

“Making Sense of God’s Will: God and Suffering”

Matthew 27:45-46, Luke 23:44-46

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I grew up a fourth generation Christian, but that doesn’t mean that I understood faith. When I was a young student, I had many questions about God. One serious question was if God knows everything, and everyone’s thought and plan, how do I understand ‘my free will’. As I grew older, I realized that faith is not a ‘one overnight conversion event,’ but it is a life long journey pursuing a spiritually mature relationship with God. I will be dealing with a new sermon series, “Making Sense of God’s Will” for the next three Sundays. For example, why do people suffer, why doesn’t God answer my prayer, why does evil still work in our world? What does the Bible teach us about God and God’s work in our world? I hope we learn something to grow our Christian faith.

Regarding our relationship with God, recently I learned something from my son, Jacob. He is 21 months old which means he became a human being less than two years ago. So far, he has already surprised me two times: the first was that he is clearly able to say “NO” staring me in the eyes when he doesn’t want something. The other was that he has his own preferences even at his age. Two days ago, I picked out his pants and tried to help him wear them, but he refused and picked out a different pair that he liked. He already has his own personality at the age of 21 months! Did you know this? Obviously, when God created us in His image, he didn’t create us as His puppets. But he made us independent beings with free will. We are free to be and to do our own things.

In Genesis 1, Adam and Eve’s story represents well who we are. Adam and Eve know God’s rule “not to eat the fruit of the tree”, but they were so curious. A serpent whispered to them to eat the fruit. They convince themselves that it is beautiful and that God did not really mean for them to miss out on such a lovely fruit. Adam and Eve rationalize sin and then eat of the fruit of the tree and paradise is lost. Pastor Adam Hamilton emphasizes that this story points out who we are as human beings. We find ourselves drawn to do those things that will bring us or others pain and are easily tempted to stray from God’s path. He explains that this tendency towards sin permeates every part of the human experience. It leads to dictators and tyrants abusing people. It leads to men and women violating their marriage covenants. So what God intended as a gift, our freedom, when misused, leads to suffering. *(Some ideas and quotes drawn from Adam Hamilton’s Why? Making Sense of God’s Will.)*

This morning, I would like to talk about suffering: why do people suffer. As I mentioned, our wrong decisions and misuse of our freedom may lead people to suffering. There are many kinds of suffering: natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, flooding and drought and an innocent infant's death or a person's death in a car accident, and deaths from war and diseases. What does the Bible say about suffering when we think God doesn't work in our lives? In most cases, our disappointment comes from our expectation about God. In other words, we have assumptions that God is *supposed* to work for us. In the Old Testament, the Israelites had a perspective on "Deuteronomistic History". Deuteronomy 28 says that "The Lord will bless you if you obey. But if you disobey the Lord, you will suffer." According to Jewish tradition, suffering is the cause of disobedience to God, but this is not the whole point of the Bible.

Look at the book of Job in the Old Testament. This is a story of a good man who loses everything. His friends try to make it his fault, but Job didn't do anything wrong before God, but he loses everything that he had and had to suffer. Many Old Testament scholars argue that Job symbolizes the Israelites' relationship to God and the arrogance of their faith. In Job, we see the innocent man may suffer and perceive the Israelites' understanding of God and God's work. The Bible definitely does not teach that God's people will be exempt from suffering nor those who follow God will have a life of bliss. One other assumption is that our suffering happens to us as a result of God's punishment or God's discipline. People often say to those grieving that, "God has a bigger plan for you", or "there must be a reason for your hardship". These words make sense to some of us, but not all of us. How do you explain an innocent infant's death or innocent person's death caused by another person's fault? The Bible is a book of faithful people's powerful testimonies for those who kept their faith in the midst of sufferings and persecutions.

Jesus' teaching and the Bible do not talk about ways of how we avoid sufferings or get rid of them in our lives. Jesus teaches us, "Do not be afraid. Be strong. Stand firm in your faith." Mary shared a story of Pat Sherwood at her memorial service. When she was struggling with her pancreatic cancer at the hospital, on one Sunday evening, she was told from the medical staff that her cancer had already spread over her liver and other organs. It was too late to do any medical treatment. Can you imagine how she felt at that moment when she heard this news? Mary gave her a Fair Oaks church key chain that has a prayer. Pat held it in her hands in the most vulnerable moment of her life. What made me humble was Pat's attitude to keep her faith. I still think of her and her faith facing death, feeling the deepest fear but also trusting in God.

Our first Scripture reading describes the last moment of Jesus Christ on the cross. The Gospel of Matthew shows us that Jesus called out to God, why God abandoned him. His honest confession and cry delivers his real pain and the deepest fear of death. But what deeply inspired and challenges me was that in our second reading, the Gospel of Luke, Jesus trusted God. His last word was “into your hands I commit my spirit.” The Bible showed us a great example of faith in Jesus Christ’s life and death. What is the essence of Christian faith? Why do we have faith if we may continue to encounter suffering? Christianity enables us to hope for those who are suffering and in pain. Their suffering will never have the final word. The sting of death, agony of suffering has us believe that there is no God and there is no hope in life, but people of faith boldly should say that God never abandons us. God will walk with us through the darkest valley in life. Our Christian faith is our hope as Jesus rose from the dead. He brought us a new life and new hope as a promise. Keep your faith and let your faith be a sign of hope to others in our rough life journey. God promised that “the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us (Rom8:18).” Amen.