

Overcoming Life
Romans 5:3-5; 8:35-39

Two acts of violence in recent weeks, one in a distant state and one in our own community, have sensitized my awareness of evil in the world. We all know that evil is in the world, and the violence that accompanies it, but we also build up defenses. I know that I try as much as I can to hold that harsh reality of our world at a distance.

But every now and then, something like this invades lives so intrusively that it jolts me back. It makes me acutely aware that accidents, tragedies or evil can happen anywhere, anytime. I don't like to see the world like this...where crazy, evil plans are orchestrated against innocents.

Somewhere in all of us resides a fantasy that life should always be fair. We set up our worlds with rules and structures to keep life safe and fair. And we should – this is part of God's call in our lives if we are Christ followers; to help build up justice and fairness. And while I hope for God's kingdom of peace and justice to come into reality in the future, I am devastatingly reminded by these kinds of events that life is just not fair. And God never promised us that it would be...at least not in this world.

And so it leads to the question of why...

Why does a 13 year old believe that his problems can be solved with an assault rifle? Why do innocent little girls get executed by a deranged mad-man? Why do evil regimes exist that only desire the destruction of others? Ones that are like Hitler, Milosevic, and what is going on in Sudan today.

Why God? Why is evil in our midst?

Theologians call this issue "theodicy". It's the issue of the goodness and power of God in light of the suffering of the world. It questions God's justice and asks, "If God exists, why doesn't God do something about suffering?"

So as we explore this question for a little while this morning, I want to look at what the Bible has to say about this. There are some stories in both the old and new testaments that attempt to answer this question. And just to keep this sermon from becoming an all-day seminar, I am going to limit our focus today on the presence of evil and violence in our world. I'll leave natural disasters and other sorts of suffering for another day...a day when Aaron is preaching!

As we begin, let's remember that evil is nothing new. The oldest stories in the Bible deal with the presence of evil and the actions of evil in this world....the serpent in the Garden of Eden that tempted human beings to be their own God; Cain murders his brother Abel out of jealousy; the world becomes so corrupt, so evil, that it has to be literally washed clean by a flood. And that's a sampling from just the first six chapters of the first book of the Bible!

So let's look at a couple of Biblical stories about the hardships and sufferings associated with evil from the Bible.

1. The story of Job. We are introduced to a person named Job in the first verse of this book in the Bible. And Job is described like this, **"In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil."** Job 1:1

Sometimes we get in this mindset that if we're good, if lined up right with God, then there won't be any tragedies that come our way. We get this thought that our faith

and our integrity should keep us safe from injustice or tragedy. But here's Job, blameless and upright (I'm guessing that description may be a stretch for us). And what happens in the story is that through a series of catastrophic events (none of which are his fault) he loses everything. He lost his wealth, his health, and he lost his family. Life isn't fair...this is a big lesson in the book of Job. We have to unlearn this fallacy that life has to be fair, because it just isn't.

Here's how Job tells us that life isn't fair. It's **Job 27:2**, where Job says to his friends, "**As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice, the Almighty, who has made me taste bitterness of soul;** So Job begins with a statement of faith...God lives, the Almighty, that means the all-powerful. Basically Job is saying this, "God is good, but he has denied me justice. The Almighty who has all the power in the universe has made me taste the bitterness of soul." We are learning through Job that life isn't fair...and that faith is not an insurance against tragedy or evil.

But Job makes a mistake in this story that we also make sometimes. It's another learning point that the author wants to be sure we catch. Job eventually blames God for all his troubles, which does not please God, to say the least.

In the end, Job gets an answer from God, but it is not the one he wants. Basically, God says, and this is the big-picture point of the story, "Job, the understanding you seek is beyond your ability to comprehend. So how about this, you be Job, and you let me be God."

So Job is left without an explanation, but with a decision. Does he only trust God when life is good? Or does he trust God to be God, even in the face of evil, tragedy and suffering?

