

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“The Problem of Evil”
Hebrews 7:23-28
Job 42:7-11**

**Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 11, 2018**

Hebrews 7:23-28

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

Job 42:7-11

After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the Lord had told them, and the Lord accepted Job’s prayer.

And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends. And the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. Then came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and ate bread with him in his house. And they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him. And each of them gave him a piece of money and a ring of gold.

“The Problem of Evil”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It happened again this week. A crazed gunman opened fire on hundreds of people at the Borderline Bar & Grill in California. Eleven patrons, one sheriff’s sergeant, and the gunman himself are now dead. I was weary about preaching on Job this morning, but it seems divine providence has other plans. Actually, that’s where the conversation gets difficult. It’s not uncommon to hear, “Where is God’s divine plan in all of this? Where is God in the face of evil?” Without a right understanding we’re quick to cast blame. Blame on God. Blame on policies. Blame on upbringing. In our minds, we need to put a face on evil—whether manmade or natural—so then we can judge it.

God has not revealed to us a full and final answer to the problem of evil. There's a lot about him and his thinking that remains a mystery to us. Many of which will always remain unknowable, so long as we live on this earth. What surprises some people is that God does reveal to us some things. He is not entirely silent on issues, especially the problem of evil. Scripture provides to us the answer to the question, "How could a good God allow such things to happen?" The harder question to answer, and the bottom line question, is are we willing to accept God's answers? Because God is not going to conform to our desires of him.

There are two wrong answers to the "how could" question. The first wrong answer is, "God is not in control." We see throughout Scripture that our God is not a distant, disinterested deity. There's a common but false image of God as a divine watchmaker. He creates this elaborate, unique, and complex world, winds it up, and just lets it go. That is not the God of the Bible nor the God that we worship. In Matthew 10:29, Jesus speaks of sparrows being sold for a penny, meaning sparrows are overly abundant and their market value is severely deflated. Well, he says, "not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father." If God has sovereign control over thousands of tiny sparrows, how much more does he oversee the lives of men?

If God is in control, then the second wrong answer is, "God is evil." God is holy. God is good. God is pure. These axioms are enumerated in Scripture. I John 1:5, "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." James 1:17, in the Father of lights, "there is no variation or shadow due to change." James 1:13, "God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one."

To say that God is evil or can produce evil is blasphemy. There are things that God cannot do, because of his nature, and evil is one of those things. Evil is also not an illusion. Some religions and false branches of Christianity teach that evil is unreal, a figment of the mind. The reality is, the Bible never minimizes evil and pain. Rather, Scripture shows us people who responded to evil by rending their garments, offering lamentations, and crying very real tears.

To answer this difficult question correctly, we need to have the right focus, otherwise the answers we seek will be off base. We know that God created the world and when he did, he declared everything good. Things turned with the Fall, but God didn't make a mistake and neither did Adam and Eve mess up God's creation. Paul reminds Timothy that "God saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, *which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.*"¹ Christ is the lens through which we need to see everything about our world and about God. His intention at creation was not to create a perfect world that Man would then pollute. No, his intention since the beginning was a redemption climaxing in Jesus Christ. And we cannot have redemption unless there is something to be redeemed from. Whether we like it or not, the world is the way it is because God ordained that Adam and Eve be permitted to sin.

Remember, God is not evil. While he does not orchestrate violence, in his sovereignty he permits it to happen. There is no way that we can ever know *from God's perspective* why a particular evil occurs. We don't know why God allowed the Holocaust to happen. We don't know why God

allowed 9/11 to happen. Or the Titanic. Or the Rwandan Genocide. Or Apartheid. We know that God does not orchestrate evil, but we many never know why he allows it to happen. What we do know and what we can do is grieve at tragedy, comfort those who mourn, and, if possible, seek after ways of preserving life. Because we lack God's point of view, we cannot make easy conclusions between a person's sin and the evil that he commits. Now, courts of law have the authority to condemn such violence, but the court of Christian opinion must always be focused on God alone. Job's cry that "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord"² is not a superficial display of piety nor a denial of pain. Rather, I imagine Job biting his lip and clenching his gut as he remained faithful in the midst of tragedy. Job knew who God was, he refused to curse him, and he never denied his own suffering.

When we are rightly focused on God, we begin to see that calamities exist in this world because God subjected the world to futility. The Apostle Paul says so in Romans 8:20-21, "Creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." Terrible things are in this world because this world is subject to futility. Suffering is here only because sin has marred God's creation. Remember total depravity? Horrible evils are in this world because they are parable of the moral evil that so deeply permeates this planet. Bad things happen because we live in an imperfect world.

Bad things happen to Christians because we live in an imperfect world and also because no treasure compares to Christ Jesus. In our passage from Job, we see God telling Job's companions to pray that he will not deal with them according to their folly. They tried to convince Job to forsake God's goodness, but he would not, because he knew that no treasure on earth, no earthly comfort, could compare to God's presence. In Job's case, because of his faithfulness, God rewarded him in his lifetime. This may not always be the case for us. However, the Christian knows that her true recompense awaits her in heaven.

Actually, this is why the world exists as it does, because our true and permanent dwelling place is in heaven. Evil exists in this world so that the Son of God could suffer and die for our sins, that we may have eternal union in heaven. We often think that God responded to this fallen and sinful world by bringing a redeemer to her shores. But that is not the true order of redemption. Since the foundations of this world, God ordained that his grace would flow upon this place through the cross of Christ. Because of that foreordained work, the state of this world is actually the stage set for Christ to reveal the glory of God's grace. Trouble is in this world so that Christ might be troubled. As we share in Christ's victory over death, so, too, do we share in his suffering unto death. There could be no Suffering Servant, no slain Lamb, had there been no sin, no fall, and no misery.

The deepest answer to terrorism, calamity, conflict, misery, cancer, and death is the suffering and death of the Son of God. He entered our fallen world, bore in himself the cause of it all, and through his death bought the cure of it all: forgiveness and everlasting joy in the age to come. Evil exists in this world to make plain the horrors of sin and the wonders of Christ, but we are

not to ascribe to evil powers it does not have. We cannot deny evil but neither do we regard it more powerful than God. Scripture's final word on evil is God's triumphant victory. Creation groans as it awaits its final redemption, which means we cannot be passive in the face of evil. Some argue that because God is sovereign over evil that we need to let it run rampant. No! Where there is sin, we must confront it. Where there is evil, we must decry it. Where there is heartache, we must comfort it. We do not have the power to stop evil. No amount of legislation, no warring can ever bring an end to evil. The only "war to end all wars" is the battle laid out in Revelation. But in the here and now, we do have the power and the call to speak out against it and to remind people that over all of creation stands the resurrected Christ, triumphant over the powers of evil and commanding us to stand firm in imitation of his peace.

Let us pray. Holy and Mysterious God, you are both approachable and beyond reach, accessible and unknowable. What we know about you is revealed to us in Scripture. Forgive us for the times we distort or deny your self-revelation. Open our eyes to see that you stand sovereign over all things, even evil and tragedy. Open our minds to understand that your sovereignty is mysterious yet total. Open our hands and feet to pray for those who mourn, protect those who are at risk, and persevere in peace and love. Through Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen.

¹ II Timothy 1:9

² Job 1:21