

First Presbyterian Church
Rev. Charles M. Cary
Sermon: "Questions People Ask IV: Why Do We Suffer? Is There a Purpose?"
July 30, 2017
Job 3: 1-10, 42: 1-6

Why is there suffering in this world and is there any purpose? Darren Schuringa asks these questions along with countless others who wonder – why. Why do the good suffer? Why do evil prosper? Why so much tragedy – and why so little triumph? These questions surface every time there is a funeral for a child – or the death too soon of an adult whose life made this earth a better place! I am grateful for Darren's questions. They prod us to an honest wrestling with life itself. The questions are as old as the ancient text of Job where we turn.

The late Dottie Dudley was a thoughtful, wise member of Westhampton Presbyterian Church for years who loved opera and shopping at Hildreth's. One night during a class on Job she showed her exasperated self. We were onto the meaninglessness of suffering and had reached a point where simplistic slogans no longer sufficed. Dottie spoke for generations when she said: "Either God is free to deliver us or He is not! Either God is capable of delivering us from evil or He is not!" Her tone of voice and posture were sincere and engaging – Dottie wasn't in the mood for nonsense. I don't recall how we ended the dialogue. But her question echoes across the years: Either God is free to deliver us from suffering or He is not.

Martin Buber – a wise Jewish Theologian asked the questions this way; as he notes the difference between Christians and Jews. Jews declare that there is suffering in the world – why, then, won't the Messiah come? Christians declare that the Messiah has come, why then is there still suffering in the world? The common denominator is that there is still suffering and evil in the world!

Why is there suffering – most often purposeless – tragic suffering in a world created and redeemed by a good God – whose love is undying? Darren's question is hard, challenging! This question was posed by a student I had in a class in seminary – she was an emergency room physician who was taking a year off to consider switching careers. What bothered her was this – she found it harder and harder to live with her mistakes which diminished the life of another. It didn't make any difference that she had likewise healed any number of broken people she was haunted by mistakes, and regrets that she had not taken action to bring relief. Why do innocent suffer? Why are children malnourished in a world which has the capacity to feed them? Why is there corruption, suffering-causing corruption among those charged to keep the public's trust? Why is there suffering caused by chronic selfishness? Chronic loneliness? The questions spark one after another after another. Job becomes so conflicted by them that he curses the day he was born!

One million Rwandans died in a tribal genocide. One million Cambodians vanished in the notorious killing fields. If we never asked the question: "Why Lord" we would be less than honest. And if we never arrived at the same exasperated conclusion which Dottie Dudley raised, we would be less than real. "Either God is free to stop this or He is not free!" As a pastor who buried four sons of the congregation in six years – where is God when death appears to win – and tragedies prevail? And human suffering is rampant?

Job's friends came to him with explanations which try to make sense. Each has a trivial answer or formula which sounds OK to the non-suffering – One declares that Job must have committed some flagrant sin for which he is being punished. Another declares that it is not for him to know now all the reasons behind his tragedies. The answers are being held in some kind of time capsule. But Job is wise- and will not settle for their trivializations. He is persistent – refusing to let go of God's lapels until he has an answer which justifies his suffering. It is only when God turns the question back on Job that we begin to understand. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me. Were you there when I assembled the stars of the Pleiades? Tell me. God is not in a big hurry to justify himself to ordinary humans – even one as righteous as Job the patriarch.

What is the meaning of human suffering? Is there a purpose? On the face of it there is no simple answer, no ready-made explanation. Here we are with a pint of brains pondering eternal verities. But there is one source, one meaning, one source of hope, one answer for those who gather under it weekly in church or daily at home.

Darren's questions drive me to the cross itself. Where Christ was crucified, dead, and then rose from death. If there is any answer, abiding answer – it is there – in God's willingness to suffer with us to reveal the meaning of sufferings.

A return to the Rwandan genocide, School girls in Gisenyi were ordered to sort themselves ethnically by tribe or suffer the consequences. The girls considered it and refused to reveal themselves as either Hutus or Tutsis. They were nevertheless beaten indiscriminately. Some were saved. Others not. But in their courageous "no", love triumphed over hate, over fear, over violence- over death.

