

Why Did God Allow the Pandemic?

Text: Luke 13:1-9

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on April 18, 2021

As you know, we've just started a series of sermons on questions or topics that you've submitted, and for this week it's a question. The full question reads: "Why did God allow this pandemic to happen and have so many innocent people die?" This is, of course a specific version of the huge and classic question that formed the substance of the 1981 bestseller by Rabbi Harold Kushner: *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

That book has literally helped millions, and if you're struggling with the question—especially because of tragic loss in your own life—then I highly recommend that you read it. He and I are on the same page on almost everything, and I can't give you the depth in 20 minutes that he can in an entire book. He can also help you with the book of Job, which is relevant to this morning's question but that would require an entirely separate sermon about its literary origins before I could use it this morning in a helpful way. So, for today at least, I will leave Job in the more-than-capable hands of Rabbi Kushner and I'll focus on what Jesus has to say in the Gospel of Luke. Here it is from Luke 13:1-9:

13 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

⁶Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' ⁸He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

I picked the passage from Luke you just heard because, like the book of Job, it doesn't answer why horrific things do happen, but it does torpedo the most common wrong answer. So I think it's most helpful to start there. Hopefully, by the end, we'll be able to upgrade and expand the question in ways that will be helpful. Then tonight at 7 pm on Zoom you can join the sermon talkback if you want to have more discussion about it. Link is on the church website.

The answer that the Bible is most clear in condemning is the one that says bad things happen because God is punishing the people who suffer. On the surface, it seems plausible. God, by definition, has the ability to do anything. And if you believe God is in control of the world, it would seem sensible to assume that anything that happens, happens either by God's design or at the very least with God's permission. And the Bible does have a lot of stories of God blasting people for sin—in both the Old and New Testaments. But when directly dealing with this question, none other than Jesus says, no, that's not how it works.

So, let's move in closer to that passage, where we have examples of two different types of horrible events. The first is the slaughter of some Galileans at the hands of Pilate, presumably at the Temple or other holy site, since it mentions their blood mingling with the blood of their sacrifices. We don't have a historical reference point for this event. Luke is the only one who mentions it, either inside or outside the Bible. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us of other things Pilate did that would make this believable, but the point here isn't to add to the historical record. Someone in the group mentioned the massacre to him, presumably to get an answer to the "Why did God let this happen to faithful Jews at worship?"

It might just as well have been the Tree of Life Synagogue massacre in Pittsburgh in 2018, or the slaughter of Christians in Bible study at Mother Emmanuel church in Charleston in 2015 and Jesus is clear. The people slaughtered were not greater sinners than the ones who were left unharmed. Why were those Galileans slaughtered? Because Pilate slaughtered them in an act of state-sponsored violence. Why were those in the Tree of Life synagogue slaughtered? Because an anti-Semite and white supremacist named Robert Bowers slaughtered them. Why were the Black Christians at Mother Emmanuel gunned down in their Bible study? Because a white supremacist named Dylan Roof gave his soul to hate.

Jesus then follows that up with a very different example of innocents losing their lives. Jesus reminds the group of a tower that was part of the Jerusalem walls that collapsed and crushed those underneath. Here the tragedy is no one's fault. Jesus doesn't follow this with "woe to the engineers who built such a faulty tower!" In terms of the question being asked — were the people killed more sinful than those who were not — the events are equivalent, even though one was a rampage by a ruthless government official and the other was, at most, the neglect of infrastructure. But neither of them, Jesus says, was God punishing anybody for sin. The people who died were no better and no worse than anyone else. The passage from Luke does have a strong message of judgment in it, but set that aside for now. We'll come back to it in a bit to see how it fits into the larger picture.

Across time and culture, the most common reaction to tragic events has been some form of "blame the victim." It happened yet again this past week, when instead of focusing on why thirteen-year-old Adam Toledo was shot by police in Chicago when he was complying with their orders and had his hands up; people were asking, "What was he doing out at 2:30 in the morning?" That's bad enough. But we in faith communities make people's trauma and suffering after tragic events even worse by insisting that God is somehow behind it. We even do that to ourselves when we are the person in anguish. We almost need to believe that we did something wrong, because if we did, we could at least have some hope of preventing a future tragedy. A random universe that hurts people who don't deserve it seems too terrifying for us to deal with. And yet, here is Jesus implying that very thing.

I was glad that this morning's question didn't say, "Why did God **give us** the pandemic;" but "Why did God **allow** the pandemic" is just a small step removed and still makes God the prime agent in the tragedy.

I understand why people do that. From a theological perspective the argument goes that God is all powerful and also supremely good. Therefore, if something bad happens, God must have at least allowed it to happen and perhaps even caused it to happen for some greater good. The number of people who have fled religion because of that theology is enormous, and many there are who will argue that God can't be both supremely good and supremely powerful. If your child dies, the thought that God could have stopped it but didn't to teach someone a lesson, is just as massively offensive as the notion that either the parent or the child was a greater sinner than the family across the street whose children are safe and well. No one, including me, wants a God like that. So often we think God is responsible for things that, if a human being did them, we'd put behind bars for life.

But it's where we end up if we don't allow for real human freedom and recognize that from the minute God picked Adam up by the collar and set him down in the Garden to till it and keep it; from the moment God asked Cain why his brother's blood was calling out from the ground and Cain answered, "What? Am I my brother's keeper?"; from the moment Jesus breathed on his disciples in the upper room and said, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you," the day-to-day management of this world has been turned over to us.

