

## SERMON – 02/03/08

### *Tough Question #1 – “Why does God allow evil & suffering?”*

It began on Christmas Eve. Here in this very sanctuary. About half of the 300 people who gathered here that night submitted a faith-related question they had...

- I reviewed the questions... combined similar questions... and tallied the results...
  - Over the course of this past month, we’ve looked at 3 of the 4 most asked questions...
  - And today it’s time to address the #1 question asked by you folks...
  - But before we do that, let’s round out the 4 categories we’ve been looking at as well...
- First, the **Christmas Question** of the day ...
  - *“How many pounds was Jesus (when he was born)?”*
  - Well, the Bible doesn’t specifically say... but if I had to guess, I’d estimate somewhere around 7 pounds, 7.7 ounces!
  - But in the eyes of his parents & God, he was “just right!”
- Next, the **Quick-Answer Question** of the day...
  - *“Looking at the church’s altar, the concrete pillar has fishlike-shapes. Was this done on purpose to look like the Christian symbol?”*
  - Well... YES. (How’s that for a quick answer?) It was intentional!
- Third, the **Fun Question** of the day...
  - *“Why is God so big, nice, good & cool?”*
  - If God could answer this directly, I believe God would say, “Because **I AM!**”
- Finally, the last “**Good Question**” Question...
  - *“What does God look like?”*
  - (pause) Good question! I don’t know!
  - But the book of Genesis says that humankind was made in “the image of God” – both male & female... so I’m guessing God looks a little bit like each of us!

Now, on to the question we've all been waiting for... the #1 "Tough Question" asked by this congregation: "Why does God allow Evil & Suffering in the world?"

- Ah yes, this is one of those questions that have perplexed & befuddled people since probably the beginning of time!
  - And let's be honest, who hasn't asked this question before... either privately or publicly?
  - A 2-year old baby is thrown to his death from an overpass...
  - A woman is beaten to death in broad daylight in Kailua...
  - Hurricane Katrina devastates the Gulf Coast, killing over 1800 people... with 750 still missing & unaccounted for!
  - According to UNICEF... 30,000 children die **each day** due to poverty & malnutrition...
- This is definitely a question that we, as people of faith, must wrestle with.
  - If God is all-knowing... all-loving... and all-powerful, then why does evil and suffering occur in God's created world?
  - (And let me say here at the beginning, that I probably will not be able to answer this question to everyone's satisfaction...
  - But hopefully some of what I talk about today might start pointing you in the right direction as you wrestle with this same issue.)
- It's important that we start thinking about the problem of evil and suffering BEFORE we find ourselves in the midst of it (because it's very hard to make sense of things during!).

It was a common understanding during the Old Testament times that whenever a person experienced hardship, suffering, or evil, it meant God was punishing or correcting him/her.

- Something going wrong? You better determine what sin you have in your life!
  - Born with a disease or illness? Your parents' sins have come to fruition.
  - Disaster strike? Get on your knees before the Lord and confess! CONFESS!
- But this didn't sit well with some folks... some very faithful folks, no less.
  - In fact, the Old Testament book of JOB is a direct response to this exact issue.

- Job has disaster after disaster befall him... and his three buddies come to console him... by telling him there’s some unresolved sin in his life that he obviously has overlooked.
- Job disagrees. He’s searched his soul over and over... and can’t imagine what aspect of his life was at fault.
- His friends are brutal, though... with every successive chapter, their insistence of his sin grows.
- Until God breaks in and addresses Job directly (we’ll come back to this later).
- In a sermon on the topic of suffering, Pastor Adam Hamilton remarks that modern science has given us a better perspective of various kinds of tragedies today:
  - **Natural disasters...** It used to be that hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, tsunamis were classified as “Acts of God.”
  - Yet we understand today how the earth is designed... and how it keeps from overheating at its core... and many of our “natural disasters” are a direct result of this necessary process!
  - We know the science behind these phenomenons.
  - Or what about the subject of **Illnesses & Infirmities**, like cancer... scientists have identified cancer cells, and we know they form from a single strand of DNA that replicates. We know there are specific practices we can avoid to help prevent some kinds of cancers... that’s “light years” ahead of where we were just a few decades ago!
  - **Accidents...** can often be explained because of the choices people make... intoxication, speed, distractions all have direct effects... not to mention equipment malfunctions, etc.
  - And when it comes to **Evil...** we, as human beings, frequently hurt each other. We’re at times unkind, violent & we betray one another.
  - Yes, we can explain & understand many of the causes of pain & suffering today...
- At the same time, we have to ask ourselves how much evil, pain & suffering could be avoided if we all lived the way God intended us to live, rather than the way we felt like living?

There are two extremes when thinking about Providence... or the way God interacts with the world...

- The first is a “Clockmaker” understanding...
  - God is the architect of this complex universe, and like a divine clockmaker, God creates the world, sets it in motion, and then steps back and watches.
  - In this understanding, God does not intervene in the affairs of this clock-world He’s created...
  - God is distant & removed from humankind.
- Another way of looking at Providence is the “Puppeteer” theory of God...
  - That’s an understanding that God is actively involved in every aspect of humanity!
  - Nothing happens without God’s knowledge & approval...
  - God is the divine puppeteer, holding the strings of his marionette children.
  - A person with this understanding will say that “everything happens for a reason, and it’s all God’s will!”
- There is another way of thinking about divine Providence... a middle way...
  - God primarily works through the laws of this universe that he’s created... God can work miracles & suspend the laws of nature, but most of the time God chooses not to operate this way.
  - But God also seeks to influence His creatures (that’s us) to make a difference for the better... to follow God’s divine plan!
- When I was in seminary I learned a lot of various theological concepts... many of which I’ve long since forgotten.
  - But there was one particular insight of Process theology known as “The Divine Lure”... (and no, it’s not something you’d put in your tackle box!)
  - It says that at every point in our lives, we have numerous ways we can choose to act... numerous pathways, if you will.
  - And at every point, God knows which of the many paths is best for us to travel... so God tries to “lure” us into that direction... giving us nudges, inspiration, messages, etc.

