

Sermon: God Will Meet You There

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Scriptures: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Luke 19:1-10

A few months ago, we attempted a People's Choice series, but received only two questions by the time I'd needed to plan worship for the series. One Sunday before worship, I reached into my mailbox and found the following anonymous question (or questions) typed up neatly on a half sheet of paper:

"I believe God is loving, forgiving, and protecting.

Why then:

Do innocent children suffer from disease and abuse?

Are innocent people subject to war and destruction?

Did the pandemic occur and millions of lives were lost?"

I read it and thought to myself, "How many ways are there to say 'I don't know' in a 15-minute sermon block? It's a good question to be sure, but the truth of the matter is that no one really knows. No one has any idea, but I'm going to be very honest with you, this is *exactly* the kind of question that I designed that people's choice series for. It's the kind of question I love to wrestle with. It's the kind of question the drew me not just to God, but to theology as a passion. I remember trying to address this question in seminary papers and twisting myself into knots trying to understand. I recall worrying over it when I was diagnosed with lupus. Probably my most significant wrestling with this question happened after my childhood best friend died at the age of 7 from leukemia—the impact of her life on mine is part of what ultimately allowed me to listen to God's call to ministry. This is a good question, but since I had worship planned out for the following several Sundays, I put the question in my bag, saving it until the lectionary presented me with a natural scriptural opportunity to address it. When I read this week's scriptures, I knew this was the moment.

The question of theodicy, that is, why an always good, all-powerful God allows evil and suffering in the world, is one that has plagued theologians throughout time. Many have

tried to provide a satisfactory answer to this question to varying degrees of success. How *do* we reconcile our understanding of a God who is *always* good and *all-powerful* with the existence of evil and suffering? How can God be all-loving and all powerful while children still die from cancer? While innocent lives are lost in war? While the world reckons with a global, deadly pandemic?

Friends of mine who are not Christian wonder how on earth we can believe in the God we worship. Using logic, they have said to me things like: either God is all loving, but not all powerful *or* God is all-powerful but not loving enough to prevent these issues. God cannot be all-loving and, at the same time, stand by as innocent life suffers in the wake of colossal, ever-present evil, right? So what do we, as Christians, do with this conflicting information?

Well, first we might look at the problem of evil and suffering. Why is there evil and suffering in the world? There are some who have blamed evil and suffering on the actions of the first man and woman (though historically the blame has been placed more heavily on the woman) in the second creation story told in Genesis. St. Augustine read Adam and Eve's disobedience and self-centeredness and subsequent expulsion from the Garden of Eden as the cause of what became known as "the fall" of humankind. Before Augustine, it was Tertullian who argued that we have inherited our sin from the first family and were or are doomed to reap the consequences unless we turn from a life of sin and toward a life with God. Others, like Origen of Alexandria (a personal favorite of mine), have argued that, following Adam's example, we make bad decisions sometimes and are drawn to sin, but a sinful state is not, necessarily, hereditary. More recently, in his *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis presented what has become known as "The Free Will Defense," arguing that God made humans with free will (otherwise why make them at all) and that they had the ability in any given situation to make the good (and Godly) decision or the bad (and evil) one. In other words, the bad stuff isn't God's fault, it's ours.

Before we go too far down the theological rabbit hole, I want to pull back and simply acknowledge that none of these explanations is likely to be satisfactory to someone who is in a state of abject suffering or caught in the consequences of evil perpetuated through systemic injustice and oppression. We suffer. Whether that's our fault or not, why doesn't an all-loving God step in to alleviate this suffering? Is God unable? Then God is not all-powerful. Is God unwilling? Then God cannot possibly be all-loving. You can see why this is problematic and why, for millennia, we have wrestled with these questions. So here again, I'll say: why do bad things happen to good people if God is all loving and all powerful? I don't know.

In my Master's thesis, I argued that "We sin when we act on the beliefs that contradict the Divine intent of harmonious existence with others, human, or otherwise. Evil is the result of these actions." I don't believe God creates or perpetuates evil. While some scripture stories tell us that God punishes people for their sins (Sodom and Gomorrah, anyone?), we must remember whenever we read scripture that we are reading the work of human beings doing their best to understand what was happening in the world around them. Like C.S. Lewis, I don't believe God makes bad things happen. I do believe that suffering and evil are the result of human action *and* human inaction. When we fail to do the work of justice and mercy, we are contributing to evil.

If we turn to our scriptures for this week, we find ourselves at the beginning of the book of Habakkuk. This book isn't one we usually spend much time in and it's hard to understand its broader meaning from just a few verses, so let's get into it a bit. The book begins with a lament: "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save?" Why, the prophet asks, are all these terrible things happening in the kingdom of Judah? Why is there so much injustice? Why are we suffering, God? The age-old question presented by the prophet seven centuries before God becomes incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. Lest we think we're the first to face these questions, I present to you the prophet Habakkuk.

