

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Mind Matters: Woe”

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Isaiah 5:14-24

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We continue this morning with our series “Mind Matters,” talking about how the gospel of Christ speaks into, well, matters of the mind. Whole lot of directions this could go, but roughly speaking, the first half of this series will look at some of the intellectual or logical hold ups some might have to the claims of faith, while the second half will explore what the gospel might have to say in aspects of mental health or mental illness.

Last week we talked about what at least appears to be tension between the claims of faith and the claims of science. Those are challenging enough, but today we venture into perhaps more charged territory, taking on what is, in my opinion, the most challenging question that faces the church and all those who hold to the testimony of a good, all-powerful God: suffering.

We drop into a passage of the prophet Isaiah, against a backdrop of any number of things going against how they should be, and we hear at once words of warning, of lament, and of promise. Let’s go to God’s Word together, Isaiah 5:14-24:

Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure; the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude go down, her throng and all who exult in her. People are bowed down, everyone is brought low, and the eyes of the haughty are humbled. But the Lord of hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness. Then the lambs shall graze as in their pasture; fatted calves and kids shall feed among the ruins.

Woe to those who drag iniquity along with cords of falsehood, who drag sin along as with cart ropes, who say, “Let him make haste; let him speed his work that we may see it; let the plan of the Holy One of Israel hasten to fulfillment, that we may know it!” Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and shrewd in their own sight! Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine and valiant at mixing drink, who acquit the guilty for a bribe and deprive the innocent of their rights!

Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will become rotten, and their blossom go up like dust, for they have rejected the instruction of the Lord of hosts and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Gracious God, we praise you for the testimony of your Word, declarations of your righteousness, of your justice, lifting up the plight that so many face without clear answers as to why. Lord, as we consider the brokenness and sufferings of the world in light of your goodness and of your sovereignty, we pray for your guidance, and we pray your Spirit would be with us. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

You might've heard those words of warning and with them also promise and hope, right there at the end of the passage. "Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will become rotten, and their blossom go up like dust; for they have rejected the instruction of the Lord of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel." The warning part of it is pretty clear: all you who oppress, you who are self-indulgent and greedy, you who mock the Lord and flaunt what you think is your own impunity, there will be a reckoning. But along with that, a hope and a promise: all you who suffer under that oppression, you who are exploited by those who self-indulge and self-aggrandize, you who suffer under the weight of a broken, cruel world, the Lord will set things right.

It can be easy enough to read it, to say it, maybe even to believe it when things are on an even keel, but when you're in it, when you're in the pit, well, that's a different matter altogether.

It's a fairly straightforward premise, but it still troubles theologians, philosophers, spiritual or ethical authorities of all stripes. You don't have to be some kind of an academic or high-falutin' thinker to understand. If God is all-good, if God is all-powerful, if God is all-knowing—all of which are qualities that within the Christian faith at least are central to an understanding about the one, eternal, almighty God—if one holds all three of those statements to be true, it becomes very, very difficult to come up with a satisfying, compelling answer to this question: then why do horrible things happen?

There it is. Not an original idea. Been called a number of things: the "problem of evil," for one, or "theodicy," for another. This question has tormented humanity for a long, long time, and I'll go ahead and spoil this sermon: if you think there's going to be a quick, simple explanation at the end of this sermon for a question that has troubled people for millennia, this is the wrong sermon.

There are easy answers if you let up in how one understands God, that is, if you let up in believing God to be all-good, all-powerful, or all-knowing, it's easy to explain why horrible things happen. If God is all-powerful and all-knowing, but not all-good, and horrible things happen, why? That's easy. God could have done something about it, but didn't want to, and why should he? If God is all-good and all-knowing, but not all-powerful, and horrible things happen, why?

That's easy. God knew and wanted to do something about it, but couldn't. If God is all-good and all-powerful, but not all-knowing, and horrible things happen, why? That's easy. God would've and could've done something about it, but just didn't know about it.

But when you hold to all three, as the Christian faith does, it gets really hard to give a compelling reason as to why horrific things have happened throughout history and continue to happen now.

They could be natural things, that is, things within nature: earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, flooding, famine, fire, plague and pestilence, things that obviously no human being singularly chose or brought on. If you hold that God loves you, cares for you, has your best interest at heart, and is truly in control, truly sovereign, able to do anything, and then your house is swept away in a flood and your loved ones die to terrible illness, you kind of wonder of why God let that happen, why God didn't stop it somehow.

Or it could be human things, that is, horrible things that have a direct origin in human choice. (Theologians and philosophers call this the difference between natural evil and human evil.) But when it comes to human evil or human choice, like oppression, abuse, murder, genocide, on one hand, it could have a simpler explanation. Deep in the heart of darkness, humanity is capable of incredible cruelty, a sign of our own depravity. Therefore any human evil isn't God's fault. It's free will; it's human choice.

