

## GOD'S PROVIDENCE AND HUMAN SUFFERING

Luke 13:1-9

My soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, how long? Psalm 6:3 NIV

Last Sunday began our series on Why? Making Sense of God's Will. The opening stories I shared were all ministry situations I have encountered in the course of my 15 years serving as a pastor. I left you with the thoughts of Rev. Adam Hamilton, lead pastor to The Church of the Resurrection in Leewood, Kansas. We were looking at three foundational ideas for reconciling God's goodness with the suffering we experience in the world. Briefly, they are; 1) God places humankind in charge of earth, 2) to be human is to be free (free to choose, right or wrong) and finally, 3) we come into this world with a predisposition to stray from God's path. Romans 7 really resonates with me that our human condition to stray from God's path, is truly evident in our lives and in the life of the Apostle Paul. Hear these words this morning, Romans 7:14-20: *We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.*

In these words, from the Apostle Paul, it seems as if Paul is passing the proverbial buck almost saying that "I can't help what I do...God made me this way." Yes...and NO. Paul is making the point that left on your own, it is almost impossible for you to choose the path God wills for your life without the help and guidance of Jesus Christ. This also supports the third foundational point of last week's message that human beings have a tendency to be drawn to that which is not God's will or plan. Another one of Paul's most well-known writings is the simple verse from Philippians 4:13 – *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.* While these two verses may appear to be in direct opposition to the other, Paul is further demonstrating our need for and total dependence on Jesus Christ.

Continuing with the theme of suffering, this morning we are going to look at one type of suffering most all encounter in the course of a lifetime; natural disasters which cause widespread human suffering. A tsunami of gigantic proportions, caused by shifting plates in the ocean floor off the coast of Aceh in northwest Indonesia, causes horrific damage in several countries, and kills about 300,000 men, women, and children. Through most of human history people have seen such disasters as acts of God. (Hamilton) In April 2015, a devastating earthquake hits Nepal killing more than 9,000 people and injuring more than 23,000. Unlike the prescientific era, we now know and understand that earthquakes are the result of the movement of the earth's plates, a process designed to keep the core of our planet from superheating. Without this occurring from time to time, the earth could not support life. Annual monsoons in certain parts of our world which bring terrible flooding are part of the earth's system for cooling our atmosphere. Where is God when these disasters occur and why doesn't God stop them from happening? As I just stated, to stop these events would lead to the complete destruction of our planet. Rather, God has given us intelligence and the ability to adapt to these conditions by engineering buildings to withstand these forces. Along the Atlantic coastline where hurricanes are so numerous, beach homes are shored up and built with removable flooring in decks to withstand the relentless pounding of the ocean when hurricanes

occur. Growing up, the beach club house my family belonged to was regularly washed away during hurricane season, that is, until they developed a system of “trap doors,” which were opened in the event of a hurricane giving the powerful water a path, thus sparing the building.

But then there are circumstances, as we have seen, where the greatest destruction from these forces of nature occur in areas where many live in poverty. Does God rain down destruction on the poor? We all know the answer to this, or we should. God makes provision for the human beings who face these natural disasters by sending other people to provide care. We had Katrina relief by the millions of dollars in 2005 and more recently with hurricane Sandy. As human beings we are meant to hear the call of God to provide food and clothing and shelter for those in need. (Hamilton) As the family of God, we wrap our arms around those who survive and help them put the pieces of their lives back together again.

In our denomination the work of UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief) meets these needs. You need to know the following fact – 100% of all donations made to UMCOR go directly to the people and areas hit by such devastation. Not one penny is used for administration of any kind. Those hated apportionments take care of these costs so that whenever and wherever United Methodists open their hearts to help brothers and sisters in need, every penny is used to help them put the pieces of their lives back together again. Along with the American Red Cross, UMCOR is usually the first to arrive on the scene of disasters and it is always the last to leave.

There are numerous opportunities right in our own back yard to help those in need. About 4 years ago, I had the opportunity to participate in a 36-hour mission encounter for area students in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade just down the road at Christ UMC. The intent of this brief encounter was to expose our young people to serving in ways that help their fellow men, women, and children – and to highlight local viable ministries. Named, “Helping Hands,” this mission experience is well worth the time and effort. The children have at least two hands on mission experiences in that short span of time.

My group experienced the food pantry at Calvary UMC in Stuarts Draft. This food pantry is open two afternoons every week providing food and other items to people who struggle to make ends meet to be able to put nutritious food on the table. In 2014 more than 4,000 families were helped by this ministry. The second mission experience took place practically in our own backyard called Equipping the Saints in Weyers Cave. Equipping the Saints ships materials globally to assist others to become the hands and feet of God. Printed materials, electronic materials (computers, etc.) and thousands upon thousands of pounds of clothing are shipped wherever there is a need. Of course, we have the Marquis Memorial Food Pantry. We really do not have to go very far to meet the needs of people both globally and locally.

In looking at the Bible, we can find hundreds of disasters which appear to have been sent by God to bring God’s people into line. The Great Flood which destroyed the earth; fire raining down on Sodom and Gomorrah; the plagues sent to Egypt...etc. These events have led to the idea and attitude that God rains down disaster to bring human beings into line. Still, we are left with the confusion as to why does God also rains down disaster on the good and innocent? We have the very words of Jesus in Matthew 5:45 *...so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.* Part of the separation from God which occurred in the Garden of Eden included nature being out of balance with its original creation. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, not only was their relationship with God severed, so too God’s relationship with the animal and plant kingdom was broken.