Speaking on behalf of the broader community, Habakkuk says, “the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.” The words for “law” here can also mean moral teaching and the word for “slack” also means something that’s gone numb from cold. In other words: the leaders of Judah are making unjust decisions, which cannot give the people the moral teachings that they might live “rightly.” As a result, the community lives in a perpetual state of social injustice. The prophet here isn’t angry with God. He believes God’s people are responsible for the rank oppression and injustice they are subject to. Habakkuk’s cries are the cries of a faithful person who trusts in the Lord. Like Job before him and Jesus after, Habakkuk understands that lament is holy and that speaking that lament, crying out to God from the depths of despair or injustice, is a vital part of our spiritual health and our relationship with God. Remember how we talked about prayer being like a conversation God desires that we should have with God? Part of that communication with God is honesty, we cannot always go to God with praise and thanksgiving. Sometimes things are hard and injustice is all around us and all we can ask is, “How long, Lord?”

Habakkuk stands at his watchpost awaiting word from the Lord. How long, O Lord? How long? The Lord’s response to Habakkuk in our reading today is that justice is still coming. Habakkuk says, “the Lord answered me and said... there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.” God asks Habakkuk to remain faithful because the vision of justice is still on the way.

In the words of the smash hit musical Hamilton, God says, “Wait for it.” Habakkuk is forced to wait on that promise from God—but God is not expecting him to sit on his bottom and do nothing in the meantime. God calls for an active waiting. It is a waiting not unlike a child waits for the promise of presents and joy on their birthday—the waiting is the hard part. But the child doesn’t put away all their joy as they await big joy their birthday, instead, they find smaller joys to pass the time with until bigger joy comes. There is an active kind of waiting, and it’s exactly the kind of waiting we who struggle and suffer in the face of pain and injustice must do.

The book of Habakkuk ends this way:

“Though the fig tree does not blossom,  
and no fruit is on the vines;  
though the produce of the olive fails,  
and the fields yield no food;  
though the flock is cut off from the fold,  
and there is no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,  
I will exult in the God of my salvation.” (3:17-18)

It ends with a statement of what it means to be a person of faith in an all-loving, all-powerful God in the face of a world full of so much pain and suffering caused sometimes by abject evil: wait, actively, for the promise of God’s kingdom. What do I mean by “wait actively?” In another part of my master’s thesis, I wrote: “In a world of sin and evil, what is our responsibility as people of God? Where are people of faith complicit and how can we address any of these issues? Jesus of Nazareth lived, ministered, and taught on the front lines of injustice and inequity. Thus, it is my contention that the church, as the body of Christ in the world, is called to respond in kind.” In other words: we, the church, are called to wait actively. We are called to do justice and mercy in a world with so little of it.

SO often, too often, we get caught up in what I call “the tyranny of the shoulds,” what I mean by that is that we get so stuck on what should be that we fail to act on what is. The trouble with obsessing over what “should” be is that it can keep us in neutral all our lives rather than allowing us to move forward with what is. We already know what should be. We also know that we are human and have to deal with things as they are.

If God’s so good and all-powerful, why do bad things happen? Why do innocent people suffer? Why is there war and disease? If God is all the things we do believe God is, why doesn’t God intervene? I told you that I just don’t know. No one really, truly does. But

part of the problem, I think, is that we spend so much time ruminating on the world that should be that we forget to do what we can do working and dealing with the world as it is. We want to be omniscient and omnipotent as God is so that we can snap our fingers and make all the bad things go away. That's what God should do. God has given us the promise of the coming of a perfect kingdom, but God has asked us to wait. While we wait, God has told us what we should do through the incarnation in Jesus Christ. Waiting is hard. Like a child on their birthday, we want that promise now. We want an end to injustice NOW. I don't know why it feels God is delaying, but I do know that God put us here and gave us the example of Jesus because God wanted us to do more than just wait. God wanted us to wait actively in hope. To do justice now. To love mercifully now. To trust that God's kingdom will come, but in the meantime, we've got work to do. Even if I could explain to you why bad things happen, I'm not sure it would do much good because while you'd have an explanation, you'd still be suffering. The question isn't the point; it's what we do with this knowledge that matters.

Like Habakkuk, we are not alone in our struggles; God is with us in it. God comes to us in the midst of the worst the world has to offer. In today's gospel lesson, Zacchaeus climbs that tree in search of Jesus, but what is perhaps more important in this story is that Jesus looks right up into that tree to find him. We're so busy in our pain looking for God's answers to the question and, all the while, God is right there looking at us. We ask what God is doing, but we forget that there are many things we can do, too. The world should be different. 1 John tells us that God is love. We believe God is all-powerful. These bad things shouldn't be happening. Annie shouldn't have died at 7 of leukemia. A pandemic shouldn't be taking millions of lives. Children shouldn't be sent away from war-torn regions without their parents or suffer in the face of bombings and violence. The world is not as it should be. We know it and so does God. While we wait for justice, God comes to us to work with us, to teach us what it looks like to live rightly. We are free to lament, to cry out, and, at the same time, to remember that God and our community are right there with us in the struggle. We do not actively wait for justice alone and helpless. Together with God, we can do great things. That's good news. Amen.

