

Sermon July 23, 2023

God Is Not Your Enemy

[Isaiah 44:6-8; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43]

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Grace to you, and peace, from God the Creator and from Jesus, God's son the Christ, who is our Savior, healer, Lord, and friend. Amen.

Last week I spoke of how the Christian faith might be made relevant again, not simply with regard to the broader society, but first, with regard to the congregation; the church; each of us. Christianity, we learned, was something to be *lived*, not simply something we hope for after we die. The Apostle Paul, accordingly, spoke of how the resurrection animates our *mortal* bodies that we become in *this* world at the beginning of this new age, "a new creation," as he says in 2 Corinthians 15. Living that faith, therefore, makes the faith relevant; first to each of us in our daily lives, and then hopefully by extension as we go out into the world.

This morning, I'm going to take a very different look at our readings. I'm going to share with you, in three easy steps, first, how to perceive God as your enemy. Isn't that great? This is why you come to church: to learn how to perceive God as your enemy.

Step one, (and I have this in my home video program, if you're interested,)

Three steps: how to make God your enemy.

Step one: **Suffer!**

Pretty easy right? Suffering is a universal human condition. Every single person in this room including the one speaking, has, is or will suffer some time in their lives. Now suffering comes to us of course, in many forms; it can be physical, as in debilitating chronic pain, or mental illness. It can, on the other hand, be emotional, as in the case of loss, particularly the loss of someone we've loved. Whether it's a father or a mother, a wife or a husband, a close friend, or a colleague, each of us knows the experience of what it means to suffer in the face of loss. So, step one is pretty easy. I'm going to assume that we all have it covered: Suffer.

Step two. Are you ready? **Profess your innocence.** Justify yourself before God. We know how well this worked out for Job, right? Now, Job was a faithful servant of YHWH. According to that text, there was nothing he had done wrong to merit God's punishment, to suffer, presumably at the hands of God. Job challenges God, and God responds by saying, "Who are you to question me?" Now in the Book of Job, we have an assumption. And the assumption might be, using the language of sin, that sin is an act. That sin is something egregious I did, or, in this case, Job did, to upset God, who therefore punishes me. Sin, understood as an *act*. Now in the case of Job, we have no such act on record. So why in the world would God punish Job? Job was innocent! So,

step one: suffer. Step two: profess your innocence. Now, there's more to step two. I'll come back to it in a moment.

But I want to get to Step Three, which is very exciting: Finding no major fault in anything you did, **blame God**. I mean, if God is in control, if everything happens for a reason, and if there is nothing I did to warrant my suffering, God must be responsible. That's what faith is; it's submitting yourself to God's omnipotence, believing that at the end the reasons for my suffering, which at this point are unclear, will be clarified, clarified on that day when we no longer see in part, as the Apostle Paul says in First Corinthians, but in full, in total. In the end, the reasons for our suffering, not apparent to us now, will be revealed.

It's my conviction, and my argument this morning, that these three steps turn God into your enemy, which is to say they make you perceive God as somehow against you. Again, since there's nothing you or I did to deserve the suffering in question, and since God is in control, the "grand puppeteer" as it were, God must be to blame for my suffering. Who else could be? Everything happens for a reason, including my physical and emotional pain.

Now, before I go any further, I do not wish to blame anyone for thinking this way. It's our default theology. The example I think of, with respect to my own life, is growing up with a serious illness that repeatedly put me in the emergency room. I had asthma. And there was a point I remember, probably when I was eight or nine, lying in my father's recliner, barely able to breathe, that I asked myself, "Why are you doing this to me, God?" My little eight-year-old-boy mind had assumed that I had done something wrong, or rather had questioned that. What could I have done, to warrant that kind of suffering?

