

## **February 14 – Taking Responsibility**

Scriptures: Genesis 1:27-28, Genesis 2:15-17, Genesis 3:1-7

Throughout Lent we are going to be examining a book by Adam Hamilton entitled. “Why? Making Sense of God’s Will.” I am hoping that many of you will take advantage of the small groups that will meet to discuss it during these upcoming weeks. Hamilton packed so much into his first chapter that I felt the need to split it into two sermons. This week we will look at three foundational ideas. We need to understand them if we are to make any sense of the rest of this book. Next week we will take a beginning look at the idea of God’s will and human suffering.

We struggle with the idea of suffering and the will of God. The problem is often stated this way: “If God is loving and just then God must not be all powerful. Or, if God is all powerful, God must not be loving and just. For if God were all-powerful and loving and just, then God would stop the evil, pain, and suffering in our world.”

The problem comes from our assumptions about how God is supposed to work in our world. When God does not meet our expectations, we are disappointed, disillusioned and confused. Here are the two assumptions that give us the biggest problem:

Assumption One: If I believe in God and try to be a good person, God will take care of me and bless me. Nothing bad should happen to me. It sounds good but then whenever something bad happens we believe God is punishing us for some misdeed. Since none of us are perfect we know there are things for which we could be punished and so we begin to ask, “Does the punishment fit the crime?” Usually the answer is no. So then it seems God is harsh, unfair, or doesn’t keep God’s part of the bargain. Yet, when you read the Bible there are story after story of good and faithful people running into difficulties. These are not perfect people but the punishment doesn’t fit the crime. Joseph is a braggart and gets sold into slavery. The people of Israel are afraid to cross the Jordan and spend 40 years in the wilderness. Moses strikes a rock and can’t go into the Promised Land. And who can’t help but think of Job who suffers so much because God and the Tempter get into a theological discussion regarding faithfulness and

reward. And the list goes on and on. The Bible does not confirm this assumption but it feels so right that we hold onto it. We want to believe that we should have some reward for our faithfulness, some protection and when it doesn't occur we blame God.

Assumption Two: everything happens for a reason. God has a plan. We can't see that plan but somehow the suffering you are going through is purposeful and God has a good reason for it. Just trust God. This sounds pious and logical, at first. But when you begin to explore the implications everything breaks down and we get angry. If what we are experiencing is part of God's plan for our life then God actually caused it to happen. This makes God the cause of our pain and suffering! Do we really believe this? Think of the people murdered because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, or the people who die because they were again at the wrong place when a natural disaster happened. Do we really think God purposefully made them be there so they could die this horrible death in hopes that some family member might gain a lesson? That would make God into a monster.

You might have other assumptions about the will of God but for today let us move on to the three foundational ideas of Hamilton that let us square the realities of living, with joy and pain, and the understanding that God loves us.

One: *God Places Humanity in Charge of the Earth*. We live in a scientific age that tries to explain creation. Two such scientific explanations are the big bang theory and quantum physics. But we believe that before the big bang there was God, the creator at work. Creation is God's vision and God calls it good. We also believe that we have been placed in charge. We sometimes wonder if it was smart for God to tell us to subdue the earth and have dominion over all life. We have done a really good job of subduing, to our detriment at times. We are only now grasping that we are part of a web of life that includes all living things and so having dominion over it, instead of being in partnership, is not such a good idea. But taking the scripture for what it is, did God say you are in charge and then step back and see what happens? Or did God give us some help?

We know the answer to that question. God gave us intellect, a soul, and a conscience to help us know right from wrong. We were given the laws and the prophets to guide us. When that was not enough God sent Jesus to teach us.

If we are in charge we are also responsible. God's primary way of ruling and acting on our planet is through people. When God wants something done in the world, God calls people to do it. So some of the evil, darkness, troubles, we face in living is because we have not done what we should do or responded in the ways God asks. We cannot blame God for our lack of responsibility.

A second foundation is: *To Be Human is to be Free*. We take the concept of freedom very seriously. We are willing to fight and, yes, even die to protect it. This concept of freedom is in the very beginning of the Bible as we heard. God places Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it, but the Lord also commanded them to not eat of the tree of good and evil. Have you ever wondered why, knowing that Adam and Eve would eat of the tree, God put the tree there to begin with? God could have left the tree out of the garden and Adam and Eve would never have disobeyed. The tree represents the freedom that God gives us to choose to follow God. We do not act on instinct like an animal. The ability to think and reason and choose is an essential part of being human. We need to celebrate this gift but also realize the difficulties. This leads us to our last foundational idea.

*We have a Predisposition to Stray from God's Path*. Here is where the word sin enters into the conversation. Sin means to stray from the path. Hamilton writes: "What I love about the story of Adam and Eve is that it so powerfully captures what happens in my life on a nearly daily basis. I hear the serpent beckoning me to do what I know I should not do or convincing me that it's okay not to do what I should do. I have to decide each day, often many times in a day, whether I will follow God's way or the path of the serpent."

Think again about these foundational ideas. We are in charge, we have the power to make decisions and sometimes we make poor decisions. What if we were to look at these ideas in the realm of business? There is a man who owns a franchise restaurant. The chain is very profitable. This man makes a lot of bad business decisions. The corporate folk try to steer him into more positive patterns but he continues doing what he does and finally the store closes, the owner is bankrupt and the employees are thrown out of work. Would it make sense for these employees to blame the corporate people for losing their job? No. It is the owner's poor choices. Now,

put this idea back into the bigger realm of life. People make poor choices, they cause us pain and suffering. We blame God. Not really fair, is it.

Again you are probably thinking about all the things where this logic doesn't fit and we will address them over the weeks to come. But for today think about where it applies: wars, terrorism, crime, poverty, lack of health care.... These problems are all in our realm of free choice being used poorly. Instead of blaming God we need to take ownership of the problem and see what we can do to fix it.

There are consequences to poor behavior. We just want to blame instead of being an agent of change. For change costs us money, resources, time and so much more.

Next week we will look at those other issues, sickness, disasters and such, and see how these foundational ideas help us to understand how we worship a loving God even when life is challenging.