2. Jesus heals a blind man. Sometimes we make the error of determining that tragedies deserve a scapegoat. What I mean is that we believe that there is blame to be placed on someone or some group of people for something bad that has happened. It is true that sometimes our decisions end up having bad consequences in life, but that's not what I'm talking about here. The extreme cases of what I'm talking about here can be illustrated by Fred Phelps and his little following from Topeka. Back in the 80's they began by saying that Aids was God's punishment on gay people. They would probably say that the hurricanes of the last few years are God's punishment on America for our sin. Most recently, Fred Phelps daughter, a spokesperson for the group said, "*Those Amish people, speaking of the shooting in Nickel Mines, PA, everyone is sitting around talking about those poor little girls — blah, blah, blah — they brought the wrath upon themselves,*"

Jesus, however, makes it very clear that tragedy is not a judgment against sin. In John 9, Jesus is walking with his disciples and they come across a man who was blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "**Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?**" "**Neither this man nor his parents sinned**", said **Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."** **John 9:2-3** Then Jesus fulfills the work by healing the blind man.

Tragedy is not a judgment against sin. There is another scene in the Bible of Jesus and his disciples sitting in a restaurant and going over the daily newspaper. One of them points out that a lot of Galileans were murdered under the terrorist regime of Pilate. And Jesus said, "*Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all*

the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you no..." There was another account of 18 that died when a tower fell on them. Again Jesus asks his followers, do you think that they were worse people than you? And again he says, "No."

So Jesus is clear that tragedy is not a judgment on sin. In other parts of the gospels, it's clear that he believed that evil was at work in this world, and that evil has a particular mission, to bring death and destruction. In the same passage where Jesus is talking about himself as the good shepherd, who will lay down his life for the protection his sheep, he says this, **"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life and have it to the full."** John 10:10

So evil is on a mission of death and destruction, but Jesus is on a counter-mission... One that brings life, over-coming life. What Jesus promises is not a life where evil and tragedy are absent, but a life that is filled with his presence – even in times of suffering. Jesus even goes so far as to say to his friends, if you follow me, you will face hardship and evil and suffering because of me.

The author of John's gospel puts it like this...**In him is life, and that life is the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it.** John 1:4-5.

The only place mentioned in the Bible where there is an absence of evil is in heaven. In heaven, evil is completely and utterly defeated. Suffering, pain, fear, all of these are defeated in heaven. In this world, there will be darkness, that is what John is saying. But God has given us a gift of light. And it is a light that darkness can not overcome. The one promise that Jesus makes that he will be present with us through life is the one thing that cannot be taken away from us. Like Job, everything else can be taken from us, but this one thing, this light of the world is the one promise, the one hope God gives us, that can never be taken away.

Paul writes about this very same thing to the church in Rome, to people who are suffering because of their faith. And he writes about this one thing that can never be taken away, even if, like Job, everything else is. This is the promise Jesus makes to us. Not a life free from the sufferings, especially from people who are motivated by evil intent, but with him even if the face of sufferings. **Romans 8:35-37, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."**

And as we address this question, we need to remember that God has given us the gift of free will. God did not create a world on moral autopilot where people make decisions that can never hurt another person. If God gives us this free will, then we have to accept that sometimes people are going to choose poorly; sometimes causing pain unintentionally, and sometimes very maliciously.

So I think that in all this searching, the question comes to us just as it did to Job. The explanations we want are going to be beyond our reach in this life. God does not give us an answer, but God does give us a promise...the promise of overcoming life.

And God gives us a cause...a purpose...something to do about it.

The second thing that I'm trying to work out in response to the events at Memorial Middle School and in Nickel Mines, PA, is "what am I supposed to do about it?" The first part of this sermon was "What am I supposed to think and feel about it?", but after that, it has to turn to action.

And the great thing is that Jesus invites us to shine the light! He wants us to use our lives to bear witness to his light, the light that darkness cannot overcome! And Jesus more than invites us, he empowers us with his over-coming spirit. The apostle Paul puts it like this, **...we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.** Romans 5:3-5.

What I believe Paul is saying here is this; suffering provides an opportunity for Jesus followers to point people to hope! To an ultimate, lasting, life-sustaining hope. A hope that bridges between our broken world and heaven.

