

Providence
A Message by Rev. Dr. Richard Lapehn
First Presbyterian Church of Barberton: November 18, 2018

Scripture: Psalm 131; Matthew 6:25-33

I. In 1635, the Puritan clergyman, Roger Williams, was banished from Massachusetts Bay colony for promoting ideas of religious tolerance and for urging the separation of church and state.

Williams made his way to Narragansett Bay, where he purchased land from the Narragansett tribe. Together with a few friends, he established a settlement that he named Providence.

Williams chose the name of Providence for the new settlement, because Williams said it was in gratitude “for God’s merciful providence to me in my distress.” This settlement eventually became the capital of the colony of Rhode Island.

Other persons who were exiled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony came to Providence, among them were Anne Hutchinson, the Quakers, and some of the first Jews to settle in North America.

The use of Providence as the name for the settlement points to God’s action. Providence comes from the same root word as “provide” and “provisions.” In that day centuries ago, providence was a word commonly used in speech. Our ancestors were not shy about attributing good things that happened to them to God’s care for them.

Providence is rarely used in our vocabulary today, unless we are referring to the physical city.

Providence means that everything that happens, however bewildering, disappointing, or even cruel, is ultimately subject to God’s purposes. It means that God can turn even something evil into something that renders a positive impact in the end.

Without providence in our conversations today, we are much more likely to attribute the things that happen to fate, luck, our own hard work, or the intervention of other people. Our forebearers understood those influences, but they were much more likely to see the hand of God at work in our world.

Have we grown to savvy to notice God? In this season of gratitude, I wonder how often we take the time to credit the hand of God guiding, protecting, and sustaining us?

II. The Gospel reading comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. One of the primary themes of this passage is providence.

Jesus begins by referring to the worry that many people feel about the future. We worry about everything, don't we? In fact, whenever we catch ourselves without a major worry on the front-burner of our brains – if we realize we are not fretting about something – we will scroll through our mental schedule and find some upcoming events we should be worrying about.

We worry about car maintenance, road conditions, the car maintenance of the person in the next lane of traffic, whether our persistent cough is masking a sinister illness, the food we will prepare and eat this week, the food we shouldn't be eating this week, the mix of personalities who will gather around our tables this week, our financial limitations, and whether or not the Cleveland Browns simply had one good game last Sunday or if it's safe to root for another victory.

We worry about a lot of stuff.

Jesus knows our worries, and he addresses them (well, not the Browns!) with three examples.

He asks us to ponder how God cares for the birds of the air. If God cares for them – and God does – how much more will God care for humankind?

Jesus asks us to consider how beneficial our time spent worrying is. If we worry about something, are we going to add even one hour to our lifetime? We know today that persistent worry may actually decrease a lifespan.

And what about the beauty of the wild flowers that grow in a field, Jesus says. They only bloom for a brief time. They don't worry about tomorrow. Their beauty comes and goes quickly. That's the way God designed flowers to be.

Despite the brevity of life that flowers enjoy, not even Solomon (in biblical terms, Solomon enjoyed the greatest wealth that one person ever amassed) was dressed as handsomely as these flowers in the field.

Since God cares for flowers of the field and the birds of the air; since you cannot improve your lot in life one iota by sitting idly and worrying about it, shouldn't we trust in the providence of almighty God?

III. The humble heart says, "yes." That's the subject of Psalm 131. Even though Psalm 131 is only three verses in length, there is lot of meat in this passage. The world famous pastor Charles Spurgeon once said this Psalm is one of the shortest to read, but one of the longest to learn.

"My heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me" (Ps.131:1).

In order to understand this psalm, it's critical to know that the heart that **is** lifted up and eyes raised high are images representing pride, arrogance, and self-assertion. Those are the traits of a soul that cannot recognize the providence of God.

In terms of this psalm, the heart lifted up and the eyes raised high are demanding the attention of the world: look at how marvelous I am. But the arrogant and prideful heart leaves little room for the providence of God.

The faithful psalmist says, I know my place in this world in relation to my Lord and King. When I am humble before the Lord, I am at peace. When I fix my eyes on the tasks of today, I know that God will give me the strength I need. When I calm and quiet my soul before the Lord, I know that the Lord will offer me hope.

As the weaned child depends upon her parents for sustenance, so, too, do I know that my Lord will deliver exactly what I need.

IV. The more we recognize God as the giver and sustainer of life, the more we can free ourselves from our anxiety about tomorrow; the fretting and worry of which Jesus spoke.

Jesus said, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” in order to challenge our natural proclivity toward worry. A mindset that first focuses on the majesty and glory of God will crowd out any worries cropping up from one day to another.

Unlike the notions of fate or luck, providence is understood as a positive and intentional working of goodness in life.

Providence says that this is God’s world. No matter how much evil breaks into our lives, none of it can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Providence is strong. Fate and luck are weak. Providence drives us toward faith in God and the worship of God. Fate and luck point to nothing; they are amorphous, lack a center, and have no guiding principle.

If we sense that fate and luck are in control, we end up in a blind alley, our spirits sagging. When we live humbly before the providence of God, our spirits soar.

V. Thanksgiving is only four days away. As we recognize the providential hand of God at work among us, as we find hope even in the toughest of times, as we cling to a faith that

sustains us each day, we ought to be the most thankful people on the face of the earth.

Let us exude thanksgiving, and live as a people of hope. Amen.