In the cross of His Son, God engages our suffering, by suffering. He triumphs over it not by escaping it – but through engaging it completely. Ultimately defeating death itself by dying.

Why is there suffering in the world? Is there a purpose? The questions invite you and me to take up our cross and listen to what God says to us therein!

In the story "Quo-Vadis?" Peter the Apostle is fleeing persecution as the city of Rome is burning. There fellow Christians are undergoing mad Nero's persecution. Old Peter – who had denied Jesus three times, and had bad knees and scarred hands, and sunburnt skin is escaping along the Appian Way – lined with the tombs of Patrician Romans. Suddenly He is grasped by a vision of Jesus himself, heading in the opposite direction toward the fires of Rome. Wrong escape route. "Quo Vadis Domine?" The Lord answers. Into Rome to be crucified again! It was then that Peter – again humbled by the truth – turns around and makes his way back into the burning city...and according to legend – to his own upside down crucifixion. Call it a change of heart. Call it repentance. Peter engages our question for today and answers it with his own life ready to be sacrificed to end all suffering!

Why do we suffer? Is there a purpose? On a hill far away, God has acted. Maybe not to everyone's satisfaction. But He has given Himself, given His son – to the world's suffering. He has renounced the trivial and the superficial. He has refused the path of cowardice – only to say, "I will defeat the power of suffering through suffering. I will triumph over death by dying."

Why is there suffering? Is there a purpose? If we stay with it...the question begins to turn back onto us. Why is there suffering? I can hear the Lord asking me the same question. Yes, Chuck, why is there suffering in your world? Why is there suffering in your church? What are you doing about it?

Why is there gratuitous violence fueling an unprecedented world refugee problem? Why do children wash ashore on a Mediterranean beach? The questions scandalize God.

Why is there corruption and scandal amongst those charged with keeping the public's trust? Why are we retreating from such problems – indifferently washing our hands? The cross of Jesus empowers you and me to say "no" to suffering. Why then are we indifferent at best?

Why is there suffering? Why are there crimes against humanity? Why do we choose evil when we have the capacity to choose the good? Is that God turning the question around- changing it from a question we ask Him – to one which He asks us?? Is that God I hear asking us to be less concerned about the evils out there – and more concerned about the evils within us? Why is there suffering? Is that God we hear saying: "You are asking me?"

Is that God weeping because His creation knows not what makes for a just lasting peace? Is that God in Christ – turning over our conference tables judging us because we have yet to learn to work out our differences in peaceful ways?

The course of the Book of Job travels through a self-righteous complaint to a self's humble word of repentance. It goes from cursing the day you were born to confessing how much we don't fully understand. Why is there suffering? Is there a purpose? I ask God and God says: "You tell me! You tell me!" If we are anxious to call on God to justify His ways – let us be willing to justify our own ways, ways which – with God's help- bring an end to suffering and usher in a season of love and justice.

Is there an explanation for the world's suffering? The question is profound. It prods me to look more deeply into the cross where God turns the question back onto me, and you.

Another student of mine- with whom I have long since lost touch was from the nation of South Sudan where his fellow Christians were a persecuted minority – His name was Tak. He had no money but was possessed by a spirit no money could buy. He rode his donated bicycle in the freezing cold of Chicago. His smile was born of a warmth I could not explain. He loved coming to our apartment for baked chicken and Kenyan tea! He knows God even though he did not know whether his family lived or died. The last time I saw him he was riding his bike back to his dorm room from the seminary libraries. Tak kept the faith in a world where answers about his family and their suffering were few. He kept the faith because there was some force for good so tangible that he would never turn back. I learned so much from him. Mainly I learned that life is a pilgrimage from one revelation to the next and the glue which holds us in between is God's love that never lets us go. The glue for a simple faith that the journey is not in vain. Why is there suffering in the world? Is there a purpose? Consider the cross! You tell me!