

Sermon on Sunday, March 20, 2022

Why do bad things happen to good people? Every preaching professor will tell you to never preach on this question. It's better to discuss it in a Bible study. Ok, it's better to talk about it over a lot of Bible study. I tried really hard to stay away from it this week, but as I talked to people, prayed and through the discussions in the Scripture study groups, I decided to talk about it. We are horrified by the war between Russia and Ukraine. Last week, the violence against children angered so many and we were left asking, "where is God? Why are these things happening?" Now, I want to let you know, I won't answer that question because what we're asking is to know God's ultimate purpose and I am not God. But perhaps Jesus didn't answer it because he understood we need faith. Jesus gave us scripture and the Holy Spirit to help us endure suffering caused by sin as well as suffering that just happens for no good reason. Our faith that God is always with us, even when we sin and that God works through other people to help us in times of suffering is what helps us endure.

Paul talks about testing and it's difficult to think that God tests us. I don't know about you, but I really don't like tests. They give me anxiety and so does the idea that God tests me to see the strength of my faith. However, a better translation of the Greek is temptation. And if we take a closer look at this reading, we notice that God is not the one doing the tempting. Temptation is a part of life. We can, with God's help, not give into temptation or we can turn away from God and lose that strength to say no. We've been talking a lot this Lenten season about sin and how it leaves us empty. It may make us feel good for a while, but sin always leads to death; death of relationship, death of trust, death of our identity and the list goes on and on. What Paul does say is that, even when we give into temptation, God is with us. God will not allow us to be tempted beyond our strength and will give us a way to endure it. One way God gives us to endure temptation and the consequences of giving into it is other people.

When we suffer, it's tempting to isolate. Perhaps we're embarrassed, we don't want to seem weak, we think we can handle it ourselves, or we've been let down by people in the past. Jeff Langdon quoted the song, I am a Rock by Simon and Garfunkel in his devotional this week. The song says, "**I've built walls**

A fortress, steep and mighty, that none may penetrate. I have no need of friendship, friendship causes pain." But even when people let us down, life lived as a rock and island, for most of us, is not life. God wants us to be in relationship with each other. Friends, life is hard and God knows that. God comforts us in difficult times by reassuring us that God will always be with us; especially in hard times, but God didn't stop there. God said God would give us each other, too. Often, it's in those difficult times that we see the true beauty of humanity. For example, what is happening between Russia and Ukraine is horrible. The bombing of innocent people is appalling. The devastation is horrifying. And in the midst of all that there is God working through people to help. So many people and nations are supporting the people of Ukraine as they suffer.

The last major war we had was WW2. **Elie Wiesel (pronounce Ellie Vee-sell) was a Romanian-born American writer, professor, political activist, Nobel laureate, and Holocaust survivor. He**

authored 57 books, including *Night*, a work based on his experiences as a Jewish prisoner in the Auschwitz and Buchenwald (pronounced boo-ken-wald) concentration camps. He writes about a small boy who was hanged. As the young boy was dying, the Nazis made the prisoners walk by the boy. One man asked, **“For God’s sake, where is God?”** **Wiesel writes, “And from within me, I heard a voice answer: ‘Where is he? This where—hanging here from this gallows...’”** Now we can ask ourselves, “Does he mean God is dead or that God is suffering with us? Good question because at the end of the day, we don’t know why appalling and horrendous things happen in the world.

Jesus talks about this exact thing. We hear about two events that are horrible. The first is that Pontius Pilot killed Galileans who were on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. We don’t know why he did this but we do know he mingled their blood with that of the Jewish sacrifices, which was sacrilegious to the Jewish people. Why would he do such a thing? The second is 18 people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. A piece of the outer wall of Jerusalem came loose and fell on them, killing them. It was an accident but why did it happen in the first place? Why Jesus? Why do things like murder, hate, war, and accidents happen? And Jesus doesn’t answer the question. He takes it in a different direction and leaves us with no answer.

So what do we do with that? We are left with a choice. What do you believe? Where is God? Is God dead hanging from the noose or is God with the child, hanging on the noose with him? Is God with the other prisoners who help each other get through one more day in Auschwitz? Is God dead or is God walking with the innocent people caught in the middle of the war? Is God working through us to provide aid? What it comes down to is faith. Do we believe that God is with us in suffering and that God works through others to help us endure times of suffering? Because God is impossible to understand. When we suffer, we try to understand God and God’s purpose but we can’t. Perhaps that’s why Jesus didn’t try to answer the question, “Why do bad things happen?” but instead turned us to faith.