My point here is that this default way of thinking about God is, for many of us at least, in our bones. Sometimes people in the Bible think this way. You may recall the story, for example, from the Gospel of John 9, where Jesus heals a blind man. The first conjecture on the part of the Pharisees is, "well, he's blind because his parents did something wrong." That's our way of thinking. And we find evidence for it again and again, in both the Old and New Testaments. Sometimes we hear it, moreover, from other Christians: God must be causing you to suffer for a reason, they say, or other preachers, or Sunday School teachers, or those who will occupy at the end of the age what Dante refers to as the Ninth Circle of Hell: televangelists.

This is so much a part of the way that we think about God, I believe, that we have to challenge it constantly, which is why you'll hear me preach again and again and again.

Otherwise, when we see our suffering as caused by God, we not only make an enemy of God, we make our suffering worse! We add an additional burden to our suffering. Either I didn't do anything wrong, and God unjustly punishes me, or I did something wrong and God punishes me severely. This added dimension to our burdens is an illustration for why good theology matters. Bad theology can make suffering worse, when it makes God into an enemy. When it gives a spiritual dimension, you might say, to our suffering and pain. Indeed, even if we acknowledge before God that we are not perfect, the alternative, as I've been saying, is no better; if I did something wrong, clearly, the thinking goes, God is punishing me.

(Now in nerd-speak, just to get into the weeds, this is called the "Deuteronomic theology." We see it in the book of Deuteronomy, in the book of Joshua. It's challenged indirectly by the book of Job, as well as the book of Ecclesiastes. Okay, we're now out of the weeds.)

So here's my question. How do we avoid perceiving God as our enemy? How do we come to understand that God is not the cause or the source of our suffering? How do we come to understand God doesn't want us to live in pain? How do we come to understand that God doesn't want us, like creation, to groan, in the words of the Apostle Paul, to wither away, and die?

Well, for starters – and this is a pretty radical claim, so I invite you to brace yourselves – we turn to Scripture to hear, what my favorite radio host Paul Harvey once called "the rest of the story," or I might say, the alternative to our story.

So, let's take a quick look at each of the readings today, beginning with Isaiah 44:8. Now, this is a good example of why Isaiah is sometimes called "the fifth Gospel." It's chock full of good news. Verse 8 of our first reading is no exception. Listen closely:

"⁸Do not fear, or be afraid; [God says.]

Have I not told you from of old and declared it?

You are my witnesses!

Is there any god besides me?

Turn to no other rock; I know not one."

That's the God of the Old Testament, not the wrathful, vindictive God, but the God who says to us, do not fear or be afraid. That's good news! That's the word of God in this text. Now, that was easy.

Let's turn to Paul next, where things get a little more complicated. So, let's turn to Paul and see if we can make sense of what he's saying. I want you to look at verses 19 to 23. Paul writes,

“¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.”

Why? Because beginning with those filled by the Spirit, God is transforming the Earth into a new creation, where death will no longer have the last word. As those of us who are scientists in the congregation might appreciate, Paul includes the totality of nature, the whole cosmos, as part of God’s healing plan. God not only redeems human beings, according to Paul, God will transform the entirety of the cosmos, again, beginning with those who are filled with the Holy Spirit.

So, that’s Paul. Here’s the problem. If you look at verse 20, what does it *mean*? What does it mean, “for the creation was subjected to futility?” Now, I used to say, “For the creation was subjected to *uselessness*,” which doesn’t help, as if *uselessness* suddenly explained this passage. But I found another translation, or rather a series of translations, that might help all of us make sense here of Paul.

Try this: “For the creation was subjected to *frustration*.” Or again, “creation was subjected to *frailty*,” or again, “creation was subjected to *mortality*,” or again, following Genesis 3: 17-19, “Creation was cursed by God.”

Listen closely, Genesis 3: “And to the man God said, ‘because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘you shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you. Cursed is the ground because of you. In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life, thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the plants of the field by the sweat of your face. You shall eat bread until you return to the ground. For out of it you were taken. You are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Here something important happens. God temporarily steps back, cedes, or *hands over control*, due perhaps to Adam’s sin, to malevolent powers that subject us to everything from suffering to pain and death. God as it were, *turns the world over to these malevolent spiritual forces*.

