

Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

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Given the last month, I've had a lot of folks ask me the same question, so I think it's worth talking about. It's kinda THE question, maybe even bigger than "Does God exist?" The question is: "why do bad things happen to good people?" I've heard it enough that I'm gonna lean away from our readings and dive in here today. There won't be a quiz in the academic sense, but we're all likely to face this one eventually. But before we go into the usual solutions, for many of us, there's a lot there that's unsatisfying. Maybe you find comfort in one or more of these, and that's great. Keep at it. But if you're like me and need something a little different, perhaps we can add another tool to your theological toolbox.

So first, the usual solutions. Probably the most is "God has a plan." It's mysterious and explains everything ... a little too neatly. As Isaiah says, God's thoughts are not my thoughts, nor God's ways my ways. But it's hard to imagine the worst of humanity as a goodly part of God's plan.

There's also free will. We know enough about people for this to ring true, but it doesn't explain everything. Sometimes bad things happen without people doing anything (or doing everything) to intervene.

There's also "God is either not all-powerful and good OR is all-powerful and awful." As you might've guessed, I don't love these. They reduce God to categories we can understand while assuming malice, incompetence, and a sensible universe.

There's non-intervention: God set things up and stepped back to let Creation run its course. That's entirely too little God for my tastes.

Finally, there's evil. Bad things happen 'cause a metaphysical Boogiemán has it out for us. I don't want to discount evil, but I'm uncomfortable with this solution because it implies evil is more powerful or more clever than God. Or maybe evil pounces when God's not paying attention. That says a lot about God I'm not willing to buy.

Now, pretty much the whole book of Ecclesiastes deals with this big question. Their basic conclusion is a massive shrug of the shoulders. There's injustice in the world, and no one can make sense of why. But we acknowledge it's there. Injustice is there. It's real. We can't tie it up in a neat little bow. But we can point to it. And if we can point to it, maybe we can discern what we can fix from what we can't. In other words, Ecclesiastes's massive "beats me" doesn't leave us scratching our heads. Some things we can do while other things are beyond us. Accept this, and life will be a whole lot easier.

But there's one more, and I dig it: Chaos is Biblical. To make sense of this, we need to revisit one of the world's oldest stories: the Babylonian myth of Creation. (Babylon matters for us because they had a ton of influence on our scripture writers.) So, in their story there's a Big God and his wife Tiamat. He's sitting pretty while the rest of the pantheon does all the work. Tiamat, the queen of the gods, is a massive sea serpent, and she embodies chaos. An upstart god leads a divine revolution and dethrones the Big God. Fair warning: this gets a little grizzly. To make sure there's no question who's in charge, that upstart god kills Tiamat, tearing the massive sea serpent lengthwise, and the waters of chaos pour out. It's out of those spilled waters that Creation comes, directly from chaos, imbued with chaos. Tiamat the sea serpent lays defeated, but chaos remains. Now, we don't believe in that whole pantheon, but the Babylonians's fingerprints are all over our scriptures. Our own Creation Story begins with God's Spirit blowing over the waters of the deep. In the Old Testament, water means two things: life and chaos, inextricably linked from the beginning. God and chaos. Life and creation. For good measure, don't forget the chaos-sewing serpent slithering around Eden. Or when chaos appears in Job, Isaiah, or the Psalms as "that Leviathan," the enormous chaotic sea serpent, Tiamat by another name.

Again, I'm no ancient Babylonian believer, but for me the connection of Leviathan to Chaos, Chaos in Creation -- that's the key to making sense out of terrible things. Sometimes people are awful to each other. But not everything that happens is so simple. Sometimes things happen without any will guiding them. The chaos of the universe affects us but it's incapable of providing an explanation. I know the idea of living in a chaotic universe doesn't fix our problems. For some of us, it might raise a thousand others. But for me, believing in chaos actually helps me believe in God. Because if God were responsible for all this suffering, I'd have a mighty hard time getting out of bed on Sundays. But if God is somehow different from that, removed from the finger-pointing cause-and-effect, now we're talking.

For me God simply is. Instead of blaming God, we're free to search for God even in the most terrible places. As Francis Spufford puts it, God is in all places, but that doesn't have to mean God causes all things. God is there regardless of wherever there is and regardless of whatever's being done. In terrible illness, in tragic accidents, in our three-score-and-ten, God is there. Perhaps that's most easily seen in the people that step forward to help. But it's not always about doing. As representatives of God's love, we've got a responsibility to love as much like God as we can. If God is about being present, then maybe we do know what to do in the face of unjust suffering.

We help where we can. We donate blood or bills, stand between oppressed and oppressor, love every soul. But the most important thing we do is hold sacred space open. I know there's a temptation to come to church to solve our problems, but I don't think that's what we're for. We might be able to help, but what we really do is make this a place to come. We hold this place as sacred. Sure, we fix what we can, but more importantly we make space for you. We may not fix your problem, but we can help you hold it. We clear a spot close to God and carry whatever it is with you. We don't come together as perfect beings. We're all wounded, have all wounded. And still we come here, our wounds bare and vulnerable thanks to all those leviathans.

There's an image of God I'd like to leave us with this morning. At first it sounds a little goofy, but stay with me. God is like a holy chicken. It's all over our scriptures! Even in Matthew, God's described as a hen gathering her brood under her wings. I don't see it as God sheltering us from the storm so much as wrapping us in a cozy blanket while it pours. Instead of shelter as protection, maybe this shelter is about comfort. A great and loving embrace when comfort cannot be found anywhere else. It's not an undoing of chaos, it's a haven where tears and weak knees and heavy hearts are free to mourn.

At the end of The Lord of the Rings, the exhausted Samwise asks Gandalf if, now that peace has come, "everything sad is going to come untrue?" It won't, of course. Samwise says he feels like he's seen the first signs of Spring after a long Winter. It's not that Winter never happened. It's that Winter did happen, with all its ice and chill and loss. But Spring came anyway. Leviathan weaves through seasons unbidden, but there's always space under God's wing. No matter the season, no matter the place, no matter the terrible new pain, God is with us.

I wish I could make all sad things untrue. But I can't, and maybe that's not what we're for. We don't undo sadness. We make room for it and we hold it with you. You don't have to believe the same thing as the next person over, but you will always have a place to weep. Church is where flawed people come as flawed community to bear the pains of chaos. We do not offer a cure. We offer care and a body of loving people to bear your burden with you. Because we know that, no matter the season, no matter the place, no matter the terrible new pain, God is with us.