

When you think about the origin of the universe as presented in the first chapter of Genesis, there is a sense of order. There is a logical progression from the separation of the unformed void into light and darkness, the separation of the water from the sky and from the land making way for the emergence of plant life. And then the animals of all kinds, come forth before the creation of humans. It is a nice neat package that belies the chaos that underwrote each step of creation.

Our world, the universe is both order and chaos. According to Chaos Theory, order and chaos do not necessarily run in cycles but often at the same time. Unlike most sciences that focus on the predictable such as gravity, electricity, or chemical reactions, chaos theory is a mathematical science focused on surprises, the unexpected in the world such as wind turbulence, or changes in the stock market. Chaos theory supports a both and view of the world, chaos is not just discord or destruction. Chaos is in the transitions between order and disorder.¹ Through chaos theory we come to understand that chaos was definitely part creation and chaos is definitely part of our everyday lives.

We humans have a hard time with chaos. Chaos makes us uncomfortable. Chaos is change happening at a faster rate than we can manage. We think of chaos as being bad because it is not nice and neat, it takes us by surprise. We often explain chaos in terms of evil and destruction. And so we look for ways to explain away the chaos and resulting destruction in ways that we are able to comprehend, not in a theory but something tangible.

So if chaos or evil is part of the universe people have postulated that it is due to natural forces, or it is brought on by humans, or by cosmic forces either demonic or angelic. In his novels, under the title of This Present Darkness, Frank Peretti offered a world where the spawn of the devil lurked in trees, on telephone poles and under beds waiting to lure their charges into the arms and ways of Satan. Many a theologian have embraced the idea of the existence of an energy force or fallen angels that have made this world Satan's world rather than God's world.

There are those that believe evil and destruction are the result of human actions alone. The choices we make, the way we live our lives result in consequences, short term and long term consequences, both good and bad consequences. However, the way these consequences are manifested typically fall into two categories. They are either the result of human freewill or they are the result of divine intervention leading to reward or punishment by God.

So let's consider some events in recent history. Who or what was responsible for the death of 1200 plus people due to the earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia, the

¹ Fractal Foundation, "What is Chaos Theory," accessed online 3 October 2018 @

more than 3000 that have died in Puerto Rico with an estimated \$139 billion in rebuilding costs expected due to hurricane Maria, or the \$170 billion estimated to reconstruct the 750,000 homes destroyed by hurricane Florence? Were these losses the result of demonic forces, actions by a vengeful God, the result of human activities, or due to the nature of chaos in the world?

And you might be thinking, what a strange way to talk about hurricanes and earthquakes as the result of demons or divine punishment. But think about how many have made statements to the effect that God is punishing us for the way we have chosen to live. Such was the case with the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York City and the impact of Katrina on New Orleans!

Why bad things happen in this world, especially to good people, is not a new question. This question was explored in the Book of Job. Job a pious man, a blameless man, who loved God and shunned evil.² Why did so much suffering fall upon Job? Was it due to demonic forces, a vengeful God, something Job did, or something else? For in our desire to have everything neat and tidy, easily explained, to be able to blame someone, the Book of Job challenges our thinking.

So first off we need to understand that the Satan or ha- Satan as presented in the Book of Job is not the devil or a fallen angel. The ha-Satan works for God. Ha-Satan is part of God's good angels. Ha-Satan as translated from Hebrew means "Adversary." Professor Carol Newsom affirms the role of the Adversary is not to lead people astray but is "a member of the divine court whose role it is to defend God's honor by exposing those who pose a threat to God. Ha-Satan is the adversary of sinful and corrupt people."³

And the Adversary has a theory warranting testing. Do people, blameless people only love God and shun evil because they are comfortable in life or are this way because they truly love God? So God agrees to the test. And Job, the blameless, is the guinea pig in this two part divine experiment.

