

Since We have Survived
A Sermon on Exodus 1:8-2:10 and Romans 12:1-8 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ August 23, 2026

What can we know about the way God works in the world? Sometimes people seem to be very certain they know exactly what God is doing in the world. What can we know about God? What can we be certain about, when it comes to God's intentions and actions in the world?

When my brother and I were teenagers we were always going off on adventures together. When we were fifteen or sixteen years old, we were often riding through the leafy green side roads of New England on our bicycles, sometimes with sleeping bags, food and clothes packed on the back. As we grew older we were more often driving in a car to go skiing or hiking someplace in the mountains.

I remember one particular trip we took when I was 20 and Tom was 18. We were driving north on Interstate 91 from mom and dad's house in Connecticut into Vermont. It was January, and very cold and snowy.

In Vermont the mountains are not extremely tall, but they are very steep. In between the mountains there are deep river valleys. The steepness of the mountains and valleys leads to a common local expression: "You can't get there from here."

When they built Interstate 91 in the 1960s people made the decision to build the highway as straight as possible from south to north. This leads to a situation where the highways climb over the shoulder of a hill or mountain, then the road descends to the valley. When the highway comes to a deep river valley it crosses the valley on a long bridge. These bridges are often several hundred feet long and several hundred feet above the river at the bottom of the valley.

Tom and I were close to our destination on that cold January day, as we approached one of these bridges late in the day; it was the bridge over the White River, which is in White River Junction, Vermont. I was driving. I wasn't driving really fast, probably just about 60 mph. As soon as we entered the bridge our car began to slide sideways. The pavement of the bridge was coated with black ice. Neither one of us had ever encountered this hazardous road surface, but it's actually very common in Vermont. It's called black ice because you cannot see the ice. The road just looks a little wet, but the water has actually frozen into ice.

The car slid one way, and then the other way, and at one point I thought the car would do a complete 360 degree turn. I was sure the car was going to go over the guardrail, which seemed to be about 24 inches high, and down into the river gorge and we would die. Our car was going all over the road, across both lanes, and I was sure that we would be hit by another car or a truck at any moment. But we didn't get hit by another car, and our car didn't go over the guardrail and into the river.

We made it to the other side of the bridge and pulled off onto the side of the highway. I couldn't believe we had made it across the bridge alive. In that moment I was aware that my life had been given back to me.

There are several things regarding God and faith where I have complete confidence. After more than thirty years of working in the church, I am completely confident that I will see the love of God in the lives and actions in the people of the congregation. I am completely confident that our primary task as Christians is to love one another, because that's what Jesus tells us to do. I am completely confident that Holy Scripture gives us what we need to find and follow the path of salvation. I am completely confident that the way of eternal life is the way of the cross, which means to follow Christ's example of not being selfish, but to serve others with love and devotion. I am completely confident that God's love for us will never end.

But I am different from some other Christians, because I do not have any confidence in the ability of women and men to describe the exact way God is working in specific situations in the world. Some people very confidently say, 'God did this.' or 'God saved this person.' or 'God decided that one

person should die and another person should be saved.' Some people might say that God saved my life on that icy bridge in Vermont 45 years ago. I don't have confidence that we can know precisely how God is acting in the world. What about the person who died in the car crash on an icy road? Are we saying God decided it was time for that person's life to end? That's not what I think. I have encountered many people who have been hurt when people told them confidently that God decided it was time for them or to lose their job, or to get really sick, or that it was time for the person they love to die.

But I do feel that my life was in some way given to me a second time, on that night when the car I was driving made it across the icy bridge. Since my life was given to me a second time, I should use it for a good purpose. That's what I believe.

In this way, my story is a little bit like Moses' story. Some people would say that God saved Moses' life. I'm not so sure of that, but it seems really clear that Moses' mother saved his life, by giving him away to another woman who wanted to have a little baby. Moses' mother saved his life by placing him in a basket, and letting him float in the Nile river until he was found by Pharaoh's daughter. Moses' life was given to him a second time. Moses used his life for a very good purpose.

I wonder if your story is in some way, somewhat like Moses' story, because you have survived to be here today. I wonder if there was a time in your life when things could have gone in a bad direction. You have survived, and you have strength and intelligence. Most important, you have survived and you have the capacity to love, which is the greatest power of all.

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" Mary Oliver asks this question at the end of her poem, titled "The Summer Day". "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Let's consider Paul's guidance for the Romans. *Do not be conformed to this world.* We conform to this world when we are sure that we are right and the other people are wrong. That's the way of the world. We conform to this world through our selfishness and greed. That's the way of the world.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect. Be changed by the renewing of your minds. Since you are like Moses, and you have survived to this point, what are you doing that is renewing your mind and your heart? What will you do tomorrow that will bring renewal to you and help you discern what God intends for you?

The starting place is to accept we can do nothing, and accomplish nothing that is truly good, on our own. *Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.*

My life has been given back to me so I can be with other people, with all of you, in this blessed community we call 'St. Paul's'. In the church, diversity is our strength. Other people have different concerns, different abilities, and different perspectives. That is a very good thing. We are members of one another, which means we are equal.

Since you have survived to this point, and have been endowed with strength and intelligence and the capacity to love another person, what will you do with the rest of your life?

Annie Lamott went shopping for clothes with her friend. Her friend had been diagnosed with cancer and was about to begin chemotherapy. Annie was trying on a shirt, and asked her friend, "Does this shirt make me look fat?" Her friend said, "Annie, you don't have time for that."

Annie's friend was right. We don't have time for that. We don't have time to spend our days judging ourselves, or others. We have survived. You and I have made it to this point in our lives. Our

lives have been given back to us for some purpose, and it's not hatred or revenge or selfishness or bitterness.

You and I have survived to this point. When we understand that our lives have been given back to us again, there is the possibility we might be changed by God's grace. We are living for a very specific purpose.

Our lives have been given back to us so that we can be together, so that we can be with people who are different from us, so that we can be members of the Body of Christ, sharing a little piece of God's love with the world. Our lives have been given back to us for the purpose of love, for the sake of goodness, for the sake of joy.