

Wrestling with Doubt, Finding Faith – 5. Why Do the Innocent Suffer?

Genesis 1:26-28

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Throughout these last several weeks, we've been *wrestling with doubt* and taking time to reflect on some of the big questions of faith. As we began this series, I reminded you that doubt is not a contradiction of faith — rather, having doubts and questions *can* be a sign of our faithful discernment as we follow Jesus. Part of *being human* includes wrestling with questions about our life, faith, and world. Because the world we live in is complicated and rarely offers clear non-refutable answers.

This morning, we'll be looking at one of the most common questions asked by people across many faiths, and by those who adhere to no faith system at all. That is: *why do the innocent suffer?*

It's impossible, I think, to avoid hearing about suffering in our world.

We're surrounded by news from Israel and Gaza, Ukraine and Russia, and many other places experiencing war and where access to food, water, and basic supplies is significantly limited. Close to home, more than 12% of children are experiencing poverty and with it, struggle for access to food, stable housing, and other opportunities. Emma Norton supports housing needs for over 250 people every day, helping move folks from homelessness into a stable home of their own.

And of course, there are the smaller - yet significant - ways that we experience suffering, from broken relationships or broken hearts. To devastating diagnosis and confrontations with our mortality. To the loss of a dream, or several. Or even small pains that seem ever persistent and never go away.

Considering the great needs of the people in our world, it is easy for all of us to wonder: *why?* Why do so many people, so many children, live daily amid war, scarcity, and fear? Why do some of us seem to have easy lives, and others never seem to catch a break?

As a pastor, I have - over these last 15 years - walked with hundred of people through the death of a loved one, through a terrible diagnosis, through job losses and through unexpected tragedy.

When my boys were very little, I cared for a family that mirrored my own in many ways. The Mom was about my age, and our children were all about the same age. That Mom was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer, and in just a few months went from the picture of health, to saying goodbye to her toddlers.

When I learned of her death, I sobbed. And I went home to my own children and hugged them long and hard. I prayed words that millions of us have prayed urgently, *Please God, keep my babies safe.*

In the days to come, I also witnessed as people from the community surrounded that family - as angels of God, to wrap them in love. Food was shared, a college fund was started, yard work was tended to, and so much more. But everyone felt profound sadness and grief, and in the air lingered the question: *why?*

Suffering and tragedy are a catalyst for doubt and questions for many people.

Today, I want to reflect on a few ways that I believe God does, and does not, operate in our world and daily lives. And share with you, how I have found — not a concrete answer to all of life's questions, but comfort and hope in the our loving God.

And so first, I want to address three *incorrect* notions about how God is in our world:

God does not say: God will protect us, if only we have faith.

When my kids are afraid, which happens regularly now as my youngest is experience fear of the dark, it is natural for me to sweep them into my arms and promise my protection. *Don't worry, I say, Mom's here and I will keep you safe.*

And I mean it, of course, because one of my strongest desires is to keep those I love safe from harm. So when I rock my tired, afraid boy and speak these words — I do so honestly. And yet while I'm confident in my ability to protect him from the dark bedroom... I know that I cannot protect him from all scary or harmful things in life.

Not only is that impossible, but also - to really experience the joys of life, there is always a bit of a risk of getting hurt (physically or emotionally). Still, I whisper these words as a prayer and blessings.

There is a beauty in the innocence of children to be wrapped in these promises. But one day, my little one will experience harm. Hopefully minor, but he will fall, he will get his heart broken, he will be hurt. And when that day comes, I hope that he doesn't blame me for failing to protect him, but instead, my recognize that my words of blessing in the darkness gave him courage to live.

I think of God's response to our pains a bit like this. Throughout scripture, we read words that illustrate ways that God protects us. One of my favorites is Psalm 91, of which the song, "On Eagles Wings" was based. Here we read:

Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. This I declare about the Lord: God alone is my refuge, my place of safety... For God will rescue you from every trap and protect you from deadly disease. God will cover you with God's feathers. God will shelter you with God's wings. God's faithful promises are your armor and protection.
— Psalm 91:1-4

These verses offer so much comfort, and when I read them I feel like a child held by a loving God. And that is their intention. These words, and others in scripture like them are written as an expression of God's love. A metaphor or hyperbole to illustrate for us how deep, and vast, and powerful God's love for us is.

Scripture is a love story, detailing God's great love for you, God's children. It is not a promise that nothing bad will ever happen, instead it is a promise that God will always be with you in the midst of the good, and the bad.

