice and helping other mothers who are looking for a better life for their children. This woman of faith, who is naturally shy and nervous in front of other people, took the opportunity in 2004 to address a crowd of 4,000 people at our “Faith and Democracy” rally in St. Paul. As Jesus promised in our Gospel lesson, Jacqueline was given an opportunity to testify and was given the words and wisdom that empowered her, an ordinary woman of faith, to do extraordinary things for God.

The week after Thanksgiving, several of us from St. Cloud will join Jacqueline and other ISALAH representatives from the Twin Cities to attend the International Leadership Assembly of the Gamaliel Foundation. Gamaliel is the national network of organizations like ISALAH of which our Great River Interfaith Partnership is a member. At the assembly, 4-500 people will

gather to be renewed in hope by sharing and declaring a common vision as set forth by the prophet Isaiah: it is a vision of a world where all people share in the abundance produced by their labor, where children never die young because of hunger and poverty, and old people live out their years with good health care and in communities free of fear and violence. But declaring this vision is not all we will do. We will also celebrate the exciting opportunities God has given us to begin to make this vision more of a reality for people today.

For example, in its 8 years as an interfaith partnership, with God's vision and power, GRIP has successfully led campaigns for affordable housing, a community policing agreement against racial profiling, the restoration of funding for battered women's shelters and public education, and in a few months a regional human rights office will open as a result of the work of members of our own congregation along with other partners of GRIP. A week ago Saturday several of you were present at the GRIP Issues Assembly where we selected health care, education and immigration as the issues we will focus on during the next year. The Issue Task Forces will meet for the first time on Saturday, December 8. You can be a part of this growing movement of God's people working together with the vision and power of God to make a real and lasting difference in the world today. In fact, tomorrow evening our own GRIP Core Team meets here at the church – I am sure you would be welcome!

Of course, not all of you will be active in GRIP. But all of us are called to help make a difference in this world. We can each do this in the way God leads.

On a less public level, my next door neighbor has inspired me with her faith and her quiet commitment to this community. It has been a very difficult, painful year in her life. Her husband of 60 years passed away last fall. A few months ago she discovered that the young trees she and her husband had planted in their front yard had been destroyed apparently by a drunk driver. A few weeks after that she returned home after a lunch outing with friends from her Catholic parish to find her house broken into and in total disarray. Not many weeks after that, she awoke at 4am to the sight of 25 foot high flames behind her house, toward her back alley – she dialed 911 not knowing whether it was her garage or a neighbor's. After the break-in and again the after the second arson attack in our neighborhood, Carla and I began to wonder if perhaps our good neighbor would put her house up for sale and move to a safer area. We considered it ourselves! What did our 80 some year old neighbor do? She planted a set of new young trees in her yard and helped give support to the neighbors whose garage had been burned to the ground. Jesus said, "by your endurance you will gain your souls." Theologian D. Elton Trueblood once wrote: "A person has made at least a start on discovering the meaning of human life when they plant shade trees under which they know full well they will never sit." My

neighbor is not a Mother Teresa or even a Jacqueline Belzer. She will never stand before an audience of 4,000 people – but by her life of quiet endurance she has demonstrated the same vision of hope and power of faith that Jesus calls us all to testify to in our lives.

We might never know how our lives enrich the lives of others – we may never make the kind of contributions that make us famous. But when we respond, “Yes, Lord,” to the opportunities God places before us, we are part of what God is doing in the world to make this a more caring and just world for people today, for our children, our grandchildren and their children in the years to come.

So where does such faith come from – faith that empowers us to the kind of endurance that saves our souls, that enables us to discover the meaning of human life here and in the world to come?

There is a wonderfully vivid image in the story of the Hebrew people in exile which describes them as so discouraged and defeated that they felt like hanging up their harps. Now you know that things are really bad when people can’t even listen to their favorite music anymore. It is to such people that God comes with a message of hope – whether it is through the vision proclaimed by Isaiah or the gospel message of Jesus or the testimony of words and of lives of endurance by people like Jacqueline Belzer and my neighbor – God comes into our world to bring back the music – it is a song of hope, a song that stirs deep within each of us, a song that speaks to a common dream of a better, more caring and just world.

It is in contrast to the dream, the nightmare of a world gone mad – a world where innocent people continue to suffer, where evil has its way and the world as we know it dies an eternal death.

These two contrasting dreams are captured in a song I heard last Sunday afternoon at a concert at St. Mary’s Cathedral – I end today with the words of this song, called “The Awakening” by Joseph Martin.