

“God Is Good”

Psalm 4; Romans 5:1-8 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – October 15, 2023

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might give thanks for
your goodness and find comfort in your presence. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

During yesterday's opening worship, I was sitting next to Brian Daly, the pastor at Pacific Beach Christian Church. It was during that service that the video of greetings from across the Region was played. As the pictures were coming up on the screen, the musicians were playing some background music. At one point, I leaned over to Brian and said, "Ours is a video with sound. I wonder how that's going to work." He said, "Ours too." And the video kept going, with photos of the outside of some churches or pictures of the congregants gathered in their sanctuaries. But, the planners were prepared. The musicians seemed to know when they needed to quiet down, because right on cue, their volume diminished so that everyone could hear us proclaiming "Greetings from Vista La Mesa Christian Church! Celebrating 75 years of sharing Christ's welcome!" It was pretty cool. And then the Pacific Beach video came up, and they called out in unison, "God is Good! All the time! All the time, God is good!" And it was pretty cool too.

I have to admit though, I haven't really appreciated the depth of that popular proclamation in the past. It's a thing, you know. I'm not sure how it got started – the internet suggests it was in Nigeria, or maybe it was John Wesley, or maybe it's from a

song – but it became a popular call-and-response, which I’m sure many of you are familiar with. I say “God is good,” and you say “All the time.” And then I say “All the time,” and you say “God is good.”

And it’s not that I ever thought it wasn’t so, but the phrasing felt simplistic. It felt like it carried the possibility of people feeling pressured to be cheerful regardless of their actual feelings or circumstances, or covering over real problems that impact people’s lives. And you know how itchy my soul gets when we try to pretend things are better than they really are. And you’ve heard me talk about how much our understanding of God shapes our understanding of the world. But it turns out that it was probably my understanding of the phrase that was simplistic, not the phrase itself. I didn’t even know that I was going to talk about this phrase when I chose today’s sermon title earlier this week. I had been feeling the weight of world pretty hard lately. And I had the sense that many of you have been feeling it too. Our world is in turmoil, and so are many of our lives and the lives of our loved ones. Things feel broken at all levels, from dealing with insurance companies, to watching the news, to living as the sandwich generation pulled by the needs of older family members and younger ones, to so many people working without enough staff, to cancer and climate change and covid. It’s a lot.

So I wanted to bring a word of comfort, a word of hope and release. I wanted to invite us to turn to scripture and remember that our hope does not lie within ourselves; our hope is in God. It is God’s goodness that ensures the promises of

liberation and abundant life. It is God who brings wholeness out of fragmentation. It is God who makes room when we are in distress. God is the reason we can sleep at night. God is why we can endure the suffering of the world – our own and the suffering of others we bear witness to – without giving into despair.

And now when I'm hearing people proclaim that "God is good, all the time," I am finally realizing that this doesn't mean anyone is insisting that "everything is good, all the time." "God" is the most important word in that sentence. We get through even though we're not always good, because God is good. We get through even when life is really, really not good, because God is good.

This may all seem totally obvious to many of you, so thank you for your patience as I catch up. It's a humbling thing to have your blinders fall off, but almost always a blessing. Paul writes about the development of "character" in those verses I read from Romans. Maybe that's what's happening to me? "Character" is a fuzzy thing. Is it wisdom? Is it the capacity to live with both high expectations and realistic expectations? I think it must be, if what it leads to is hope. But again, the most important word in that sentence – any sentence about hope, whether the word is actually in it or not – the most important word is "God." Far too often, we mistakenly put our hope in humanity, whether our own capacity or our desire for our communities and nations to do better. And ironically, this often takes us on a shortcut to cynicism, because humans do so often disappoint us. It's not hope itself that never disappoints. It's hope in God. God who is good. All the time. God who

loves us, even though we're not good all the time. God who keeps loving us even when life isn't good.

We don't know all the burdens that are weighing down each other's hearts today, though we have shared some of them. Sometimes, we're not even fully aware of all the things we're carrying ourselves. But when they get really heavy, that's when we need to remember that we're not meant to carry all that by ourselves. If we have lost hope of fixing all the broken things in our lives and in our world, it's because we were never supposed to be able to do that on our own. It is God who is good. It is God within whom our hope lives.

To know that God is good is to commit to trying to be good ourselves. It does mean we are called to make our world better, to the best of our capacity. But to proclaim that God is good and to try to be good is not the same thing as pretending we are God. We can't and we shouldn't and we don't need to. To admit that we are not always good is not a degradation of humanity; it's a release. To acknowledge that we will always stand in the need of prayer, of mercy, of guidance and compassion and strength is to grow in wisdom. To proclaim that God is the One who is good, is to confess that that is enough. God's goodness will cover us, contain us, comfort us, and carry us through whatever comes. Yes, all the time. Hallelujah and Amen.