

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing, Clarence Presbyterian Church on  
September 24, 2023.**

**PROVIDENCE**

*<Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 145:1-8; Matthew 20:1-16>*

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

Before we go any further, I'd like to invite you to pause for a moment and think about just how amazing it is for us to be gathered here together this morning...

In 1799, French forces under the flag of Napoleon were advancing through Switzerland and Austria. On March 23, they were amassed outside the Austrian village of Feldkirch. While there was a defensive army garrisoned at Feldkirch, it was highly outnumbered by the French. While the military leaders went about determining defensive strategies for what was presumed to be an attack the next morning, the village leaders also met to determine their course of action. After much debate, the weary leaders seemed to be at an impasse. Sensing the lack of energy, the pastor of the church spoke up. "It is late," he said, "and we are tired. Tomorrow is Sunday. Friends, we have been counting on our own strength, and apparently that has failed. As this is the day of worship, let us just ring the bells, have our service as usual, and leave the matter in God's hands. We know only our weakness, and not the power of God to defend us."

And that's what they did. On Sunday morning, as the sun rose, the church bells rang out in joyous proclamation, not just declaring the hour of the day but ringing out with exuberance and celebration. You see, coincidentally, it happened that March 24, 1799, was Easter Sunday. But as the French army heard the bells, ringing more than usual, they determined that the celebration could only be a sign that Austrian reinforcements had arrived. A weak attempt was made at taking the village, but it was easily repelled, and the French went away in defeat.

When I was younger, I found great joy in discovering coincidental happenstances in our world. It never ceased to amaze me how two or more factors could so sporadically come together in just such a way, when really the possibilities were limitless. For instance, I could say it was an amazing coincidence that, as I was preaching a year ago for the 200th Celebration of Ministry for the Olean church, a member of this congregation was sitting in attendance who would then suggest to my parents, who passed it along to me, that I should be open to considering ministry with this church.

It was an amazing coincidence that that day when the church bells of Feldkirch rang it just so happened to be Easter, and so it was extra joyous, which led the French to believe it was Austrian reinforcements.

Near the time I was getting ready to prepare for ministry, a family friend, herself an ordained minister, commented on my fascination with coincidences in our world. With a very serious, but slightly mischievous look, she pulled me aside one day and declared

to me, “Jason, you’re a Presbyterian. You don’t believe in coincidence. You believe in providence.”

Presbyterian or not, that is a very important distinction to make, and a very faithful one, at that. But what, actually, does it mean?

Well, in short, providence means that all things are working together for the glory of God, and that the events and circumstances of life come together in such a way to show forth the presence and compassion of God. “Theologically,” writes Donald McKim, a preeminent Reformed Theologian of our denomination, “providence is often said to be comprised of God’s preserving creation, cooperating with all creatures, and guiding or governing all things toward the accomplishment of God’s purposes” (*Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers*, 25).

So whereas coincidence implies randomness and lack of design, and fate gives the impression that something is going to happen no matter what, providence fosters an understanding that divine guidance and care is actively at work in our world and in our lives. Providence is the act of an active God to ensure what is needed in care and compassion.

That’s a textbook definition, but what does that actually look like in faithful living? Thankfully, our readings this morning provide good examples of that definition lived out.

In our Exodus reading, with the people of God in the wilderness, the sign of providence was dramatic and straightforward. Much as it was from our reading last week, wherein God was present as a pillar of cloud and fire, God’s providence is still seen in a very tangible way. This makes sense. As they were recovering from trauma and relearning to see and trust God, the people of Israel needed signs that were more straightforward. And God certainly provided. When the people complain to Moses about lack of food and sustenance, God provides - manna every morning, and quail every night. Enough for each person, for that day. And as they approach the day of rest, enough for two days. But when the people tried to gather extra, unsure of God’s providence, the extra turned mealy and ashy. The people, there in the wilderness, were learning to trust, again, that God would provide what was needed, whether they knew completely or not what they needed in the first place. In some cases, we’re still learning and relearning this today.

Likewise from our gospel reading, Jesus offers us a parable which gives another example of providence, though in a more nuanced manner. Each day, the owner of the vineyard goes to the market and hires labor for the day. Then again later in the morning. Then at noon, and early afternoon, and so on. Five times throughout the day he hires people to work. And when the end of the day comes, Jesus says, the landowner pays them all the same, even though some worked all day and others worked only an hour. Because the providence of God is concerned with what is needed, more so than what is earned. The providence of God is filled with grace to uplift and to offer care. The workers are upset because they think they should get more than the others, but the landowner, representing God in this parable, replies simply that, ‘I will give to those as I see fit, providing for what is needed.’ In this is the Kingdom of God.

We believe in providence, the acts of an active God to provide what is needed in care and compassion. We pray an example of this each week as we gather in worship, when we ask, "give us this day our daily bread." The providence of God is to bring about just what is needed for an individual, a community, so that they may learn - again and again - to trust in God and God's designs upon creation.

The kingdom of God is providence - providing what is needed for the day. This is not always in a material form, but it is what we need. Our call is to look for the presence of God and trust in this providence to see us through, as well as to be active, ourselves, in living this out.

The people of Feldkirch, Austria, practiced this when they determined to be a people who worship the goodness of God no matter the outcome. They trusted, and they acted, and in the inestimable providence of God, the outcome was such that their village was spared. It was not coincidence that it was Easter Sunday, nor was it fate that there would be no other outcome. It was providence that all these dynamics came to play at the same time, leading to an outcome of celebration.

It's no coincidence that we are all gathered here in worship this morning, our spirits joined together in the Holy Spirit. It's no coincidence that we are each here at whatever point in our lives we are in. It is providential. It is God at work to bring about just the right atmosphere and dynamic for the next era of ministry in and through this church, and we are each a part of that. The gifts we bring, the experiences we've had, the passion and interest of our hearts - all of it is providentially brought together here and now for this time, and such a time as this.

I would offer us, in closing, a prayer of Henri Nouwen. "Lord, I so much want to be in control. I want to be the master of my own destiny. Still I know that You are saying: 'Let me take you by the hand and lead you. Accept My love, and trust that where I will bring you, the deepest desires of your heart will be fulfilled.' Lord, open my hands to receive Your gift of love. Amen."