We need to back up a bit in our story for this all to makes sense. Job's level of comfort in the world was great. He was a wealthy man. He was thought to be the greatest man in the East – because of his is wealth, his many children, the care of his servants, and of his devotion to God. Through the use of raiders, rustlers, and storms the Adversary arranged for all of Job's livestock, his servants, his children and his standing in the community to be lost. In his sorrow, Job tore his garments, put on sackcloth and deposited himself on an ash heap. His only comment over his

² Job 1

³ New Interpreter's Bible in Twelve Volumes: Vol IV, (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1996), 348.

loss is “I came out of my mother’s womb naked and naked I shall return. The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”⁴

You would think that would have been enough for the Adversary to conclude Job’s faith cannot be shaken. But no, stage two of the experiment is then put in motion. God agrees to allow the ha-Satan to test Job personally; that is physically. The Adversary may do anything with Job except take his life. Thus Job is afflicted with boils; sores all over his skin. These sores would have been disfiguring and viewed as an outward and visible sign of God’s displeasure with Job. Job takes it in and says nothing against God.

Job’s wife however, says plenty. She too is in mourning for the loss of her children and everything she held dear. So she wants to know why, now that Job is a walking pustule, does he hold onto his integrity? Why does Job continue to bless God when God is so unjust?

Her question results in a dilemma. To curse God is forbidden, it leads to death. Then again to worship and honor an unjust God is an act of deceit, it does lack integrity. Mrs. Job raises the moral and theological dilemma of Job’s situation. And so Job deems his wife to be foolish, as perhaps her words strike too true and too close to what is going on in Job’s heart.⁵

Now Job’s friends believe suffering is due to some personal failing that results in a rift that separates us from God. So they want Job to confess to his shortcomings and the many ways he was unfaithful to God. For one to suffer to such an extent, one must have sinned abundantly. Job wants answers. He wants to understand why? If he did something egregiously wrong, what was it so he can fix it? And if it has nothing to do with Job and everything to do with God, how can one worship God with integrity?

Professor Mayer Gruber summarizes the lessons we learn from Job this way: “human suffering is not necessarily deserved – even though we may bring on our own suffering due to recklessness or failure to care for ourselves, that is through our sins. Secondly, suffering creates pain and sorrow and distress and may come without our having done anything. And thirdly, suffering is not deserved.”⁶

Suffering is part of our world, the unexpected chaotic part of our world. Suffering happens. Suffering is painful, life altering, and like Job causes us to want answers, nice neat, predictable answers that will help us understand the why of our suffering.

⁴ Job 1:21

⁵ New Interpreter’s Bible in Twelve Volumes: Vol IV, 356.

⁶ The Jewish Study Bible (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2004), 1499.

Why does bad stuff happen? Why do children have to die? Why was I robbed? Why was my house destroyed and everything I own and hold dear, lost?

We want someone or something to blame. So we seek to blame God, or the marginalized of society, our neighbor, our enemy, or ourselves. And if we don't blame God for what has happened, we want to know where God is in the midst of our suffering? Is God listening? Does God even care? I remember after 9-11 the most common response to the why question was "God is weeping with us in our sorrow."

God weeps with us in our times of sorrow. God holds us close in our times of sorrow. So maybe, as we attempt to get our hearts and heads wrapped around our losses we might begin to move away from the why or why me question to consider different questions. Both of these questions have come from members of this congregation as they have worked through their own suffering.

The first, is what lesson do I need to learn from this experience? Not an easy question when we can't see anything fruitful from the events that have overwhelmed us. But a question that moves us away from finding blame to looking for opportunities and possibilities. The second question to consider is how do I move forward? This is about taking the next step, one step at a time, living in the present and slowly moving forward even if we can't envision any reason as to why we should move forward.

These questions do not diminish the pain of what we have experienced but they do help us reframe our experiences. For unfortunately "it", suffering happens.

And so I want to leave you with these words from Psalm 94, words I have found most helpful in remembering that I am not alone. "When I said, "My foot is slipping," your unfailing love, Lord, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy."⁷

In our suffering let us hold onto God's never ending love and comfort so we are able to move forward in Jesus' name. Amen

⁷ Psalm 94:18-19