

## **“Why Do the Innocent Suffer?”**

Date: Sept. 9, 2018

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: romans 8:18-25, 35-39, Matthew 14:13-21

Occasion: Why, series

Theme: Suffering, theodicy

Bad things happen. Little children get cancer and die. Hurricanes and tornadoes destroy property and kill thousands at a time. Starvation in the world causes 20 to 30,000 people to die every day. Mass shooters and war take multiple lives in seconds.

Where is God when these things happen? And if God is good, then why does God allow these things to go on? Why doesn't God do something to prevent them, or to intervene?

Last week we began our conversation with three foundational ideas to guide our thoughts on this difficult concept. First, God has given human beings responsibility to act on God's behalf. God's primary way of working in the world is through people. Second, to be human is to be free. God gives human beings the freedom to choose God's way or another way. And third, human beings have a tendency to disobey, to not do God's will.

With these three foundations in mind, let's consider three categories of suffering and how we might think about God's relationship to these realities: suffering caused by natural disasters, by human decisions and by sickness.

Every year seems to bring with it some kind of terrible natural disaster. Earthquakes, firestorms, hurricanes or monsoons and tornadoes cause millions and millions of dollars of destruction. They can leave millions displaced from their homes. And thousands upon thousands of people can be killed in a single storm.

Throughout most of human history people have seen such disasters as acts of God. They thought, and many still do, that natural disasters were a sign of God's anger upon a group of people, a form of punishment. In a prescientific world. How else would they explain such widespread destruction? But today we have scientific explanations for why such events occur.

We now know that earthquakes are the result of the movement of the earth's tectonic plates, a process designed to keep the core of our planet from superheating. It is an amazing feat of engineering and physics. Without it, the earth could not support life.

Likewise, the monsoons and hurricanes that bring terrible flooding are part of the earth's system for cooling our atmosphere. As the earth continues to become ever warmer, the storms increase in intensity.

These processes allow our planet to support life. When human beings get caught in these giant forces of nature, there is death and devastation. But these forces are essential to life on our planet.

We are no longer bound to believe that God sends earthquakes or floods. Likewise we understand why God does not intervene and stop these things from occurring. To do so would be to ensure the destruction of our planet.

Knowing that we live on a planet where earthquakes, tsunamis and hurricanes are essential to the planet, our task as human beings is to adapt to these conditions, either by avoiding living in areas prone to the effects of these forces, or by engineering buildings to withstand these forces.

The real tragedy occurs when these forces strike in areas where many people live in poverty. It often causes even greater destruction and suffering. Did God bring such terrible devastation upon poor people? Or,

was it the distribution of wealth in these places that leads to greater suffering?

God is not unsympathetic to the suffering of the world. Ours is not a God who set the universe in motion, stepped back and watched what happens. Our God cares deeply about the suffering of people. And God's provision for human beings who face these natural disasters is to send others to provide care.

As human beings we are meant to hear the call of God to provide medical care, food, clothing, clean water and shelter to those in need. We wrap our arms around those who survive and help them put the pieces of their lives back together again.

When God wants to bring hope and help to others, God sends people. When Fred Rogers was a little boy, his mother told him when there is an accident or a fire or a tragedy; look for the helpers, because that's where God is in action. Much of the suffering that occurs in our world is because God's people have yet to hear or to answer God's call to go and be God's hands and voice to people in need.

But let's consider God's relationship to a second category of human suffering: suffering caused by our own decisions, or the misuse of our freedom, or by other's misuse of their freedom. Many times, when tragic things happen, the real culprit is not God but another person.

As a parent, one of the hardest things to do is to allow our children to make their own choices and let them learn from their mistakes. Sometimes they make mistakes that hurt themselves, and sometimes they hurt others. God has given to each of us the gift of freedom, and God does not take away our freedom to relieve us from the consequences of our choices.

Nor does God intervene to rescue us from the choices made by other people. God has not promised that we will never suffer pain in our lives, but God has promised to be with us through our trials, to sustain us while the pain is going on, and to force good to come from the painful things we experience. One mother whose daughter was killed by a drunk driver founded an organization called *Mothers Against Drunk Driving*. God did not cause her daughter's death, but God certainly inspired her to create an organization that has done much to prevent similar deaths.

As long as we have freedom, some of the choices that humans make will cause suffering to others. That's not God's fault, that's our sinful nature causing harm.

I wonder if this concept influenced John Wesley when he created his three simple rules for Methodists. "Do no harm. Do good. And stay in love with God." In other words, use your freedom for good and not to do harm.

All of this makes sense to most people. But what are we to make of cases like Hitler and the atrocities committed under his leadership during the Holocaust, or any other example of genocide you can think of.

In the case of the Holocaust it was not simply one man who did this horrible thing. It was millions of people who actively participated in supporting the Nazi efforts. And it was tens of millions who remained silent rather than stand up for the Jewish people and the many others persecuted and killed by the Nazis.

Each of these millions exercised his or her freedom in a way that grieved the heart of God. Some were guilty of sins of commission, participating in atrocities; others were guilty of sins of omission, failing to do anything to stop the evil happening around them.

God intervened through the good will of many people who actively resisted the evil, some hiding the Jews and helping them to escape, others fighting bravely to overthrow this terrible regime. Once again, God's primary way of acting in the world is through people.

Finally, let's look at one last category of suffering – sickness. When we become ill, many of us ask, “why me, God?” as though sickness is a punishment from God. I would argue strongly against that line of thinking. First of all, sickness is not God's way. When Jesus walked on earth, he devoted much of his time to healing the sick, not making people sicker.

Second, consider the fact that Jesus died on the cross as the punishment for our sin. God knew that we could not save ourselves from our own sin, so He sent a Savior. To say that God punishes us with sickness is to somehow question the very reason for the cross.

And finally, consider how amazing our bodies are. If I cut myself, my body automatically begins to repair itself. God has designed into us the ability to fight germs and bacteria with antibodies, some that our own bodies create and some that are created in vaccines. God has given to us an amazing body of knowledge to help doctors and nurses and other health care professionals help people to get better.

Sickness is a part of the world we live in. Sickness and death are inescapable realities. We have this life we have in a physical body. It is susceptible to certain common problems: disease and sickness, injury and death. It's all part of having a flesh and blood body.

Do we blame God for illness, or do we praise God that we are fearfully and wonderfully made? Friends, when we blame God, when we reject God, it doesn't change the situation which caused our suffering. It only removes our greatest source of hope, help and comfort that we have.

Christianity does not promise that we will never suffer. It does promise that suffering will never have the final word. Amen? Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Why? Making Sense of God's Will*, by Adam Hamilton. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018, pp. 16-29.