And so, while it can be tempting to believe that if our faith is "strong" or "good" enough we can avoid suffering — this is simply untrue. Having faith doesn't guarantee a life without suffering. But, as the story of Jesus - our Savior, Redeemer, and Perfector of faith shows us through his own life (with suffering) — that being people of faith means that we trust that suffering, and even death, never have the final word.

Alright, another notion about suffering and how God is at work in our world.

God does not say: Suffering is punishment for sin.

Across centuries, countries, and religions is a long held idea that suffering is a punishment for our sin or wrong doing. Many of these notions came from a time before we understood how the world, scientifically or medically, worked. Now, we understand that earthquakes or cancer have specific scientific beginnings, and are not caused by an angry God. Yet, it persists, I think, because we long for answers especially when we are in pain.

Now, there may be natural consequences to our sin and behavior. If I speed, I might get caught and handed a speeding ticket. When I say something unkind, I might hurt someone else, and have a chasm in a relationship to repair. But these natural consequences are not the same thing as God intervening to intentionally punish us.

But God does not cause the sufferings of our world. God is in the business of resurrection. Of redemption. Of healing and transformation. God does not desire us to experience pain and suffering.

Taking this one step further:

God does not say: Everything happens for a reason.

Probably all of us have heard this phrase, and many of us have said it. Because when we are in the middle of really painful moments of life, we want there to be a reason. And so we grasp for something, for *anything* to remove the ambiguity and pain.

Now, I know when we say such things, like “everything happens for a reason” — we have very good intentions. We intend to give hope. But usually, when things like this are said to someone experiencing suffering, it provides more *discomfort* than comfort.

And so, I want to invite you - gently - to remove these phrases from your lexicon. And instead, just be present. Tell them you love them, offer a hug or comfortable silence.

Because just as God does not cause suffering, God also does not tell us “everything happens for a reason,” or “it’s all part of God’s plan,” or it’s “according to God’s will”. Here’s the thing: God does not delight in suffering. God delights in restored relationships, joy and life. There are many things in our lives and world that are not “part of God’s plan.”

God did not plan for you to get cancer.

Or for your child to die. Or for your spouse to lose their memories.

God does not need “another angel” or have a grand plan that includes your pain.

Instead, God grieves with you, God cries alongside you. Instead, I believe God’s will, God’s greatest desire is that you know love and healing. That our world might be healed from our brokenness, and we might experience the fullness of God’s kingdom. God wants you, and our whole world, restored.

To that end, while God does not cause or delight in suffering — I believe God will bring forth good from it. The good won’t remove the existence or experience of your pain, and it isn’t to

minimize it either. But God will bring forth good. God will not leave you abandoned, but will walk with, comfort, and care for you.

The young Mom I mentioned earlier? Her spouse has spotted the goodness of God in his life in the time since — in the community that has stepped up to love his children, in the ways aunts and uncles make sure they remember their Mom, in the way that financial worries were decreased because of the generosity of others. These are slivers of goodness, signs of God's love. And, none of this erases their grief. None of this is "better" than the life they had before. But it does alleviate the suffering of their present.

So how then, *do* understand suffering?

There are two primary roots of suffering. The first is suffering that is caused by natural disasters, illness and accidents. These are things largely outside of our control.

Though this may lead us to other questions, such as: *why did God create a world — and people — who are susceptible to disaster and illness?* That might be a whole other message, but here is what I know: God created an earth and bodies that are incredible

The human brain generates electrical impulses that can travel up to 268 miles per hour, and our brain generates about 23 watts of power — that's enough to power a light bulb!¹ When we experience typical injuries and illnesses, our bodies can heal themselves. And even while modern medicine supports this crucial work, our bodies are incredible, active partners in the process.

And our planet? It works together to give us oxygen and vegetation, to provide resources to build skyscrapers and power engines. Our earth can sustain life, holding us in its care.

And still, sometimes our earth and bodies cause disasters or injury or illness. God did not create us to be infallible, neither in our bodies or our earth. Yet, God *did* create us and call us God's good and beloved masterpiece.

And so I don't blame God when disasters strike, or our bodies fail us — because I know that God has not caused these things to happen.

Remember, when people came to Jesus because they were sick, Jesus did not say, "I'm sorry for what's happening, but it's part of God's plan. Instead, Jesus pulled them in, comforted, and healed them. This is the response of God to our suffering: coming alongside us in comfort and love.

Now the second root of suffering in our world are those caused by human activity. That is - individual and collective actions that cause harm and suffering upon us and others. Throughout human history, we have caused a great deal of suffering on one another, and on our earth. We have treated each other poorly, we have robbed one another of worth and respect, we have caused active and intentional harm because of our fears and misunderstandings.

