

## **God and Suffering – Romans 8:26-39 – January 31, 2010**

(Watch “God and Suffering” Clip) I am guessing that there are many of you who have thought the same thing at some point in your life – maybe even recently. I find it difficult to watch the news and see the continued suffering in Haiti and around the world without that thought occasionally creeping into my mind. And it is not only natural disasters that prompt these questions or doubts. Anyone who has walked through a really dark time in their lives – where God didn’t seem to be present at all – is going to have these kinds of questions.

I wonder why we are so surprised when you consider that the bible is full of people wrestling with the question of evil and suffering. As much as we might wish that the bible was full of wonderful promises that good things were always going to come to those who follow God, that is not so. Instead we find many, many examples of people much like you and me who are trying to reconcile the God that we believe in with the world that we are experiencing.

Much of the Old Testament – which hopefully we learned last Sunday, needs not be ignored or rejected, in spite of its challenges and problems – is that way. Many of the historical books – 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles – are basically an attempt by people who have walked in these dark places to make sense of things. They too are having trouble figuring out how God could make a covenant with them but then could allow such bad things to happen. And the same is true in the Psalms. Over a third of them are Psalms of lament or what biblical scholars commonly call Complaint Psalms. Take for example Psalm 22 which starts out: My God, my God, why have you

forsaken me? Or Psalm 13: How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

The book of Lamentations is entirely a book about the complaints of the people of God during a time of intense suffering and difficulty. And of course the one many of us think about when it comes to suffering - the book of Job. The story of one man's incredible suffering. This was written during a time when it was commonly thought that suffering was God's punishment upon people when they were bad. But Job was a righteous man who suffered and this epic poem is his attempt to make sense of it.

The Old Testament is pretty clear. It doesn't say "we might go through trials." It says "when you go through them, I will be there with you." And Jesus backs that up both with his words and his own awful experience of the cross. The bible is not a witness that says life is always going to be perfect. The bible is the testimony of people struggling with faith in the face of a world that is often difficult. The biblical answer is not that God causes all of this pain or that God is going to take it all away. Instead it is a promise that God walks with us, sustains us – even carries us – and promises to redeem the pain that happens to us and bring something good out of it.

But many of us continue to struggle with how we make sense of a good, loving, merciful, kind, just God that is also described as all-knowing and all powerful in a world that is filled with pain, suffering, tragedy and injustice. Now, a note of warning here - I do not believe I am going to give you an adequate answer this morning in a twenty minute sermon. As I already mentioned, many of the books of the bible tried and did not come up with a completely satisfactory answer. And of course there are many other books outside of the bible that have tried as well.

Theologians have wrestled with this question from the beginning of time. I took more theology classes in seminary than any other type – including an entire one devoted to the subject of evil called theodicy – trying to find an adequate answer to this problem and still don't believe I have it all figured out myself. And unfortunately, I don't believe the atheists or many other Christians have it figured out either which is unfortunate – especially since we all know that there will be future dark times in our lives and in our world.

So in hopes of finding an answer better than it simply must be God, let's take a look at four different kinds of suffering to see what we can figure out – beginning first with natural disasters. Unfortunately, we couldn't have timed this subject better considering what has happened in Haiti. Throw in tornadoes, hurricanes, tsunamis and numerous others natural disasters that some insurance companies still call "acts of God" - it is no wonder that our initial reaction is to say "it must be God doing all of these things." But with modern science as effective as it is today in explaining these phenomena, why are we still so quick to do that?

Soon after the earthquake in Haiti I was doing a little internet research trying to make sense of what happened myself and came across an article titled "Haiti Earthquake Disaster Little Surprise to Some Seismologists." The article explains that a week before the earthquake Robert Yeats, a professor emeritus in Geosciences at Oregon State University said that an imminent big west coast earthquake concerned him far less than a "big one" that might occur in Haiti, due to the large fault near the capital city of Port-au-Prince - and the poverty-driven low level of earthquake-preparedness there. Six days before the earthquake he was quoted as saying: "If they

have an earthquake on this fault that runs through Port-au-Prince," the death toll would be tremendous. Sadly enough, he feared this reality and wrote about as far back as 1989.

Why? Not because he believed God would eventually make it happen for whatever reason but because he is a scientist who understands and can explain that the plates of our earth move and rub against each other building pent up energy. He understands that this amazing energy helped to create mountain ranges, continents and land on our planet that we have built cities upon, right over top of some of these faults – including the one called the Enriquillo-Plaintain Garden. A fault which runs some 16 kilometers from Port-au-Prince at the intersection of the North American and Caribbean tectonic plates, which are slowly sliding past one another.

I do not know Professor Yeat's faith or religious background – or if he even has one - but I think I am safe in saying that he believes the Haiti earthquake was not an act of God but a design function of our planet to allow it to stay together that unfortunately killed thousands of people in the process. And you know what – I agree with him. And I trust that scientists can explain most of the natural disasters we encounter in this world as well. However, that does not always stop me from wondering – maybe even questioning God – particularly when we go through these disasters or in this case watch them on our televisions from afar.

Turning our attention next to illness, the same is true as well. Medical researchers and doctors understand so much more about many of the diseases and illnesses people face every day. We have several folks on our prayer list who are battling cancer right now. I don't completely understand the process that leads to these

tumors but more and more they do. Fortunately they are also working hard to figure out why it sometimes happens and are trying to help us do a better job with carcinogens and not smoking and other things that promote the growth of tumors or cancerous cells in our bodies. So once again, why do we so quickly jump to the conclusion that God caused this to happen – often times crying out “why God, why me” – instead of realizing that it is part of a process unfortunately gone amuck in our bodies?