Here's two things you can do in the face of evil or suffering to point people to hope!

1. choose forgiveness, not bitterness.

Aaron took us through a series on forgiveness not long ago and I thought it was awesome, and really, really challenging! Forgiveness is easy concept for me to tell someone else to do, but it is tough when you've been hurt. It is not an easy thing to actually do. But Jesus was very clear about the need to forgive, and the power of forgiveness. He teaches us to love our enemies, and he lived it out by forgiving the people who put him on the cross.

Forgiveness is harder as the suffering gets closer to us. That's why I was so amazed at the response of the Amish community in Pennsylvania. You know what I'm talking about right? I'm sure you've read about their expression of forgiveness to the family of the killer. Their reaction was headline news because they were actually living out forgiveness while the nation's spotlight was on them, in the immediate aftermath of destruction and suffering. It was impressive because it wasn't natural. Human nature does not react instinctively toward forgiveness. It was a deliberate choice to follow Jesus in an horrific situation. They intentionally choose forgiveness over bitterness.

I want you to catch the spirit of hope from this article from the Miami Herald, written by James Pinkerton.

It's a paradox of our time that the Amish, arguably the least technological people in America, have nevertheless proven to be extraordinarily effective at communicating what they believe. In a time of proliferating techno-clutter, they got their message across the old-fashioned way: through the blood sacrifice of martyrs.

Of course, there's no reason to think the Amish -- who lost five of their own in an Oct. 2 school shooting in Pennsylvania -- had any plan for teaching us a lesson in Christian forgiveness. But sacrifice and martyrdom are deeply woven into the history of Christianity, and what the Amish offered all of us, whether or not we are Christians, was an enduring example of how to behave admirably in an hour of sorrow.

To use the modern language of cybertech that the Amish so resolutely reject, the message of forgiveness has gone "viral" across the culture.

Listen to this from that same article:

The widow of the killer, Marie Roberts, issued a statement declaring that she and her family were "overwhelmed by the forgiveness, grace and mercy." She added to the Amish: "Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need."

Think about how tough it is for you and me to forgive someone who said something bad about us ten years ago. We carry unforgiveness around for years over stuff that is pretty trivial in comparison to what the Amish of Nickel Mines are facing. So if we have trouble forgiving when it's not life and death, how are we going to react when it is? We need to use forgiveness everyday so that we can choose it when it's difficult. Because persevering in forgiveness, not bitterness, is essential to the character of our faith; which produces hope in the world.

2. Persevere in our mission. The events at Memorial Middle School reminded me of the extreme significance of our mission as a church. Our mission to lead people to an active faith in Jesus Christ is critical to transforming our community and our world, one life at a time.

I remember hearing Leonard Sweet say, "Making a difference in the world is too puny of a mission for the Christian. Jesus didn't come to make a difference in the world, he came to make a different world."

Jesus calls us into this mission of his of making a different world. Aaron, our lead pastor, has chosen a passage from Bill Hybels to help us state our foundational understanding of the mission of the church. It goes like this,

"The local church is the hope of the world. We believe that only one power exists on this planet that can truly transform the human heart and ultimately change the world. It's the power of the love of Jesus Christ, the love that conquers sin and wipes out shame and heals wounds and reconciles enemies and patches broken dreams and ultimately changes the world one life at a time."

Our mission is to reach people who are thinking about using all sorts of the wrong methods to deal with their problems; violence, addictions, materialism, whatever, and introduce them to the only answer that can heal their wounds and fill the hunger of their souls.

Every time we go out into this world we have opportunity after opportunity to shine the light of Jesus' love into the darkness of this world. And every time we choose forgiveness-not bitterness, every time we choose love- not hate, every time we choose to serve others - not ourself, others can see God's hope for the world. They can see the light that shines in the darkness.

We have to persevere in our mission to bring people to an active faith in Jesus Christ. Because it's about way more than you and me. It's about pushing back the darkness and changing the world with the light of Christ.

And for today, let's remember, that we are God's good news to the world. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

