

**Sermon Title:** “Poor Assumptions”

**November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020 – 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Advent**

**Text:** Psalm 80



**Theme:** Why do we assume the worst about people and ultimately God?

**What's in it for me?**

**Sermon Text:**

Grace and Peace to you from our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Well, here we are as we begin a new year in the year of the Church and the season of “Advent.” Advent means “anticipation,” as in anticipating Christ’s return while at the same time preparing to remember the birth narrative of Christ. Covid-19 has brought a lot of changes to our celebrations for this time of year. Normally we would be singing a lot of familiar and comforting hymns to help us prepare. Normally we would be having Wednesday night meals and devotions, particularly for our younger set. As we are deprived of the comfort of our usual music, I look for alternatives. One great source of comfort and anticipation is found in the Psalms, and our Psalm today is no different.

Psalm 80 takes place in a time of suffering for the Israelites. The author is conversing with God about his present situation. The author takes us back through Israel’s history where Joseph was guided to Egypt by God in order to protect him. He asks God to save Israel once again.

In the next section of the Psalm, the author shows his humanity. Notice how in verses 4-6 he makes several assumptions about God, notably he is assuming that God is apathetic about Israel’s present situation. It’s not the only time God’s people assume that He doesn’t care. Peter accused Jesus of apathy during a sudden storm on the Sea of Galilee. Abraham and Moses both argued with God for justice and mercy on behalf of others. Given God’s track record of blessings, is it really fair to accuse God of apathy or anger? Is it possible that we don’t know the whole story?

In Israel’s case, several things had to take place to bring about God’s plan of salvation, many of them unpleasant. Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. The Northern tribes

broke off from Judah, lost their faith, and were conquered by the Assyrians. Except for a small faithful remnant, they were completely wiped out. Judah was conquered by the Babylonians, the Temple was destroyed, and they were exiled for almost 80 years. When they were able to return, the Judeans struggled to rebuild the Temple, and were conquered by the Greeks and then the Romans. The author of today's Psalm seems to assume that the reason for all of this suffering is that Yahweh is angry and apathetic, but is that the real reason? Looking back from the lens of history we can see that all of these events served a greater purpose. The suffering in the Wilderness not only trained the people on how they should live together and live with God, but it made them a people, set apart. It made them special. The destruction of the Northern Kingdom was a reminder to the faithful remnant about how important faith is, and the exile produced some of the first written manuscripts of God's Word, other than the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. God's Word would survive, and travel further than what oral tradition could take it. The Greeks and Romans built a massive road and transportation network that allowed the Gospel to spread far and wide and reach people in a way never seen before. Once again, God's purpose is vindicated, and we are rather short sighted. Notice how history always seems to vindicate God, but in the heat of the moment, we often struggle with trusting God, instead unfairly blaming Him for all our troubles.

So, what is this Psalm telling us? Like the author of this Psalm, I bet you that we've all accused each other and God of being apathetic when it comes to our own suffering. I bet you that we've all assumed the worst about someone, only to look foolish after we learned the full story. So, how can we avoid these pitfalls? I think we need to guard against making assumptions with too little data to support them.

In 1940, 1984 author George Orwell was tasked by *Atlantic Monthly* with reviewing the unabridged English version of *Mein Kampf*. Keep in mind the date, May 1940. This was before we learned of the Holocaust, before the US entered the war, and at that time Hitler still had a lot of admirers in Great Britain. Orwell was even regretful that Britain was currently engaged in a war against Germany but acknowledged that she had no choice. Orwell was struggling trying to explain how a country such as Germany would elect Adolf Hitler and follow him, considering how enlightened Germany was. It produced great reformers, such as Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, Frederick the Wise, John the Steadfast, Emmanuel Kant, and other heroes of the Reformation and Enlightenment. So how could a country such as this follow someone like Adolf Hitler? Orwell's eventual answer went against an assumption that humans are hedonistic, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. Orwell noted that Hitler won on a platform of shared

suffering and shared purpose. Hitler's election as German Chancellor showed that people were willing to delay pleasure and endure pain if they endured it with others and if they believed that there was a greater purpose. And as it turned out, they were willing to do some of the most horrible, evil acts known to man in order to achieve that goal.

In our Psalm for today, the author should be aware that Israel's current suffering served a greater purpose. He does acknowledge how God has blessed Israel in the past, but he struggles to see God's vision of salvation in which Jesus saves us all from our sins.

We find ourselves in similar situations to both of these examples. When we understand that our suffering achieves a greater purpose (at least in our minds), we are willing to endure incredible hardships in order to achieve that goal. During WWII, we made many sacrifices on the home front in order to defeat the Axis powers because we understood that the sacrifice was worth it. When we become parents for the first time, we quickly realize how hard parenting is, but we understand how important it is, to raise up the next generation.

Where we fall apart is when we don't understand why we are suffering, and it seems needless. We don't understand why we are struggling with Covid-19, and some people incorrectly assume that God doesn't care or is actually punishing us. I also see a similar trap of assuming the worst in regards to other people. How many times have you met someone, only to find out that your pre-conceived notion about him or her was wrong? So how can we help each other from assuming the worst about God or our neighbor?

When it comes to God, look to His inerrant Word. Look to see what God's pattern is. What is His track record? Yes, God has allowed His people to endure a limited amount of suffering, but it always served a greater purpose. Whether it was training God's people, calling home God's lost flock, or preparing God's people for a future phase of His mission of salvation, it all serves a greater purpose, even if it's not obvious at the time.

So, what about our neighbor? Keeping open lines of communication are critical. People are willing to share burdens and suffering if they know why they are doing it. Listening to people builds bonds with people and when they get to know you, they are less likely to make poor assumptions about you, and the reverse is also true. People all over the world, love their

children. They want what's best for them and they are willing to do whatever it takes to give their children a brighter future.

So, how about Covid-19? Why are we suffering? Does God care? If you look at God's Word, He has a solid track record of caring for us. He sent Jesus, didn't He? So, if God really does care about us, why are we suffering? What purpose? The only answer that I can think of is that it is part of God's plan, namely Jesus' return. That doesn't mean that Jesus is coming in the clouds tomorrow, but this is one of those events designed to bring us together and teach us something about loving each other and caring for each other, the way God wants us to. When we understand that our suffering has a purpose, we can embrace it and press on. When our neighbor can understand why he or she is suffering, that can be transformative for him or her too. A kind word of support from you might be what he or she needs to get by, so be that friend.

Lastly, like our author, we have a direct link to God through Jesus Christ. When you pray, reflect on what God has already done for you. Not that God doesn't know, He does, but it helps you remember all He has done for you already. Take your suffering to God. He can take it. Need someone to listen to you, God wants to hear from you. He wants to help you, so give Him the chance. Take it to the Lord. How many times have you heard here how God answers prayers? I've lost count and am in awe on how many times God chooses to bless us. This Advent season, prepare for Jesus' return by taking your troubles and suffering to Him. He has big shoulders. He can take it, and He listens. Jesus also answers prayer, so give Him the chance to do so, and see what you can achieve when you do.

In Jesus name,

Amen.

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