



The World Is a Mess. Why Doesn't God Do Something?

TEXT
Matthew 13:24–30
Habakkuk 1:1–4

January 27, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In a few weeks, Village will mark the 70th anniversary of this congregation. The founding pastor, Dr. Bob Meneilly, was fond of saying, “Be of good cheer.” I don’t know anyone else who says and lives that statement as consistently as Dr. Bob. He recognized that there was something essentially Christian about a spirit of good cheer.

But it’s not always easy. You asked, “Where is God in the presence of evil and suffering?” It’s a question as old as Habakkuk. The way the question has been asked through the generations is this: If God is both loving and powerful, then why is there so much evil in the world?

Annie Dillard begins her book *For the Time Being* with these words: “I have in my hands the standard manual for birth defects: *Smith’s Recognizable Patterns of Human Malformation*, fourth edition.” She says, in vivid photographs, “It depicts many variations in our human array.”¹ And then she describes children called the “bird headed dwarfs,” who not only display an odd appearance, moderate to severe mental deficiency, but a 6-year-old boy is pictured fitting in the hand of an adult.

What does the Christian faith say to that? What does Christian faith say about Auschwitz or slavery or fires that destroy California or hurricanes that blow entire towns away in Florida or North Carolina?

If God is all-powerful and God is all-loving, why is the world filled with suffering? There seems no way to make sense of this problem. It is an intellectual jail cell. No way out. We have tried to reason our way, and we have found some help along the way. But we have also come face to face with the inadequacy of our answers.

Dr. Bart Ehrman, a professor of religion at the University of North Carolina, says, “Because Christians cannot answer this question, it has become impossible to believe in God.”² If I understand Ehrman, he believes suffering makes it clear that God is not powerful enough to do anything or good enough to care, so there is no God.

Well, some have offered answers. Let me share a couple.

One of the most thought-provoking answers is presented by philosopher John Hick. Hick says our perspective is wrong. We have assumed that a good life means that there will never be suffering. But Hick argues that

suffering is needed in the world. Suffering actually serves a purpose. Hick argues that God’s intention is that we would grow toward God. And growth results from tension, from challenge, even from suffering. A good creation is not one that avoids suffering. A good world is one in which human beings grow toward God. This is what Hick calls a “soul making” world.³ Suffering produces soul making.

What is true to human experience is that often suffering teaches us. We do grow from our hurt. That’s Hick’s answer: Suffering doesn’t question the power or goodness of God, because suffering isn’t really bad. It serves a purpose.

Maybe that helps you, but I find that unsatisfying. I don’t understand God to be one who inflicts or allows pain in order that we might grow.

Rabbi Harold Kushner has offered a different answer. He wrote *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. It narrates his journey with his son Aaron. At two years old, Aaron was diagnosed with the rare disease “progeria.” It causes rapid aging. Aaron died of old age in his early teens.⁴

Kushner admits he is a better person because of Aaron’s death.

He knows about soul making. But he states, “I would give up all of those gains in a second if I could have my son back.”⁵

In his search for answers, Kushner became convinced that God wants the righteous to escape suffering — but sometimes even God can’t bring that about. It is too difficult even for God to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent victims.”⁶

Kushner faces the intellectual jail cell: God is all-powerful; God is all-loving; there is innocent suffering, and he unlocks the cell by saying God is not all-powerful. God is doing the best God can.

Maybe that helps you, but I find Kushner’s answer lacking as well.

I am grateful for those who have endeavored to teach us, but in the end, we come face to face with the inadequacy of our answers.

Last Sunday I told you of Dr. Kate Bowler. She teaches at Duke Divinity School. At age 35, she was diagnosed with Stage 4 colon cancer. A neighbor and friend visited her and said, “Kate, remember, everything happens for a reason.”

Kate’s husband responded, “Tell me. What is the reason my wife is dying in her 30s?”⁷

Here’s what I think: *Answer* is the wrong category — not only because our answers are inadequate, but because in the end, we really don’t want an answer. Answers inevitably make it sound like God isn’t God or our suffering really isn’t suffering. I find any attempt to explain suf-

fering belittling to God, and often even more so, belittling to sufferers. Don’t tell me the reason there is a neonatal ICU. Don’t tell me the reason there is famine. Don’t tell me it makes sense.

I don’t think our faith provides answers, but our faith does provide responses. Responses may not gather all suffering into a system of reason, but responses are reasonable ways of living in the face of the world’s deepest sufferings. Suffering is less a reality Christians *explain* and more a battle Christians *engage*.

Jesus tells a story that I think is on point here. Jesus says, there are weeds in the wheat fields of our lives. The world is a mixture of weeds and wheat. The church is a mixture of weeds and wheat.