And when this happens, we are to turn to Jesus again, to seek healing and reconciliation of our ways. And just as Jesus brought healing to those who came to him throughout the Gospels, so too — do I believe, that Jesus will continue to be at work in our lives today.

So while humans are the cause of much suffering in our world — we also have the ability to find another way, and make things better. Let's look to our reading from Genesis 1, and listen here as I offer - what I think - are some words of hope:

Then God said, "Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth." - Genesis 1

In the beginning, when God created and set the whole universe in motion — God made you with a purpose. You have been made in the image of God, and created to care for all of God's creation. For the fish, the birds, the livestock... for nature and the earth itself, and for the rest of humanity.

God made you to be the image and likeness of God on earth.
And I happen to think this is pretty incredible.
God has called each of us to do all we can to love and alleviate the suffering of others.

This means, caring and loving God's earth, doing our part to support its health for generations to come. This means, caring and loving God's creatures - all the animals of land, sea, and sky. And as we see, or learn of ways we are causing suffering to our earth, or any creature who lives upon it, we do what we can to stop.

And this means caring and loving for God's children — those who are in our immediate circle, those who live around us, those who might be a trickier to love. And those who live in communities far away, for whom we haven't met. God calls us to act and speak in love — and when we see suffering, or have caused suffering, to do our part to bring forth healing.

This is the purpose God gave us at creation. It's our life's directive. To know ourselves as made in God's image, and to tenderly care for all that God has made.

And if that wasn't enough, God gave us Jesus as a living, breathing example of what God-in-flesh looks like. In Christ, we have the ultimate response to the sufferings of our world. Because in Jesus, we see that God will not let *anything* separate us, or *anything* stand in the way of God desiring us to know we are loved, we are redeemed, and we belong.

And yes, even though there is much suffering in our world — God promises us that through it all, we are not alone. And that love, not sorrow or pain, will always have the final say.

Let us pray,

Good, good, God thank you for wrapping us in your tender care today. Thank you for holding us as we ask hard and vulnerable questions. Thank you for walking with us amid our doubts. As we wrestle today with the presence of suffering in our lives and world — we seek your wisdom. Give us comfort and hope. Make us a people who alleviate the suffering of others, and care for your lovingly created world. Most of us all, let us find ourselves wrapped ever in your care, knowing that you are with us. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of February 4, 2024

Weekly Prayer

Good morning, God. This is the day that you have made, let me rejoice and be glad in it. Help

me to grow in love of you today. Send your Spirit upon me and bless me. Open my heart to your presence. Heal and forgive my brokenness. Lift any despair or doubt and encourage me by your grace. Amen.

Monday, February 5

Scripture: Genesis 1:26-28

Then God said, "Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth."

God created humanity in God's own image,
in the divine image God created them,
male and female God created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground."

Observation

As scripture begins, God creates our world. There are two accounts of creation in Genesis, but today we read how God created humanity. "Let us make humanity in our image," God begins – declaring already that all of humanity have been made in the image and likeness of God. That little "our" reminds me that we have been made in the likeness of all of God's forms: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. But in our creating, God also tells us *why* we have been made: "so that they may take charge of... all the earth."

Application

God has made you with purpose! You have been made to reflect the One who has not only made the earth, but who redeems, cares, and nurtures all life. Your greatest "family trait" is that you reflect God. And your purpose is to care for the earth: its people, animals, and environment. How do you suppose God hoped this would look? In what ways have we found our purpose? In what ways have we strayed? How might God be calling you, today, to tend and care for God's masterpiece?

Prayer

Good and loving God, thank you for making me in your image and inviting me to care for your beautiful earth. Keep me mindful of the purpose you've given me, that my words and actions are aligned with reflecting your image into the world. Amen.

Tuesday, February 6

Scripture: Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd.

I lack nothing.

He lets me rest in grassy meadows;

he leads me to restful waters;

he keeps me alive.

He guides me in proper paths

for the sake of his good name.

Even when I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no danger because you are with me.

Your rod and your staff—

they protect me.

You set a table for me
right in front of my enemies.
You bathe my head in oil;
my cup is so full it spills over!
Yes, goodness and faithful love
will pursue me all the days of my life,
and I will live in the LORD's house
as long as I live.

Observation

One of the biggest questions of faith is “why do bad things happen to good people?” It’s a question that arises because we want *good* things to happen when we are good. At its core, I think, we simply want to be able to control and avoid suffering. And yet, we all know that just as the rain falls on areas of drought and flood – so too, do struggles find their way to us all. The real question then, might be: “how do we remain faithful amid suffering?”