We live accordingly in a state now of separation from God, which is a much better way to define sin. Sin isn’t simply something you do that merits God’s punishment. Sin is a state of separation, or a condition. Something happened in the creative process, something went wrong, a mistake occurred. Because of it God turns the world over,

temporarily, to the gods of the heathen, or to the elemental spirits, according to Galatians 4, or to the principalities and powers of this world, according to Romans 8.

But, God's ultimate purpose will not be thwarted. God, as I said before, indeed as Paul said before, will redeem human beings, freeing us from this bondage, transform creation, freeing creation from this bondage, and restoring the world to the way God intended it to be.

Now when my mother passed away, believe it or not, that was one of the most comforting things I could say to myself: her death was not something God wanted. It was part, rather, of a fallen world that God did not initially intend, but that God promises, if you will, to clean up – and we are the beginning of that cleaning, that restoration.

The most important point here is simple. For Paul, God is not, at least not directly, responsible for our suffering.

Turn now with me to Matthew 13, our Gospel reading for today. Take a look at verses 25, 28 and 38. Notice the language Jesus uses for the adversary: "an enemy, he says, came and sowed seeds among the wheat and then went away." Verse 28: "an enemy has done this." And then again, verse 38: the weeds are the children of the evil one," and 39: "and the enemy who sowed them is the devil."

To whom does Jesus attribute the planting of bad seeds, the existence of evil, and with it, suffering in the world? To an Enemy, an Evil One, who snuck into the creative process and turned it away from God.

We have no explanation here for how an enemy could sneak past God, we might say, to do this. But we do see that God takes an evil and promises to turn it into a good. Again, God's creation brought forth estrangement and separation from God. It brought forth resistance, and rebellion against God. God, however, doesn't leave it alone. God promises to make out of it something good. The main point is simple. God is not responsible for our suffering or our pain. Evil is caused by the children of the evil one.

I want to take a quick look at one more passage. This is chapter 13 from the Gospel of Luke, 10-17. Listen to parts of it closely:

"Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues. Just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. Then when Jesus saw her he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."

Notice here the miracle of healing, the most common miracle Jesus performs,

some 35 times in all four Gospels, reflective of God's emerging kingdom as a kingdom of restoration, wholeness and healing.

"When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leaders of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'there are six days on which work ought to be done, come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day.' But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites. Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the manger and lead it to give it to water? And ought not this woman—and here's what I want you to hear—a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for 18 long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?'"

So to whom does Jesus attribute evil and suffering? Not to God, not to himself, to Satan; not to God, not to himself, but to Satan. What we have here is the same thing as the Apostle Paul: God temporarily cedes control, such that Satan or other malevolent forces become responsible for our suffering in the world.

The world is not as God intended, but God has promised, in Christ, to do something about it. Now, I don't want terms like Satan, the Devil, or the Evil One to distract you. My point or rather, the point I wish to make, is that all of these authors, Paul, Matthew and Luke, attribute our suffering to forces other than God.

Let me repeat that. All these authors, Paul, Matthew, and Luke, attribute our suffering to forces other than God. God is not our enemy. God does not want us to suffer.

So what does God do about it?

God joins us in our suffering. Not as its cause, but as our companion, through Jesus Christ. This means that you are never alone. No matter how bad or awful your suffering is. To enter into this fray, God falls into being as Christ, confirming God's identity as the fellow sufferer who understands. The Gospel is that nothing can separate us from this love, not even death.

Dear Friends in Christ, today's message is simple. God is not your enemy. Indeed, God has reconciled you, me and the rest of the world to God's self in Christ Jesus. Now, with the Apostle Paul, we await the birth pangs of a new creation. Indeed, we are already participating in it.

My point here is this: the next time you suffer, remember, God is not your enemy in Christ; God is with you, alongside of you, and all around you.

"There is no other rock;" we read in Isaiah. "I know not one."

And all God's people said, "Amen."