And the first question Matthew’s congregation asks is, “God, did you do this?”⁸ This is not a question for information, but a voice of protest: “God, did you do this? There is domestic violence and cancer; there are hurricanes and crushing poverty; there are weeds in the wheat. Did you do this? Is this who you are, God?”

And the response is “No, an enemy has done this.”

Now I don’t know how to explain that completely. But if I understand this text, it is saying that suffering is no friend of God. God does not cause innocents to suffer for any purpose — not for judgment or soul making. No!

The second question is this: “Can we fix it? Do you want us to pull the weeds up?”

This is complicated. Our mission is born from suffering. Our food pantry and Hillcrest

Housing; Thelma’s Kitchen and Rose Brooks; our mission in the Dominican Republic and Haiti and Kenya; our journey to the U.S./Mexico border — all of these are protest in action. We are endeavoring to pull the weeds from the wheat field, and that is a good and holy thing.

For this is what is true: God is not found in the hurting, but in the healing; not in the breaking, but in the mending; not in the hating, but in the reconciling. Our mission is protest. But mission is not an answer, and it is not a fix; it is a response. And what Jesus tells us is that ultimately, we can’t rid the field of weeds. We do our best, but suffering has always been and will always be a part of this world. Do you want us to pull the weeds? No. They must live together for a while.

So again, I think we see suffering is not a reality that Christians explain, but rather a battle we engage.

I want to suggest a spiritual practice. When suffering comes, don’t focus on the suffering; focus on the sufferer.

Dr. Bob says, “Be of good cheer.” It comes from John 16:35. The Greek word that is translated “good cheer” is *tharseo*. *Tharseo* translates “good cheer,” but it also translates “take courage.” Dr. Bob knows that to be of good cheer requires courage.

My life has been filled with people who have shown that kind of courage. In the face of suffering, they have revealed a courageous joy. Julie Lee did. Tony Diehl did. Stormy Shank, Caryl Herman, Ernie Lobb, Deke Har-

berts, Brant Tidwell. I also think of Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Apostle Paul. I could go on and on listing the people in this church who have lived with courageous joy, but I hope just this short list has invited you to bring to mind the people on your list. The truth is, there is a cloud of witnesses who have lived as a people of good cheer, of courageous joy.

When we look at suffering, there are no answers. The answers fall to the floor, inadequate. But look at the sufferers, and sometimes there emerges a completely different mystery. How do people demonstrate just courageous joy unless God is at work ... unless God is engaged in the battle?

Jackie Boggs was a young, energetic, beautiful woman. Her doctor uttered words that changed her life: “You have MS.” For the rest of her life, with grace and courage, she battled the disease that eroded her control over her own body. But it did not erode her spirit. Eventually confined to a scooter, she would make her way to this sanctuary, and in a paradoxical battle of weakness and strength, she would pull herself into this choir and, with the face of an angel, she would sing praise to God. And she instructed the rest of us in how to engage the battle with courage. In the face of suffering, she was vibrant, alive and beautiful; and she was not afraid.⁹

You may say, “Tom, I don’t have that strength.” I understand. I don’t either. But I want to. I have seen the power of God’s

love in many who have suffered, and when it comes to me, I want to be like them. And I know this: Courage like this is a gift that never comes ahead of schedule. But when suffering comes to you — and it comes to us all in time — do not worry about understanding why it has come. Just remember the cloud of witnesses in your own life, and be of good cheer.

But this is what I trust: When suffering comes, God will not disappear, but in that circumstance, we will discover that grace is tenacious, that love will not turn aside and will not let go. I believe this because I have been surrounded by those who, in the face of great suffering, have stood like giants of good cheer.

Dr. Erhman says our lack of answers makes it impossible to believe in God. He is looking at the reality of suffering, but he overlooks the sufferers. If we really look at them, it will raise up a new question in you. If God is not present when we hurt, then how do you explain the courage of these people? Do you have an answer for that?

There are weeds in the wheat. But remember that you are God’s child and loved with a love that will never let you go. Trust in that, and be of good cheer — be of courageous joy

Religion, ed. Peterson, Hasker, Reichenback and Basinger (1996), p. 282

⁴Rabbi Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981), p. 4

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 147

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 49

⁷Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason (And Other Lies I’ve Loved)* (2018), pp. 112–113

⁸I am aided here and throughout this sermon by Tom Long, *What Shall We Say?*

⁹I have been inspired by Jackie Boggs and her husband, Al, for MS attacks not just the body, but the family.

¹Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (1999), p.1

²Bart Erhman, *God’s Problem* (2009)

³*Soul Making Theodicy*, by John Hick, in *Philosophy of*