

Where's God in the Pandemic?

Text: Romans 8
Date: March 15th, 2020

Context: Papanui Baptist Church
Preacher: Elliot Rice

Instances of Suffering

There's a lot going on . . .

Today we remember the 51 people who were killed, and the many more who were maimed and traumatised as they were gunned down in their place of worship by a white supremacist—here in our city. They *are* us—humans created in the image of God, neighbours in our city, and this should never have happened in our backyard, regardless of creed or skin colour. We've been disturbed out of our complacency about racism and Islamophobia; we've grieved that such a hotbed of hatred existed that led to such an act, and repented for our complicity in that way of thinking. United to Jesus, we have shared lament to his Father. In New Zealand our hearts and minds are with our Muslim neighbours as we remember last year's terror attacks in the mosques.

Even as we remember that act of terrorism, today we face the very real threat of COVID-19, declared a "pandemic" this week by the World Health Organisation. Entire nations are being quarantined; five thousand people have died; there's a global financial crisis; borders are closing. Meanwhile, hundreds of billions of locusts are swarming through parts of East Africa and South Asia; it's the worst infestation in 25 years, and crops and livelihoods are at stake.

Through our partnership with Voice of the Martyrs and missionaries like Ross Campbell, I'm mindful that in other parts of the world Christians are suffering for their faith. Ross shared with me how most weeks he gets news from Ghana of attacks on churches in their neighbourhood—particularly in Burkina Faso across the northern border. A recent noon day prayer request was to pray for the families of the 24 church goers killed in Burkina Faso the previous Sunday. I'm sure our guests today will only be too familiar with this sort of news . . . These aren't competing tragedies; they're all instances of terrible suffering, of a world sick with the reality of sin and death. We grieve them all.

THE CERTAINTY OF DEATH AND TAXES

"In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." Whether you're rich or poor, famous or forgotten, wise or fool, one way or another we will all die. *Remember mortal, you were created from dust, and to dust you will return.* It's easy to forget that . . . Most of us get so used to having control of our lives, to the expectation of consistent health, wealth, and happiness, that we forget the reality of death that faces us all. "*I'll worry about that later, when the time comes,*" we think. Our ancestors lived out their lives at the mercy of nature; these days, nature lives at *our* mercy as we manipulate it through medical and technological mastery.

But here with COVID-19 we have something we're struggling to master: something that could actually impact *me*, could affect *us* . . . Those mosque attacks happened in *our* city; the earthquakes shook *this* building. Every now and then, something happens that cuts through our illusion of indestructibility, reminding us of our mortality. For the first time in my life Sarah and I have a child to worry about, and we have parents who could be vulnerable. Let's be real: this virus poses a real threat to this community. Just because we're Christians and we pray to God doesn't mean we're immune to tragedy.

Where's God in the Pandemic?

God is good: all the time; all the time: God is good. But *where's God in the pandemic? Where's God in the suffering and the dying?*

WHY ME?

When suffering like this comes our way, we're tempted to look for the divine rhyme and reason to account for *every* instance of suffering and loss. It's tempting to take suffering *personally*. *Why me, God?* Like Job's mates, we get to believing there's some clear purpose behind every experience: *Everything happens for a reason*, right? *"What are you trying to teach me in this suffering, Lord?"* For sure, *we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him according to his purpose*. But does God *intend* suffering and death for his good purposes?

A few years back, Brian Tamaki famously blamed the Christchurch earthquakes on certain sections of society, looking for the divine logic in the destruction. But Jesus is clear about this stuff: in Luke 13 he speaks of two recent tragedies, asking if those who died had somehow brought it on themselves. Did they have it coming? Was there some divine purpose to their suffering? *I tell you, no!*

Suffering and death—considered in themselves—have no true meaning or purpose at all. Jesus is clear: To have a tragedy happen to you is not a sign of sinfulness, just as a *lack* of tragedy in your life is not a sign of righteousness.

WHERE DOES EVIL COME FROM?

Ok, so I don't personally suffer for some divine reason. *But why do bad things happen in the first place?* Where does evil come from? Christians hold that *God created everything out of nothing*, and it was good. According to Genesis, humanity was not originally sinful. God created a universe that was and is essentially good; *God don't make no junk*. And when we consider the miracle of existing in our human bodies, or the perfect balance of elements to sustain life on planet Earth; and when we see that our bodies and all creation are made to glorify God, that essential goodness is obvious! In the beginning, the world was good, *not good and evil*. God is the Creator of everything, but he is *not* the creator of evil.

God didn't create evil, because evil isn't a thing; evil is not a something but the absence of the good. Evil is not a substance. It has no being of its own. It is, rather, a *lack* of something. For example, a disease may be caused by a substance, but the substance itself is not evil. *Its location is wrong*. The disease is a disorder of the good system of a healthy organism. The evil of COVID-19 isn't so much that corona virus exists, but that it exists where it shouldn't, *in humans* where it's a *disorder* of our good bodies.

But if everything's created by this good God, and if everything God created is essentially good, then *where does evil come from?* Looking at Genesis 3 and the story of the fall, we see that sin was alien, intrusive, and foreign. Adam and Eve weren't originally sinful; *rather*, sin originated with the Devil, who fell first, and who appeared to Eve in her innocence. And so, we live in a good world that has fallen.

WHERE'S GOD IN THE PANDEMIC?

So, if God didn't create evil, and if God doesn't personally will suffering on us, where's God in the pandemic? Where's God in the suffering and the dying? Is God like the watch-maker who, after

setting the it up, left the world to tick under its own steam? *Is God an absentee landlord?* Or is God like the puppeteer, determining every action from on high, every blessing *and every disaster* according to his will? *Is God a micro manager?* Well . . . God is neither. Because the only God we know is the one revealed in Jesus Christ.