And the same is true with accidents. In most cases, we understand the causes of them. We know that sometimes people drive while under the influence of alcohol or drugs. When they do they make poor decisions - sometimes lose control - and people get hurt or even killed. When I was a campus minister at Kansas State University I had six peer ministers who worked with me. One was a cute Catholic girl – a freshman - who went home one weekend, drank too much with a friend, lost control of her car while going over ninety miles an hour and died . She was also a pledge at one of the sorority houses and I will never forget trying to help her sisters and my other peer ministers – myself as well I suspect - understand and accept that God did not do this. That he was not punishing her or even trying to teach us something. It was a poor choice by an ordinary young woman that ended in a tragic accident.

Finally, we also know that there is evil committed by one person toward another. Unfortunately, we all do it ourselves on a regular basis in the way that we speak and act toward each other. We know what betrayal feels like. And these things don't compare to the violent acts we daily read about or watch on the news. Do we believe that God is prompting the heart of a killer to go murder his or her victims? Or is that what happens in a world where God has given human beings freedom to decide or act?

When I look in the bible I find a God not controlling everything that happens but a God that has taken a big risk in giving us freedom. Is that not what the very first story in the bible is attempting to explain? That God in his great mercy created us not to be robots or puppets but free, moral agents. That is to be able to choose right from wrong - to choose whether to follow or reject God. Of course, God's desire is that we do follow him. So imagine what might happen if more of us did or if those who say we do were more effective at it? Might there not be less poverty if people actually decided to do what God told them to do in sharing their food with the hungry? How much more would we stop hurting one another if we actually loved our neighbors as much as we love ourselves? How different would the world be if we put the needs of others before our own?

The bottom line, for me, is that God is not the one causing these things to happen. In fact, many times in the bible we find God throwing up his hand and asking his people why they do such things and then coming along side them and behind them, picking up their messes and redeeming them over and over and over again. Not only that, but the bible also tells us that God takes all the evil and suffering and tragedies that happen in this world and does whatever he can to fold them into his divine purposes. So I think that most of might be able to accept that God does not cause these bad things to happen. But I suspect many of you are still asking – why doesn't God prevent them from happening? Atheists take that one step further and ask why we even need a God if he isn't going to stop all these things from happening?

In order to try and answer that question this morning we must turn to the doctrine of providence which attempts to explain how God does interact in our world. We are

going to briefly look at two common answers that are given – that unfortunately I believe are inadequate - so I am going to suggest a third possibility. Much like last week, we can think of them on a continuum with Deism on the one end and Hyper-Calvinism on the other. Deists believe that there is a God who created the universe and the laws that govern it. But basically God stepped aside and watches but is not actively involved in human activity. Hyper-Calvinists, on other side, believe that God is in control of everything. They basically believe that God is somehow behind everything that happens in our lives and in our world including the natural disasters, illnesses, accidents and even the evil that happens in this world.

The Deist says God is not involved in our world at all while the Hyper-Calvinist says God is involved in everything. I believe that there are pros and cons to both views. More pros in Deism and cons in Hyper-Calvinism for me but unfortunately I don't have time to go into that this morning. So instead let me propose this third option as to how God works in our lives, which I believe is backed up in both the Old and New Testaments.

I believe that God guides us, carries us, and sustains us and as today's text told us – never leaves us no matter what. God is our hope and our help – in fact an ever present help in times of trouble. But not always through miraculous intervention or the suspensions of the laws that God made. That's what we want to have happen, isn't it? Some of us want the assurance that as long as I pray and am a good Christian then God is going to protect me and save me from all harm, all evil and all tragedy. I think we secretly want that or believe that and may even pray for that for ourselves and our families.

I know I pray for God to put a hedge of protection around my son – especially when he gets in his truck and heads off to work or a night out with his friends. I am counting on God's influence in Chris's life, but I don't think that God every day, every moment stops all bad things from happening to him. Nor do I believe that God causes the bad things that do - like when he hit a deer one month after getting his license and his new used beloved little green pick-up.

Now, did God help keep Chris from getting hurt? I do believe so, which is why I can't completely call myself a Deist. Can I explain how or why? Unfortunately, I cannot. Maybe it was simply by influencing him to wear his seat belt or to drive the speed limit. Maybe it was because he has some special purpose for Chris to fulfill in his life. I really don't know but my understanding of God's activity in our lives assures me that God was somehow with Chris that night and helped to protect him.

The interesting thing is Chris does not believe that himself. He is at a point in his faith journey where he believes like the Deist which is perfectly okay. I am happy that he at least believes there is a God and hope that as he goes through life he too will come to experience God's presence and promptings more fully in his life which is exactly how I came to believe what I do.

Over many years of bad times and good, I have come to know and believe that God can and will influence me by speaking to my heart and guiding me when I listen. The more in touch with and open to God I become, the more I sense God's guiding hand in the decisions that I make and the things that I do. So our job is to be open and available to God so that we can more fully experience his grace and love and be ready to share it with others. Our task is to trust God and say "God, my life is yours as long as

I have life. When I go through suffering teach me. Use it as an opportunity to help me serve you more faithfully. And in all things God, I entrust my life to you.”

I know that many of you are already doing this – even in the midst of difficulty, pain and tragedy. Thank you for being a witness to others of us who are tempted to turn away from God – maybe even reject God completely - in times of suffering by reminding us and showing us that God does guide us, carry us, sustain us - for nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.