The singular human vocation, the thing that separates human beings from the other animals, is not greater ability but greater responsibility. I don't rule out miracles by any means; but throughout the Bible, from start to finish, the primary way God works in the world is in and through us. Were I to take this morning's question

to God and ask, "God, why did you allow the pandemic? Why did you let millions of people die?" God might reasonably say something like, "Me? Why did I let this happen? I might ask the same of you!"

About a year ago I shared a meme on my Facebook page that had a popular image of Jesus knocking on a wooden door. That image is usually associated with the Bible verse that says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." Only in the meme, Jesus says, "Hey, Debbie? It's me, the Lord. Listen...you need to stop telling everyone that your health is in my hands. You're going to have to wash your hands and quarantine with everyone else, ok?"

We're not puppets in a play here. From Day 1 of Creation, we have been charged with making sure that God's will in heaven is done here on earth, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer. And that's why I think Luke 13 has such a harsh tone to it, even though Jesus is talking about the deaths of innocents. He keeps repeating "Repent, or you will perish as they did." The word "repent" doesn't mean groveling. It doesn't mean saying we're sorry for all the mess or reciting some other magic words. It literally means turning around and going in a different direction. I think Jesus is saying that if we humans don't get our act together and take our role as stewards of this world seriously, we're all going to meet the same fate, whether we're slaughtered by madmen or crushed by crumbling towers.

Many of you work in business, so let me try to translate this passage from Luke and the underlying concept into contemporary terms—a parable of sorts. A middle manager comes to the CEO and says, "We've had a bloodbath in marketing. The director flew into a rage and just fired everyone in the department! No warning, no reasons, no nothing. I'm afraid we're going to have lawsuits." The CEO then says to the middle manager, "Didn't you hire that director? Why didn't you see this coming? The marketing folks aren't any better or worse at their jobs than in other departments. If you don't step up and become better aware of what's happening in the departments you oversee, the whole business is going to crumble and you'll be in the same boat.

Then accounting comes in and says to the CEO, "I'm afraid we've been hacked. All of our customer information, including sensitive bank account data, has been compromised and we're locked out of our own system." And the CEO responds, "Companies get hit with cyber-attacks all the time. Why weren't we prepared? You need to up our security game or the whole business is going to go bust."

The CEO then calls for a company-wide meeting and says, "We've had three years to become profitable—something that I promised to our investors, including the city—and you have been asleep at the wheel. I'm seriously thinking of just cashing out and walking away. Then the Executive VP stands up and says, "One more year. I'll make sure we have new internal controls and I'll work to streamline operations to minimize these kinds of risks. If we can't turn it around by then, we'll admit defeat and you can dissolve the company."

Now you may think that's a terrible analogy, and maybe it is. But I think the language in the passage from Luke is so loaded with our own baggage and fears of a wrathful God and stories of hellfire and damnation that we can have trouble hearing the underlying message. I think Jesus is saying that we both are and are not responsible for the tragic circumstances of our world. Innocent people suffer every day of every week and that is not God's punishment for some sin, real or imagined. But much of that suffering is preventable if we join together and do the hard work of building real community, learning to handle conflict appropriately, and caring for those who are, for whatever reason unable to care for themselves.

The appearance of a virus is not anybody's fault, but the unchecked spread and 566,000 deaths in the United States is totally on us as a society for not taking advantage of all the gifts God has provided to help keep us safe. That we have multiple vaccines available to us right now is nothing short of a miracle for a virus unknown to science just over a year ago. "Hey, Debbie? It's me, the Lord. Listen...I need you to get vaccinated and still wear a mask and keep distant in public until the experts tell you it's safe, okay? No more telling

people I'll just protect you. Those things are how I'm doing it, and you're making everything harder than it needs to be. Can you work with me here?"

There are a thousand things more that could be said, but I promised you upgraded questions. When people of faith experience trauma, the question that rises to the surface most immediately is what has been asked, "Why, God, did you let this happen?" And, in the moment, no one wants some theological explanation. In the moment, it's a cry of anguish and is best met with simply a loving and largely silent presence. But underneath that question are assumptions that could use further reflection down the road, and there does come a time when we are ready to reach deeper. And in those times, I offer these:

"How free are human beings to go against the will of God?"

"Do I believe that God causes horrible things to happen to people?"

"What exactly do I mean when I say, 'Everything happens for a reason.'"

"Does randomness exist in the universe as quantum theory suggests? What if there are things that are outside of anyone's control?"

"Is it possible that God exercises self-restraint in preventing harm?" "Why might that be?" "Would there be any downside to God intervening to stop everything bad from happening?" "What does it mean to be a disciple of a suffering Messiah?"

"Why are we here?" "What does it mean to be human?"

"What does God expect of me? Of us?"

If you read Rabbi Kushner's book, you'll have help thinking through all those questions and more, but his focus is on what I think is the best question of all, if we can settle the others enough to ask it. And that question is, essentially, "Now what?" For whatever reasons, known or unknown, the pandemic has struck with deadly force. Another unarmed black man lies dead at the feet of law enforcement. Another dreadful diagnosis. Another child has been bullied into suicide for being somehow, "different." Another mass shooting. Another loved one lost to cancer. Another fatal car accident. Another wildfire, tornado, flood. Now that whatever it is has happened, now what? Where do we go from here? What are we, both individually and together, going to do in response?

Hey, Jesus? It's me, Debbie. How can I help? Amen.