

**“In the Chaos of Life, God is with You” based on Isaiah 53:1-8 and Hebrews 5:1-10
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on October 20, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

I saw a short video recently on Facebook with a comedian, whose name I believe is Drew Dunn. He started with the premise that this is a pretty good time to be alive, considering the history of the world. Mockingly, he said, “I’d hate to bring a child into this world with medicine and blankets.”

He said we have amazing things in this world, not the least of which is air conditioning. He joked that we live like whiny little princes from 200 years ago: “Oh, I want it colder in me castle father. Make it colder. Not that cold father. It’s too cold now.” Air conditioning and heating are incredible things to have, and we don’t take into account that just 100 years ago, just hitting the thermostat was unheard of. We have a magical life in a lot of ways.

He brought up chicken wings: “Oh, I want just the limbs of the chicken father! Throw away the bodies! And I want a spicy sauce from South America smothering the chicken’s legs. And I want cheese from France for dipping, father! Cheese from France!” We get bothered by the fact that now this costs 12 bucks.

I say this not to mock us but to help us realize the perspective that we have living in the Western world. We get frustrated when we look around the world and we see suffering and trials. We get frustrated when things like the hurricane happen and we see our neighbors suffering greatly. We wonder where God is when there is abuse and genocide and war. These are challenges to our faith.

We face real challenges even in our princely lives. We face challenges when we get news we don’t want. We see things that scare us. We see changes in our culture, changes in our world, and changes in our personal lives.

We want a world where there is just comfort because we can actually imagine that now. Unlike 200 years ago, we can imagine a world that is comfortable and easy to live in. We get frustrated that God isn’t just going to make that happen for us.

We question God’s justice, because if God is all powerful, why doesn’t God just fix it? If God is all knowing, how does he not know to stop someone like Hitler before they start? If God is all loving, why does anyone suffer at all? We demand that God’s justice be something where there is no pain and suffering, there are no challenges, and there are no hurdles to climb.

The irony of it is that in the places of this world where the faith is most challenged by things like this – the places where we see the most poverty and what we would consider in our elite bubbles the most backward thinking – there the church is growing. In these places people are turning to God.

We hear all the stories in the United States and Europe about the decline in the church, forgetting that there are more Christians in the world today than there were yesterday, because the church is growing exponentially in Africa, Asia, and South America. But where we think everything can be perfect, they are looking for God to help them endure the suffering they face.

I recently read a trio of biographies. One was called “Shackled” by Mariam Ibrahim. Mariam was born in the Sudan to an Egyptian Orthodox mother and a Muslim father. Sudan has Sharia law,

meaning she was legally required to be considered Muslim because her father was. So, she endured hardship, but it was in the church where she found love and courage. This was different from the culture, in which she found fear and hate.

She endured incredible hardship, including the apparent murder of her mother, and an attempt to nullify her marriage to a Christian man, by people falsely claiming to be her relatives. She never got permission from them to marry him, so they sought her execution. She was convicted, but her church protected her, with a priest even giving his life for her. Later, after much press coverage, the Italian and American governments won her release. Through it all, she never lost her faith and her assurance that God was with her. That was all she had to hold onto.

In, "I Didn't Survive," by Naghmeh Abedini Panahi, she writes of her story, being an Iranian American who married an Iranian man who became a celebrity pastor. He was a celebrity Christian, even though he abused her emotionally and physically. Yet, she did not say that someone from the church hurt her, but instead sought refuge in the truth about who God is, rather than the way someone was presenting it.

When he was detained in Iran and was on death row for spreading the gospel and being an effective evangelist, she fought for his release, knowing that when he came back, his pain would end and hers would begin again. Then it became too much. She confessed to some what was happening to her. Then she went silent, which ironically caused the Iranian government to let him go, once they realized they were going to get the most they could from the US for his release. They both had to endure persecution for their faith in Iran and when she returned here, she had to suffer again.

The third book is titled, "Becoming Free Indeed." It is by someone that probably a lot of people have heard of, since she was on the reality show, "19 Kids and Counting." Her name is Jinger Dugger Vuolo, and she talks about what happened in her life, where an over-emphasis on hierarchy and authority with strict legalism in the Bill Gothard movement turned a lot of people like her away from the faith and the church.

She writes of his seven principles and how they run contrary to the gospel and the truth about who Jesus is and the character of God revealed in him. This distorted view of the gospel turned people away from God's loving embrace and somehow, she endured through it. She has a better image of God now and a deeper understanding of God's love.

These three women endured a lot. In their suffering they could have said, "If God loved me, I wouldn't suffer ever." But instead they understood what our readings talked about today.