And at some level, that explains it. If I were to cry out, "Why, oh why did my ankle get dislocated? Why God did you let this happen to me?" The right response is, "Well, Jay, it's because you made a choice to jump too high on a trampoline. That was a foolish choice, but it was your choice to make. And this is the consequence." And yeah, there's a place for human choice and responsibility in all of this.

But then when you yourself suffer under the oppression or cruelty of another person, be they a friend gone bad, a psychopath, a deranged dictator, or just your neighbor, whatever it is, you end up coming back to the same place. You can't help but think, God, with you all things are possible, you can do anything, you can change hearts, you can intervene, so why have you let this happen? Why do you keep letting this happen?

Even within this passage, we hear that anguish, that frustration. Even while it's a warning and a promise, underneath it is a frustration that those who mock the Lord and oppress the lowly have not gotten what should be coming to them. God, where are you?

For Isaiah, the people, in particular the nobility, the elite of Jerusalem seem to be in the crosshairs here. There are those who have exploited others to enrich and uplift themselves, and they mock anything resembling justice or judgment or reckoning, saying in those words of v. 19,

“Let him make haste, let him speed his work that we may see it; let the plan of the Holy One of Israel hasten to fulfillment, that we may know it!” They are mocking the Lord because, they say, well if he’s going to do something, let him do it.

There is something deeply broken about the society presented here. A people that should embody the designs, the righteousness of God, but do not. In the broader picture of Isaiah, this section of the prophet is calling upon Israel to repent, as it is promising the coming reckoning of God’s use of other nations, in particular the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires, to bring about judgment upon the unjust.

But imagine if you were one of the people being exploited by those being described here. You see your own suffering and alongside it the indulgence of those who profit from it, and not only that, the apparent impunity with which they mock the Lord and any notion that he would do something about it.

If you were in that place, what would you feel? Resentment? Frustration? Sadness? Indifference? Doubt? All those are valid. They still are.

In fact, if today, if in your heart right this very minute you think, “You know, maybe I could believe that there’s something greater, some divine power at work, and you know, maybe there’s something compelling about the message of love and forgiveness in this Jesus, but I just can’t get past how you can say there’s an all-powerful God who loves us when there’s so much wrong that this God apparently doesn’t do anything about. And I’m sick of these church people spitting out platitudes like, ‘It’s all part of God’s plan.’” If that’s where you are, you picked a good thing to get held up on. Because that’s a doozy. The single most challenging question to face the church and to any who hold to a loving, powerful God.

(And by the way, if you yourself are speaking with someone who is in the middle of a crisis, of suffering, it is probably not the right time to say it’s part of God’s plan. That may well be true, but not the right time to say it.)

So what is the right thing to say? What is the answer? If this is the most challenging question to face a people of faith, then what, after all, is the response to it?

There’s not a quick one. In fact, most of the time any attempt to give some snappy answer to a matter this troubling typically only patronizes or makes less of the suffering that someone’s going through.

The longer answer, however, if you can call it an answer, is writ large across the pages of Scripture, a steady thread of testimony of protest that things are not as they should be. We hear it in the psalms “How long, O Lord?” We hear it from the long-suffering Job: “Your hands fashioned

and made me, and now you turn and destroy me.” We hear it in the words of “Woe” out of Isaiah—this translation has it as “Ah,” but I like “Woe” from the King James better—this language of sorrow at the unjust, oppressive behavior of others.

There embedded throughout the testimony of the Word of God, over and over, is the affirmation that going to God in frustration, in anger, in grief, in sadness that things are not as they should be is, asking God even accusing God that he should do something about it and outraged that he has not is, in fact, a faithful thing to do.

Have you ever thought about that? I mean, I sense that a knee-jerk reaction is often, “No, you can’t question God. That’s not what faithful people do,” but in reality, questioning God is what we see, over and over, in the testimony of Scripture. We hear it from the lips of our Lord himself, there on the cross, crying out against the cruelty inflicted upon him, the perversion of justice that put him there: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Where is God when suffering happens? Well one answer is there, right there, on the cross, with us, for us.

So what do faithful people do? Do they simply resign themselves that there’s a certain level of suffering in their lives and within the world, and say, that’s just how it is, without protest? No. A people of faith will be eager to go to the Lord, crying out with the prophet that something is not right, “Woe, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.”

And then somewhere behind it, maybe buried deeply, there perhaps might emerge alongside the trust, the faith that God will in the end make things right, to believe indeed with Isaiah’s words that “The Lord of hosts is exalted by justice,” to move from “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” to “Into your hands I commit my spirit.”

It takes a lot of faith, a lot of trust, to get to that last part, the trust that God will after all set things right. Takes a lot of faith to get to the words that Martin Luther King stated, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Takes a lot of faith to stand in the midst of one’s own suffering or witnessing it for others and believe that in the end the righteousness of God will emerge.

So if for you, those words don’t feel like they could truthfully come, it’s alright. If for you, the only words that come are words of woe, of sorrow, of frustration, of impatience toward the Lord, that so much is not right, God you could do something about it, why haven’t you, if those are the only words that come, it’s alright. Takes a lot of faith to do that too.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.