Application

Scripture is filled with stories of good, faithful people who experienced suffering. We could look to the story of Joseph (Genesis 37), Job, Ruth, or many others for examples of people of God who suffered great loss and tragedy *and* found hope. One of my favorite reminders of God’s presence is Psalm 23. This Psalm gives an image of a long journey. At its center, it declares “Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger because you are with me” (23:4). Not only do the words remind us of God’s presence, but the poem is written carefully, so the very center words are these: *you are with me*. In Hebrew, the language in which this was written, there are exactly the same number of words before and after. Even in its shape, the psalm reminds us: in the middle of it all, you are not alone.

Prayer

Shepherding God, as you guide me throughout life – toward water and banquets, amid valleys and shadows, remind me that you are near. Draw me close and keep me near. Amen.

Wednesday, February 7

Scripture: Psalm 13

How long will you forget me, Lord? Forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long will I be left to my own wits,
agony filling my heart? Daily?
How long will my enemy keep defeating me?
Look at me!
Answer me, Lord my God!
Restore sight to my eyes!
Otherwise, I’ll sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, “I won!”
My foes will rejoice over my downfall.
But I have trusted in your faithful love.
My heart will rejoice in your salvation.
Yes, I will sing to the Lord
because he has been good to me.

Observation

It was (and is) possible to trust God even when hurting. Psalm 13 was one of about 50 “laments,” poetic expressions of sadness, pain, and disappointment. At the end, it expressed continued faith: “I have trusted in your faithful love.”

Application

When have you felt the pain and frustration reflected in the psalmist’s opening question: “How long will you forget me, Lord? Forever?” The Hebrew phrase about God “hiding his face” meant it felt as if God had withdrawn divine favor. Are there ways in which you are waiting for God today? What choices can help you sustain patience and trust in God’s unfailing love as you wait?

Prayer

Lord God, whether I’ve been brave enough to say it aloud or not, you know at times my heart asks, “How long?” I thank you that your faithful love is always with me. I never have to wait for that. Amen.

Thursday, February 8

Scripture: Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we have been made righteous through his faithfulness, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God’s glory. But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. This hope doesn’t put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Observation

Some challenges are minor; others test every fiber of our being. In our reading, Paul reminds us that even through challenges, in God we are given tools to meet all of life with hope.

Application

Romans 5 details a cycle that follows sufferings, including endurance, character, and hope. When has God’s love been “poured out” in your heart? How can you open your heart to let God fill you with hope?

Prayer

God, keep teaching me to see life your way, to value the flexibility and trust you can grow in me during tough times. Amen.

Friday, February 9

Scripture: Acts 14:19-22

Jews from Antioch and Iconium arrived and won the crowds over. They stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing he was dead. When the disciples surrounded him, he got up and entered the city again. The following day he left with Barnabas for Derbe. Paul and Barnabas proclaimed the good news to the people in Derbe and made many disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, where they strengthened the disciples and urged them to remain firm in the faith. They told them, “If we are to enter God’s kingdom, we must pass through many troubles.”

Observation

Our reading opens dramatically as a crowd who thought they had killed Paul with stones had dumped his body outside the town of Lystra. This helps us understand Paul's words when he says, honestly and reflectively: "If we are to enter God's kingdom, we must pass through many troubles."

Application

Following God means causing (to borrow from John Lewis) "good trouble." We hear it in Paul's story and throughout the life of Jesus. Paul gives us an example, not only of "good trouble," but of remaining faithful to God even when things are not easy. What is God calling you to do today that might cause some "good trouble"?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you sent Paul through unfamiliar, hostile territory. Often you just ask me to be a good neighbor, or to be your presence in my workplace or school. Give me courage to do whatever you ask. Amen.

Saturday, February 10**Scripture: John 16:32-33**

Look! A time is coming—and is here!—when each of you will be scattered to your own homes and you will leave me alone. I'm not really alone, for the Father is with me. I've said these things to you so that you will have peace in me. In the world you have distress. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world."

Observation

John wrote that, on the night before he went to the cross, Jesus plainly told his followers, "In the world you have distress. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world." Jesus promises us a life that is filled with God's love and hope. Jesus promises us a whole and lasting, fully redeemed life. But never did Jesus say it would be easy.

Application

When I read these verses, I am comforted because I am reminded that Jesus – who is God in flesh – has experienced it all. He has known grief and fear, worry and death. It feels comforting to me that our God chose to experience human life, so that we can be fully known by God. How do these words greet you today: "be encouraged because I have conquered the world"? May they bring you peace.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for taking on flesh and living among us. Thank you for making me a resurrected person. Bring me comfort and encouragement when life is difficult. Help me to find strength in you. Amen.