I don't know why God doesn't fix everything right now. I've said that time and time again. I can't explain the answers to those questions. Yet what I do know is what Isaiah foretold and what the author of Hebrews put together in retrospect after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

They about how God – the Creator of all things – is not distant. God entered into our humanity. The eternal became a creation. The Eternal Son bore your flesh and lived in your limits. We love reminding the kids that Jesus had to use the bathroom too. He likely got sick. He definitely got tired. All that we are, after all, was redeemed in him.

The incarnation is not some fun thing we celebrate at Christmas because we want to celebrate a baby's birth and get presents. The incarnation is the radical idea that the arm of the Lord, the power of God, the Word of God that spoke all things into creation, became a baby boy.

He was fully dependent on his mother. If she did not nurse him, he would not have survived. If she did not care for him, love him, and teach him, he would not have survived. He was dependent on the care of an adoptive father. If Joseph did not get them away to Egypt, he would have been killed by Herod. If Joseph had not provided a home, he would not have survived.

He had to learn the faith and choose to be dependent on God his Father. I love when people think it proof that Jesus was not God, or separate from the Father, because he prayed. What would you expect? Do they think he would not pray and be like someone outside of the faith in which he was raised, the faith he fulfilled? He is fully human and shares in all that we do. He redeems our prayer through our prayers.

Isaiah says he carried our weakness and bore our sorrows. He was a man of sorrows, and the following is normally translated, "acquainted with grief." However, literally it says he is "known by his weakness." His weakness – his humanity – knows who he is. The suffering servant knows our weakness because he shared in our humanity.

The author of Hebrews calls him a priest in the age of Melchizedek. That just sounds like weird language. Well the priest Melchizedek met with Abram (Abraham) and offered a sacrifice of bread and wine. Sound familiar? Abram shared this with Melchizedek. He was the King of Salem – the king of peace, prosperity, and wholeness. His name means "the king of righteousness, or justice." He is the great high priest who never appears again and never appeared before.

The writer of Hebrews keys in on Melchizedek being Christ or at least a Christ figure for us to recognize. That matters because the word priest is a weird word in English because it is formed from the Greek word, "*presbuteros*," meaning "elder." We get confused because we call our leaders "elders" and Roman Catholics and Episcopalians call theirs, "priests."

In how we use it in scripture, we translate words in other languages that actually mean a mediator between humanity and the gods, or between humanity and the One True God. It would probably be better to translate it as mediator because the priest comes between God and humanity. Jesus is our great mediator, bearing our humanity and the fullness of who God is. There is no greater mediator than someone who represents and understands both camps.

Jesus is the mediator who gives us union with God. When we see that, we are free to handle the problems of this world by recognizing that we can be a part of what God is doing in this world. We can help when things go wrong. We can handle what's going on. God shares in our humanity in Jesus, in our suffering, in the chaos, in the evil, in the pain, in the sickness. In all of it, we are not alone. God shares in our life.

This is still so today when the Holy Spirit within us cries out to God on our behalf, with groanings too deep for words, as Paul says. When we don't know what to pray, the Spirit of God prays for us.

Hear these words from the Franciscan Priest Richard Rohr in his book, "Breathing Under Water," which explores the spirituality of the 12-steps of AA and the Christian life: "*Suffering people can*

love and trust a suffering God. Only a suffering God can save suffering people. Those who have passed across this chasm, can and will save one another...any other god (false gods) becomes a guilty bystander, one we will not deeply trust, much less love...It is good for Christians to know their Jesus was made to order for the transformative problems of addiction and human suffering. From the cross, he draws all suffering people to himself."

We may have it good with air conditioning and chicken wings. However, there is still plenty that brings suffering into our lives. It is not proof of the absence of God, but the very place where God can be and where God truly is most present to us.

In your pain, God is with you. In the depths of war, God is with those who are suffering and dying. In the exploitation of others, God is with those who are exploited. In the crisis of poverty, God is with the poor. In divorce, God is with those who split. In the challenge of marriage, God is there. In singleness, God is with you.

In the challenge of reconciliation, God is there. In illness, God is with you. In separation and hospitalization, God is with you. In the fear of diagnosis, God is with you. In the challenge of being a parent, working and trying to have it all by getting your kids to all the events, God is with you. In the challenge of being a student, trying to fit in while at school, trying to get things done for college and while in college, God is with you.

Life is not easy, and I don't know why God doesn't just fix it all right away. But what I do know is that we are not alone. That is the good news. God is with us. Truly, God knows what you've been through and what you are going through. God is with you right now, sharing it all. Amen.