

"Why is there so much suffering?" Job 38: 1-21

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This Sunday we continue our series "Big Questions" by looking at questions about the Christian faith that have been posed by our congregation. Today's question was suggested by many people in many forms but basically the question comes down to: "Why is there so much suffering?" Or as one person put it "Why do bad things happen to good people (and yes, I have read the book)."

In his holocaust memoir "Night," writer Elie Wiesel tells a story of the Nazis erecting a gallows in the midst of the concentration camp. Three people are to be hung. Two are adult men, members of the resistance. The third is a small young boy, servant to a resistance member.

Weisel shares that at this point the prisoners in the camp have become hardened to the violence and suffering around them. When somebody is executed, no one cries -- not even the victim. But this day is different. The two men die instantly on the gallows. But the boy, because of his small frame and light weight, takes a full half hour to die, kicking and struggling as the prisoners are made to file past and view his suffering. The prisoners try in vain to hold back the tears as the boy struggles in agony. And one man asks of his fellow Jews, "Where is your God now?"

Where is God in the midst of suffering? Where is God in midst of the typhoon in the Philippines, or when a family member gets cancer, a child is tragically killed, people are starving? Why does God allow so much suffering? Does God care? Would you like to know the answer to that question? Well...so would every theologian and religious person who ever lived. We've been struggling with this question for at least thousands of years, and we don't have a *single* answer. In fact, we don't have a lots of answers. Some of which you have probably heard before.

One answer, perhaps the first ever given, asserts that suffering is God's way of punishing the wicked. This notion is certainly found in the teachings of the Hebrew scriptures, and maintains that God has a purpose for our suffering, but it's not our prerogative to know the reason behind it. Connected to this idea is an assurance that God will never give us more suffering than we can handle. The problem: Even the biblical writers eventually came to realize that often the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper, and most of us personally know of people who were given much more suffering than they could endure. But even if this were not the case, what would we think of a human parent that behaved this way -- a parent who imposed as much suffering as possible upon their child, just up to their breaking point, and then no more? As one colleague of mine likes to say, "I refuse to worship a God who behaves worse than I do." No, I do not find this answer sufficient.

Another answer suggests that God's *wants* to stop our suffering but opts not to in order that we might be in a relationship of love and mutuality with God (something not possible if God holds all the cards, all the power, in our relationship). In essence, God has given up some of the power to end suffering in order that we might have free will. This argument works to a point, and certainly much of our suffering is by choice, as we exercise that free will. But what about suffering imposed upon on me by another? Where is my free will to stop them from doing it? What are we to make of a God who could stop the suffering of the Holocaust, for example, but chooses not to in order to honor our free will? Again, imagine if a human parent behaved this way -- saw their child suffering horribly and had the power to stop it, but choose not to help? What would we think of that parent? No, I do not find this answer sufficient.

A third option ascribed to by many: God has no power to stop any suffering. Period. The universe is completely random and chaotic and there's nothing God can do about it. I would hope we do not find this answer sufficient either.

Ultimately, none of these answers are sufficient. So let's turn to the book of Job and see if this folktale (sort of a long-form parable) of the Hebrew scriptures offers a different perspective.

Recall with me the story. God has made a bet with Satan that Job, the most righteous man on earth, will stay faithful to God even in the face of terrible suffering. In order to test this, they begin to deliver various tragedies upon Job: his sons die, his livestock die, his body is covered in sores, his home collapses and kills the rest of his family. Through much of this, his friends attack him over and over, arguing that God must be punishing him for some sin he has committed. Job is insistent that he is blameless, and continues to trust that God is on his side, despite evidence to the contrary. Finally, the suffering is too much and he presses God for answer. And God's response is probably not what Job expects: "How can you question me? Were you there when I created the world? What makes you so great? Can you create mountains, form the skies and walk the waters of the deep? Then how can you ask me such a question as "why do we suffer?" In essence, God is saying "Look at the creation all around you. Look how powerful I am. Look at all I've accomplished? And you want to ask me a question like 'Do I care that you are suffering?'"

What do you think of God's response? Do you find it sufficient? Does it in any way give you some satisfaction to the question of suffering?

Many would say "No." That God's answer is really no answer at all --that God just completely avoids the whole issue and changes the subject. Or does he?

If you read the rest of the book, you will discover that Job does find the answer sufficient. He comes to see that in the midst of the chaos that is creation, God is with us, and cares for us. Job's God wants us to accept that suffering has nothing to do with

reward or punishment. It is just a part of life...just the way things are. Just a part of participating in creation --a creation full of great beauty and great chaos. And the story of Job makes it clear that God is in the midst of that beauty and that chaos.

Last night I spent a few minutes standing on my front porch watching that tremendous rainstorm, listening to the thunder, seeing the lightning light up the nighttime clouds. I was overcome for a moment, realizing that God was present -- right there in the midst of that storm. God in the midst of creation. In the midst of the possibly destructive power of the storm as well as the beauty and fragility of the rain that brings life and nourishes the planet. It was a reminder to me that we need not go looking for God "out there" in the heavens. God is right here. In our midst. In the beauty and the chaos and mystery of creation. And when there is suffering in the midst of all that, God is present within the suffering...but God is not the cause of it! And if creation includes suffering, then God suffers too. God suffers right along with us.

In Elie Weisel's story from "Night," when the man poses the challenge "Where is your God now?" another voice answers: "He's there. Hanging on that gallows." Where is God in the midst of suffering? The answer: God is right here. When we suffer, God suffers with us.

Perhaps the real question to ask is: Where are WE in the midst of the suffering of the world? We want to know "Does God care?" Maybe what God wants to know is "Do WE care?" Are we willing, in the midst of the chaos of life, to participate with God in the healing of the world. Do we trust that participating in God's compassion and grace can bring wholeness out of brokenness?

Do you want to know where God is in the midst of suffering? Do you want to know if God cares? Take the hand of someone next to you. Look at those around you. This is where God is in the midst of suffering. Right here. In us. In the way we respond and care for one another and all of creation. In the ways we are willing, even in the midst of life's chaos, to reach out, and to trust enough in God's love to continue to live lives of peace, and compassion and justice.

AMEN