

Lent 4 Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

The past few weeks we have talked about how to view suffering in light of our faith. We have discussed the fact that our faith does not somehow shield us from suffering in this world, but it does help us to better cope with suffering. As Paul would say, “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” And today’s readings once again confront us with a difficult question of our faith—why do bad things happen to people? If we experience pain, or if we become ill, or if we’re born with a disability is it because God is punishing us? Is it because God is testing us? Is it because God cannot stop it from happening?

Yesterday I attending a conference with an Episcopal priest named Fleming Rutledge as the speaker. Rev. Rutledge is the author of a massive book about the Crucifixion, and she spent a lot of time discussing the concept of evil in this world. This book took her around 20 years to complete, and during the course of her writings she spent two of those years coming up with some Christian truths about evil which she carefully crafted and presented to theological scholars for amendment and approval. These were the truths that she discerned:

- God did not create and does not intend evil
- Evil is not a component of God’s being
- Although evil made its appearance in the creation, it possesses no existence or being of its own, but is rather a negation, or corruption, of being
- Evil did not and does not occur outside of God’s control
- God is not powerless against evil, but for some reason inaccessible to us permits it to operate within appointed bounds
- God is actively at work through human agents to challenge and resist evil, so that any penultimate victory over evil in this world is a sign of God’s ultimate victory
- Evil will be conclusively and finally defeated and obliterated by God in the final judgment

These statements were carefully written by Rev. Rutledge based on truths revealed to us in scripture and I believe accurately describe evil in this world. And through the lens of these affirmations, we can more fully understand the Gospel reading for today. In the Gospel, during Jesus’ travels he and his disciples encounter a man who had been blind since birth. And when they do the disciples ask a question that shows they do not understand the nature of suffering and evil. They ask Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” The disciples were operating under the assumption that God inflicted evil on this man as punishment for sin, either the sin of the man himself or the sins of his parents. Yet if we affirm that God does not create or intend evil, we know that is not the case. But we also know that the man is blind, and to deny that his condition causes suffering would be disingenuous. So even though we know that God did not inflict evil on this man, we know that evil does operate in this world. Yet through Christ’s ministry and death on the cross, we know that God is not at the mercy of evil. And we see this through Christ’s actions when he encounters the blind man. Jesus affirms that the blind man was not born blind because he was being punished by God because of his sin or the sins of his parents, but “so that God’s work might be revealed through him.” This is not to say that God caused the man to be born blind so that Jesus would have the opportunity to perform this one miracle. But it *does* mean that every instance of tragedy in the world gives an opportunity to show forth God’s glory, if only we respond as God would have us respond. This miraculous healing, as Rev. Rutledge would say, is an instance of victory over evil in this world that acts as a sign of what will be God’s ultimately victory over evil in the final judgment.

Though God does not inflict evil upon anyone, and though evil cannot operate outside of or above God’s control, for a reason that will not become known to us in this lifetime, evil things do happen in this

world. And our faith does not protect us from experiencing suffering and evil. But it does help us to know the reality of our situation in the midst of the evils of this world. "You prepare a table before me, in the presence of those who trouble me," the psalmist writes. We will continue to have troubles and experience evil in this world before God's kingdom comes, but God is with us and caring for us in spite of it all. Though we will experience difficulty, we will be fed with spiritual food that nurtures our souls, the true bread which gives life to the world, Jesus Christ.

But our faith does not only comfort us in the midst of our afflictions, it tells us how we are to respond to the evil we see in this world. As Ephesians tells us, "once we were in darkness, but now in the Lord we are light. Live as children of the light." In the midst of the darkness and the evils of this world, we are children of the light. When others encounter evil and darkness, they either hide it or respond with evil. We are called to respond to evil and darkness by shedding light upon it, by acknowledging it is happening and then responding with good. That includes being willing to shed light upon the wrongs others have done, and also those wrongs we have committed ourselves, to admit when we have sinned and strayed from God's path. It can be difficult for us to admit when we have given in to the forces of evil in this world, especially because we know that it is never God's will for us to do evil.

But don't need to be afraid of exposing sin and evil because we have not only knowledge of the evil of this world and the evils we have done, but also knowledge of God's grace and God's love. God's grace and love precedes us in everything that we do, both the good and the bad. And so we can carry on in our efforts to be the light of the world, exposing and confronting the evils of the world and also the evils within ourselves, confident that God has not inflicted evil on mankind, that every victory against the evils of this world foreshadow God's victory over all evil in the world to come, and that when God's kingdom does come, evil will be so far removed from us that we may not even remember what it was like. But while we are still in this world, let us model our lives after the teaching of Ephesians. "Let us take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light." And let us do so always remembering the promise of God's triumph over evil when we are raised on the last day. Therefore it says, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." Amen.