David Hart writes, “if it is from *Christ* that we are to learn how God relates himself to sin, suffering, evil, and death, it would seem that he provides us little evidence of anything other than a regal, relentless, and miraculous enmity: sin he forgives, suffering he heals, evil he casts out, and death he conquers. And absolutely nowhere does Christ act as if any of these things are part of the eternal work or purposes of God.”

“Ours is, after all, a religion of salvation. Our faith is in a God who has come to rescue his creation from the absurdity of sin, the emptiness and waste of death, the forces that shatter living souls; and so we are permitted to hate these things with a perfect hatred.” At the cross God in Christ subverts death and makes a way through it to new life. In the end, when all is said and done, death and suffering will die as surely as Christ has risen and the tomb is empty.

THE HOPE OF GLORY

But more than that, in Christ we have the confident hope that creation will be *restored* and *made new*; we too will be resurrected to glory and honour, “more radiant than a million suns, more beautiful than the most generous imagination or most ardent desire can now conceive.”

Romans 8:18—I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager longing for the children of God to be revealed. Creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God!

As Hart says, in Christ we have the sure hope, “that he will strike off the fetters in which creation languishes; and that, *rather than* showing us how the tears of a small girl suffering in the dark were necessary for the building of the Kingdom, *he will instead* raise her up and wipe away all tears from her eyes—and there will be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor any more pain, for the former things will have passed away, and he that sits upon the throne will say, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’”

So, where’s *Jesus* in the pandemic? Well, *Jesus isn’t in the pandemic*; by the Spirit, *he’s in us and with us* who live and who suffer through it, helping us in our weakness, interceding for us through wordless groans, enabling our perseverance. Just because we’re Christians and we pray to God does not mean we’re immune to tragedy. But our God has the victory: his good will prevail even when tragedy strikes. God *is* good all the time.

How can we respond?

OPPORTUNITY

So, how can we respond to what we’re seeing around us, we who are marked by the Spirit as the children of God? It seems to me that this is an opportunity for church to take a lead in dispelling fear and speaking hope. In the midst of chaos and panic, we get to embody the goodness of God in our communities.

There are a few tangible ways in which we can do that . . .

1. Out of courtesy and kindness for others—especially, the vulnerable health-wise among us—it's important to practice good hygiene.
 - Regularly wash and thoroughly dry your hands;
 - practice good cough etiquette;
 - avoid handshakes and high-fives, hugs and kisses;
 - think of creative alternatives (e.g. The Indian “Namaste”).
 - and if you're feeling ill, even mildly so, don't attend church events or any other gatherings.

2. Look for opportunities to serve others, both in our fellowship and in our communities, offering support to those who need it.

E.g., many people can't afford food for two weeks of self-isolation—are you able to help out?

E.g., keep in touch with each other. Get a prayer and support partner!

3. We're in the midst of anxious communities. Churches can lead the way in their communities as exemplars of counteracting fear and prejudice. We have the opportunity to be a non-anxious presence—to be people of peace, hope, calmness, love with people in the workplace and neighbourhood.

*“However many years anyone may live, let them enjoy them all.” (Ecc 11:7-8) Henri Nouwen wrote about this near the end of his life in a book called *Here and Now*. He spoke about a friend of his who was always full of joy—not because his life was easy, but because he habitually recognised God's presence in the midst of all suffering. His friend didn't deny the sorrow of the world, and he wasn't blind or deaf to the world's suffering; but his spirit gravitated toward the light in the darkness, so that he'd speak about the sun even though the skies were covered with clouds. *I wonder how many of us managed that sort of joy this week?**

In Nouwen's words, “Joy doesn't simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day. It's a choice based on the knowledge that we belong to God and have found in God our refuge and our safety and that nothing, not even death, can take God away from us.” When we remember this, we're free to enjoy the present moment, knowing that the sun still shines behind the clouds.

4. We already live in a society wounded by isolation and loneliness; don't let this time be defined by Netflix and hedonism, but by cultivating love of God and each other. The temptation here is to self-preservation, but Jesus invites us to radical love.

Martin Luther and the Black Death

Pauline Hocking yesterday emailed me this from InContext International . . . In the 16th century, German Christians asked Martin Luther for a response to the question of whether followers of Jesus have a right to flee an epidemic when people are suffering and dying? It was 1527, less than 200 years after the “Black Death” killed almost half the population of Europe, and the plague had re-emerged in Luther's own town of Wittenberg and neighbouring cities.

In Luther's letter “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague,” he weighs the responsibilities of ordinary citizens during epidemic or plague. His advice serves as a practical guide for Christians confronting infectious disease outbreaks today. He argued that anyone who stands in a relationship of service to another has a vocational commitment not to flee, and he did not limit tending the sick to health care professionals. He challenged Christians to see opportunities to tend to the sick as

tending to Christ himself (Matt. 25:41–46). Out of love for God emerges the practice of love for one's neighbour.

But Luther did not encourage his readers to expose themselves recklessly to danger and he defended public health measures such as quarantines and seeking medical attention when available. He ultimately tasked "devout Christians to come to their own decision and conclusion" whether to flee or to stay during plagues, trusting that they will arrive at a faithful decision through prayer and meditation on the Scriptures. He stressed that participation in aiding the sick arises out of grace, not obligation.

Lord's Supper

In the same way, we remember that God didn't abandon the world to its destruction, but God pursued us in our disease; he's done this through Jesus Christ.

Paul says, that those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

We remember Jesus in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper: we eat the bread that symbolises his body, which was broken for us, and we drink the juice that symbolises his blood, which was poured out for us for the forgiveness of sins. God has sent Jesus to redeem us, and filled us with the Holy Spirit, so that we can call God—the Lord of all time—"Abba, Father!"