

## **February 21 – God’s Providence and Human Suffering?**

### God and Suffering

Romans 8:18-30

Let me remind you of the three foundational ideas that were at the center of my sermon last week. They are that: God has placed us in charge, we have freedom of choice, and sometimes we choose badly. With those ideas in mind we will look at where God is in the midst of suffering caused by: natural disasters, human decisions, and sickness.

Beginning with natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes, Adam Hamilton reminds us that we live on a dramatic ever changing earth. Without the movement of continental plates our land would not be renewed. It also keeps our molten core from overheating. Likewise without hurricanes or monsoons the moisture crops need would not happen. Stepping back and examining our earth from a scientific point of view we can see how the dynamic forces of plate tectonics and the active weather forces that lead to monsoons and tornados and even droughts are necessary for life as we know it. On a theoretical level we can even call it good.

When people enter the equation then our thinking shifts. Earthquakes disrupt lives, cause tsunamis and sometimes incredible loss of life. Hurricanes that can bring needed rain also can cause flooding, tornados, destruction and death. It is then we question, “Where is God?” We wonder why God doesn’t step in and prevent a particular natural disaster from happening. We no longer think about these forces as good and creative. They are evil and destructive and it is up to God to stop them, if God is loving, or so the logic goes. We want this even if doing so would destroy life as we know it! Somehow we have to come to terms with the idea that God is with us, loves us, and cares about us, and God allows things like earthquakes to happen because of the ultimate positive regenerative forces behind them. It is a conundrum we must hold in tension.

Hamilton also goes on to talk about how natural disasters affect the poor much more than the rich. You have been hearing me talk about the work that Clallam County

is doing to get ready for the big earthquake to come. We do not know when it will come but we are sure it will happen, because we understand the dynamic edge of the plate we sit on is ready to move! We are doing things to get ready so that loss of life and disruption of life will be as minimal as possible. This is all a good thing. But these are the activities of a wealthy and informed population. We see what preparedness does in Taiwan. They just had a significant earthquake with little loss of life because of the planning they have done. Haiti, that suffered a disastrous earthquake with a high loss of life and property, did not do these things. It wasn't because they did not know about the earthquake fault near them. They did not have the resources to plan, to retrofit buildings, or to move people away from danger areas. We see God present in how the world community came together to help them after the disaster. Hamilton asks, "Is God not asking us to be aware and compassionate and help them before such a time?"

God is asking us to use our intellect to be as safe as we can, knowing we live on a dynamic planet, not like Mars where things on the surface have not changed in millions of years. We should not blame God for these events. But God is also asking us to use our compassion to help others right now before there is a need.

The second category is the suffering caused by human decisions. There are two categories of decisions. There are first of all those decisions that we make that end up causing suffering for us and/or for our loved ones. The list of these kinds of decisions is long. Some of the decisions can be labeled minor lapses in judgement to monstrously evil. The tendency is for us to blame others and sometimes God for the consequences of our or other's poor choices. I recall talking with a man who was so angry with God for allowing his marriage to be destroyed. He was alone, only rarely saw his child and was struggling to keep his head above water financially because of child support payments. He said several times, "Why did God let this happen?" I knew his story so I asked him what part had his choices played into the destruction of his marriage. He was silent for a bit before acknowledging a fact we both knew that he had been unfaithful. He went on to say, "But she should have forgiven me!" What part did God have to play in this mess? None. Bad choices were made, the consequences were devastating and instead of

blaming himself he wanted to blame God. We find it hard to accept the consequences of our own bad decisions.

The harder issue to deal with is where we suffer because of another's poor choices. Six million Jews died and millions more suffered catastrophically because of Hitler's poor choices. Families are ripped apart because a person drinks and drives and gets in a wreck killing their loved one. We are struggling as a nation with the question of institutional racism that affects life in so many ways for people of color. When we are the victim of another's poor choice we often yell at God. "Why didn't God do something about it?" Yet, we proclaim the goodness of freedom and choice. It is a gift, but it is misused.

When this happens we have to see how God is present in the midst of the suffering. God sends loving people to support the families who have experienced loss because of other's choices so they do not have to walk that journey alone. God uses the indignation of people to institute change. Europe has been profoundly changed by the holocaust. Many realize that it would not have happened without the complicity of many. They now work harder than we do to embrace tolerance of all because they never want to see something like this happen again. It is a struggle right now with the influx of migrants and the reality of terrorism but still you hear, never again. So God does not force us to make good choices. This means that sometimes the choices we make cause others to suffer or we suffer because of our decisions. But God does not give up on us. God loves us and asks us to work on healing the wounds. Instead of blaming God we need to be agents of reconciliation and even more, work against those things that are the seedbeds for growing hate, racism and the like.

Finally, we come to the big one, at least that is my experience. Where is God in the midst of suffering caused by sickness? When we or a loved one gets sick we often ask, "Why GOD?" We blame God for the sickness and in so doing we can become angry, disenchanted with God and even turn our backs on God. Hamilton reminds us that God is in the business of healing not of sickness. Jesus spent a major part of his ministry healing the sick. To blame God for causing the illness just isn't right. Our bodies are remarkable. As the Psalmist says, "We are fearfully and wonderfully made." I had a

doctor friend who one time told me, "It is no problem understanding why we get sick and die. There are so many things that can go wrong in our bodies. What is amazing is that we spend most of our lives feeling well and healthy. Even more, when we get sick we often get better sometimes without the help of a doctor." Yet the truth is that we do age, we will get sick, and we will die. You can exercise all you want, take every vitamin there is and eat only what is best. You will still die. Those choices may help you to live longer and to live with better health and vitality but it will not eliminate the ultimate end reality. We celebrate death when a person has lived a long and productive life. We often talk about how they are now freed from pain and diminishment. We are less likely to celebrate death when it happens to a young person. We scream at God for how unfair it is that this person got cancer at an early age and died. We want to blame God for not healing the person. Yes it may be unfair when a young one dies but the same forces that will bring us to our dying are at work no matter what the age. I had a church member who was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. She knew she had only a few months. While some might have railed at God about the unfairness, not her. Instead of asking "Why me God?" she stated, "Why not me?" She understood that life happens. She did not blame God but instead celebrated all the ways God was at work in her life through friends and family providing love, care and support.

We live in a time where doctors have a hard time admitting that we will die. They always want to propose one more pill, one more surgery, one more test. We are in a fix it mentality when it comes to health care. Because of that we sometimes make choices that give us short term gains in length of days but at the cost of long term suffering. We get angry when there is no more pills to take or surgeries offered. We blame the doctors and God. Instead of celebrating all the years of health and how well things worked, we focus on the moment of diminishment, a time that all of us will face. We turn from God instead of turning to God.

When, in the face of suffering we blame God as the cause of the pain we turn away from the one source that can help us. We need to see that God is with us. Life is good. God is good, and suffering, unfortunately, comes because of our choices, our world, and our life.