

“Why Do Terrible Things Happen?”

Rev. Carol Howard Merritt

Bridge Pastor

First Presbyterian Church

New Canaan, CT 06840

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Text: John 9:1-41

I was at a wedding reception, enjoying my tossed salad, until it became obvious that the wedding party had sat me next to the most obnoxious family member. This man could not wait to corner me and tell me how he did not believe in God. He thought my whole profession was a joke, and anyone who had a half of a brain cell would not do what I do. And my God was just about as convincing as a big spaghetti monster in the sky.

I smiled, nodded, and chewed on my lettuce. Sometimes this can be an interesting conversation, if there's mutual respect between the two parties. But I had the feeling that this man had spent too much time at the bar and on Reddit for the conversation to get anywhere, so I just kept listening.

My husband, Brian, has a pat answer for people who feel the need to go into this diatribe every time they meet a clergy person. He simply looks at them and says, “Oh, I'm sorry. You must have mistaken me for someone who cares.” And then he walks off.

But I was stuck there for two more courses. He ordered more drinks from the cash bar and then vacillated from explaining how religion was evil to how it was just plain silly. Then there was the kicker, the argument that went to the heart of the matter—***If there was a God, then why do terrible things happen?***

The fascinating thing about people in these situations is that they actually believe that I haven't thought about these things. That I don't doubt. But in order to believe deeply, there will be doubt. Faith and doubt are two sides of one coin. And if a person been a pastor for more than 15 days, they have certainly had someone ask them, “If God exists then why do children go hungry? Why does cancer ravage so many lives? Why do tornadoes destroy communities?” And I think in this week, we should be asking, “If God exists, then why is this Corona Virus ripping through countries and communities? Why is it killing our most vulnerable people? If God exists, how could such cruel and senseless deaths happen?”

In our passage today, the disciples are also asking about the connection between God and hardship. They see a blind man and ask Jesus what made him blind, was it his sin? Or was it the sin of his parents? They are asking “why” questions about the origin of suffering.

The disciples were working under the assumption that terrible things happened for a reason, because of some sort of wrongdoing. That God was punishing the person. And since the man was born blind, it confused them. The logic no longer worked. He couldn't have sinned in his mother's womb. So did his parents sin?

Jesus said that the blindness was not due to sin. And then spit on the ground, picked up the mud, put the mud into the man's eyes, and healed him. As Jesus heals the man, I believe he is shifting the focus of our suffering. He is moving from the "why" questions of origin to the "why" questions of result. In other words, Jesus is showing us that there may be no reason for the origin of suffering, but there might be things that we can learn from it. And in this story, Jesus is showing us that we should have compassion in suffering.

It was a common thought in ancient societies—that God punishes us for things that we do wrong through sickness or tragedy. And, unfortunately, it still lingers. I was attending a fundamentalist college when the AIDS crisis hit, and one of the reasons I fled that movement was because of all the horrible, homophobic things I heard from the Baptist church that linked AIDS and same-sex relationships. I could not believe in such a cruel God. I had to change.

Then I was interviewed on a podcast this week, and the interviewer asked what we should do when conservative Christian family members say that this coronavirus is God's judgment. The interviewer was dealing with this problem. And I just wanted to beat my head against the wall and say, "If you think that God wants people to suffer like this, then you need a better God! We would never want this for our children or family members, and our love is finite. God's love is infinite." I didn't bang my head against the wall. I said what Jesus is communicating in this passage—terrible things do not happen because God is judging us. God is not the cause of our suffering. God is the comfort in our suffering and God longs to heal us.

Because when Jesus saw the blind man, he did not judge him. Jesus took the clay from the ground, he spit on it, and he healed him.

I believe there is a reason why people have linked suffering to God's judgment. It's because we long to have some meaning in our heartache. And it's the job of religion to keep asking, "Why is there suffering? Why do terrible things happen?" There's a term for this question in religion—it's called "theodicy." And as we are wrestling with a pandemic that is breathing down our necks, we are left asking all of these questions. We want to know that our suffering is not in vain, that it has some meaning. But, I would urge us, if it is possible, to move from the "why" questions of origin and concentrate on the "why" questions of result.

As many of you know, I am writing a devotional on Julian of Norwich. So I have been immersed in her writings and thought for months. And she keeps popping back up in my sermons because I think she has much to teach us about suffering. She was a medieval mystic who wrote during the black plague. She almost died, she was given last rights, but then she survived and wrote down the visions that she saw through that experience.

One of the main questions she wrestled with was "why do we suffer?" But her "Why?" is not a question of origin. She is not asking if suffering comes from God's vengeance, anger, or judgment. Instead, Julian sees God as our mother, who surrounds us and embraces us. Instead, Julian asks the "why" of result. She wants to know if our suffering can have meaning in its outcome. What do we learn from it? **Julian says that suffering gives us contrition, compassion and longing.**

In this moment, I understand contrition—the sense of guilt and remorse. Julian did not mean it in the sense that God is judging us and so we feel guilty. And neither do I. What it means is that when we face hardship, it compels us to make amends wherever possible. In the midst of crises, we become highly sensitive and aware of what is important. We can make sure that all of our relationships are in order—that we have asked for forgiveness, we have forgiven one another, and we are often more willing to make the changes that we need to make in our lives.

The second thing that suffering gives us is compassion. When I think of compassion, I'm reminded of a time when my father had just died and that pain of loss was so raw, I met another woman whose father had just died. We were at a party, on the beach in Florida. We ate dinner together, and through eat bite, I was so relieved to find someone who had been through the pain. Even though I had never met her before in my life, we suffered together. And I felt a deep connection with her. Her presence not only comforted me, but I could have compassion on her situation. I had also walked along that dark valley. I had been there too.

And I have been so proud of this congregation, who has shown compassion every step of the way during this crisis. People keep asking, "How can we help? What can we do?"

There is also a longing for God that might arise in this time. I know that I have spent more time praying. I pray for you all, I pray for wisdom in all of the everyday choices that we are making, from disinfecting the doorknobs to how to lead people through end of life when we cannot physically be there. I pray for guidance as we seek to serve our communities. I pray for patience for parents as they homeschool their kids. And I pray for disappointed college students who have to come home early from their dorms and their study-abroad programs. I pray for my friends who have been laid-off from their jobs this week. I pray for people who oversee stock portfolios and are trying to do everything within their power to protect retirement funds. I pray for people in our congregation who are at-risk. At every turn, I am feeling this absolute dependence on a wisdom that goes beyond my limited capacities. I pray for God's wisdom. I have that longing.

It is absolutely normal to ask "Why?" It makes complete sense. Even Jesus on the cross asked, "God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And at this moment in time, if your only prayer to God is, "Why?" then keep asking it. But we must reject the notion that this pandemic is happening because of God's judgment. The only role that God has in our suffering is that God is suffering with us. And if history has taught us anything, it is that pain is unavoidable--large-scale and small-scale suffering. It rains on the just and the unjust. If we live and we love, we cannot avoid pain. And watching the numbers rise this week, we feel the loss. Because those are not numbers. They are lives. Those are families.

As you go out, in the days ahead, you will feel all kinds of emotions. There will be rage, and frustration. There will be sorrow and loss. There will be heart ache. I want you to feel every emotion that you can. And if you need to direct those emotions toward God, then do it! God can take it! And we have every right to ask God "why?" at this moment. And I also hope that the question of "why" can awaken us to those things that result from suffering—contrition, compassion, and longing.

To the glory of God our Creator, God our Liberator, and God our Nurturer. Amen.