These words can be found in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus had just told the gathered crowd, *You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...* in other words, God does not single people out to punish them, by the very fact that we live on this earth – we will experience the bad along with the good.

I chose the passage from Luke 13 to further illustrate and hopefully dispel the notion that God punishes us when we go astray. The point of this grisly tale, presented to Jesus, is to try to get Jesus to judge whether these Galileans died as a result of some hidden greater sinfulness they all shared – or whether their suffering and death were the result of a random act of violence. Jesus utterly rejects the notion that those who died at Pilate's hand were somehow more sinful than others. But Jesus does not leave his answer at that. He calls up yet another example of apparently random tragedy. Whereas the slaughter ordered by Pilate was an intentional act of bloodletting; the collapsed tower of Siloam is one of those freakish incidents of nature and physics. Again, Jesus answers his own question with the same emphatic rejection as in verse 3, *No I tell you.* Jesus, being Jesus, however, makes good use of this line of questioning and literally turns the tables on those trying to trap him by further saying: *...Unless you repent, Jesus asserts, you will all perish just as they did.* Trying to outguess God's divine timeline of life and death for each of us is not a human capability. We are capable; however, of making sure we stand before God repentant and trusting in divine love and mercy. Whether we live well into old age and die quietly in our beds or our lives end suddenly and violently, it is our relationship before God at that moment of death that determines whether we truly "perish" or not.

At this point, Luke introduces the story of the barren fig tree to show the mercy of God available to all, and I mean all of God's creation. The main push of this line is for us to know deep within our hearts and very being that God will never give up on us...so we should not give up on our lives, nor our brothers and sisters in this world.

My late friend and mentor, The Rev. Pamela Sawyer was apt to ask the following question whenever I found myself in trying circumstances, "Where do you see God in this?" I hated hearing those words, because every single time she asked me this, I was able to see God in the midst of difficult times. Wesley, Avery and Zoey can tell you, when times are hard, God is Good! God always provides - this is known as God's providence. Psalm 23:5 speaks of the Lord who is our shepherd preparing a table for us in the presence of our enemies. This line about the table doesn't mean God promises to protect us in this life. What God does promise to do is to provide.

Not protection, but providence. There's a difference.

Protection would be if the hurricane never makes landfall. Providence means a Red Cross volunteer shows up after it does with hot food and directions to a shelter.

Protection means our intimate partner never cheats on us. Providence means that, should that happen, together we work hard and find a way to reconciliation or resolution.

Protection means the blood clot never travels up the bloodstream to the brain, causing a stroke. Providence means there's still much joy to be found in life, even if one side of the body doesn't work quite as well as it used to.

This is what Jesus means when he tells Peter in John 21:15-17 to *feed my sheep*. It means that when the world around us seems to be falling apart, we gather together around a table in the presence of the Lord and find there such food as feeds the soul. More than that, around such a table, we enjoy a life-changing fellowship with one another. Somehow, the howling wind outside doesn't seem so formidable when there's food to warm the belly and convivial company to remind us we're not alone.

Through it all, God does provide.

When times are scary, God is Good!!

Preaching professor Tom Long tells a true story that comes out of the little Georgia country church where he grew up. The older folks of that congregation loved to tell the story again and again. They laughed over it and shook their heads, and maybe they embellished a detail or two in the retelling.

The tale took place on a certain Sunday night in October of 1938. This was back in the days of Sunday-evening prayer services. The preacher was right in the middle of his sermon when a man named Sam — a member of the congregation and well known to everyone — burst through the church doors, trembling with fear. It took him a moment to catch his breath, but then he blurted out, "It's the Martians! They're attacking the earth in spaceships! Some of 'em have landed in New Jersey!"

Now, Sam was not a man given to flights of fancy; nor was he fond of practical jokes. He was a straight-arrow sort of guy. From the look in his eye, and his earnest tone of voice, it was clear he believed every word he said.

The poor preacher didn't know what to do. He had never imagined, in his wildest dreams, that his sermon might one day be interrupted by news of an interplanetary invasion. The preacher just stared at Sam, open-mouthed. The congregation stared, too.

"It's true!" said Sam. "I swear it. I heard it on the radio."

What Sam had heard, of course, was Orson Welles' now-infamous Mercury Theater of the Air radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*. It was a fictional story, meant to sound like a real radio broadcast. It fooled an awful lot of people. The announcer said at the beginning it was only a story, but if you tuned in a few minutes late, you missed the context and were very likely to think it was a real, "we interrupt this program," sort of news bulletin.

After a few moments of awkward silence in the church, one of the oldest members of the congregation got up to speak. He was a farmer, a plain-spoken "man of few words."

"I 'spect what Sam says ain't completely true. But, if it is, I know this. We're in the right place here in church. I say we go on with the meetin'." And so, they did.

As Tom Long puts it, "The old farmer sized it all up, measured it against his rough-hewn view of providence and decided it was better to be in church praising God than running around the cow pasture shooting buckshot into the night sky." Even in the midst of our worst nightmare, God is present in a myriad of ways. Where do you see God in those times?

Next week I will carry this theme forward and look at suffering caused by human decisions and suffering caused by sickness. Stay tuned as we continue to ask the eternal Why? question of the God who created each and every one of us. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.