- But God has also created us with a free will... with the ability to choose our own way...
- God may know that it's in our best interests if we open Door #3... but we're free to open Door #1, 2, 4, 5, 6, or even 56! It's our choice!
- Whatever pathway we choose to go... whether it's Door #3 or Door #56, we're then faced with a whole new set of pathways.
- God knows which of these new pathways is best for our lives... so God goes about trying to persuade us in the right direction... but again, we're free to choose whatever way we want.
- What I like about this understanding of God & the way God operates... is that God will never leave us or abandon us.
- And no matter how awful our former choices may have been, God continues to seek to guide us in the best possible pathway. Always!
- Sometimes, my friends, we may make all the “right choices” in our lives... and we're still faced with suffering & evil.
  - That's what happened to Job...
  - Though his friends tried to get him to confess his unresolved sin, Job knew that he had done nothing to incur God's wrath.
  - And at the end of the book of Job, we're left with the understanding that **sometimes bad stuff just happens.** Period.
- I listened to a seminar that Bart Campolo led at last year's HIM Conference... it was entitled, “My God is Not a Terrorist!”
  - He said he believes that God does not send evil or suffering our way...
  - God isn't evil, and He doesn't work through evil...
  - That's the way terrorists operate... they seek to use evil for their own purposes.
  - God is love!
  - And although God did not cause the evil or suffering, God can redeem ANY situation...and direct it towards good!

The gospel story we read this morning is from Matthew 13... it's the parable of the “Weeds and the Wheat.” Bart Campolo said this parable completely changed his understanding of evil & divine Providence!

- *“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well.” (v.24-26).*
  - There is a God, and God has a plan, Jesus says through this parable.
  - The plan is that **good seed** is scattered in the owner’s field!
  - We were made in the image of a loving God, in order that we might love others... that’s the plan!
  - But, as this story goes, things don’t always go according to plan!
- The servants of this landowner approach their master one day to ask about the seed he had sown.
  - (v.27) *“Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?”*
  - “We thought you only planted good seed! What’s up with the weeds!?!?”
  - *“But (the Master) replied, ‘An enemy has done this’” (v.28).*
  - There is a God... God has a plan... but someone (or something) always messes up God’s plans.
  - “It’s not me,” says the Master. “An enemy did this!”
  - Evil has a life of its own. Evil infects our souls like an out of control virus.
  - Evil can reside not only in people, but in groups of people, in organizations, corporations, governments – the potential is endless!
  - Jesus knew this... that’s why he taught his disciples to pray, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil!”
- But the story doesn’t end there (that would be a pretty depressing state of affairs, don’t you think!?)...
  - The servants, seeking to be helpful, ask if they should go and pull up all of the weeds... to get rid of all that evil presence?!
  - (v.29) *“(The Master) replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”*

- There is a God. God has a plan. God’s plan always gets messed up. But God always has a PLAN B!
- God can redeem ANY situation... and that Redeemer is Jesus!
  - There is nothing so terrible... so tragic... so sorrowful... that God cannot redeem, through the power of Christ Jesus.
  - Romans 8:35ff. says this (and I’m reading from The Message translation):
  - *“Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture... None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing--nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable – absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.”*

Before I end today, I’d like to show you a 6-minute video. I think you’ll find it quite amazing, actually... it’s called “99 Balloons,” and it chronicles the life of baby Eliot from the eyes of his father.

- Eliot was born with Edwards Syndrome... but let’s hear how his father tells the story...
  - [Show “99 Balloons” DVD clip...]
  - [note: you can watch this video on the internet at Igniter Media’s website... [www.ignitermedia.com/products/iv/singles/570/99-Balloons](http://www.ignitermedia.com/products/iv/singles/570/99-Balloons)]
- *(pause)* “An underdeveloped lung, a heart with a hole in it, and DNA that placed faulty information in every cell of your body **could not stop God from revealing Himself** through a child who never uttered a word...”
  - Maybe instead of focusing on the question of why God allows suffering & evil in this world... we should, instead, be focusing on **how we’re going to react** to these situations when we encounter them...
  - Because we will encounter them, friends... we all know that, don’t we?!
  - There is a God. God has a plan. Oftentimes, that plan gets messed up. But God always has a ‘Plan B’... which involves redeeming any situation we experience!

Instead of singing a song of response, like we usually do... I'd like to play for you a song by Natalie Grant, called "Held."

- It's a powerful song that speaks to this very issue we've been wrestling with today...
  - I'd like to offer you a few options, while the song is being played...
  - You can simply sit and listen to the song, reading the lyrics as they're projected on the screen... allowing God to speak whatever words God needs to speak to you this day.
- But God may have already been speaking to some of you, while I was preaching...
  - And the Holy Spirit may have reminded you of some unresolved pain of your past...
  - Some experience of evil or suffering that you have endured... and you've had a hard time letting God be LORD over that frustrated... or just numb.
  - If that's you, I'd like to invite you to come down to the front altar while this song is playing...
  - You don't have to speak to anyone... or reveal any details as to why you're here...
  - But by coming down to the front, you will be symbolically offering up this painful part of your past to the Lord...
  - To the One who can redeem **ANYTHING. ANYTHING!**
  - "Come, Holy Spirit & move through this place... AMEN."