

Sermon
March 23, 2025

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A Fourth Misconception

Grace to you and peace from God, the source of life, the inmost reality of all things, the deepest ground of all grounds, and from Jesus the Christ, who is that light and life in the world. Amen.

Today's message, as I mentioned at the introduction, is called "A Fourth Misconception," and I have to warn you about something. I barely made it through the eight o'clock service preaching this sermon. And so, as a remedy, during the forum, (which was fantastic), I drank three cups of coffee. So watch out, this is going to be a four-ticket ride...

Wednesday, as you know, is, during Lent, a time for our mid-week services in the chapel. Last Wednesday, I invited each of us to pause, to take a breath – reminding us that the season of Lent, after all, offers us a time to reflect, a time to evaluate our relationship with God and with one another, and when necessary, a time to repent of our self-centered ways.

Today, I want to hit pause, or rather the pause-button once more, not only to reflect, as we did on Wednesday, not only to repent, but also to review; to take stock of the territory we've covered since the beginning of Lent, by looking back in terms of the sermons that I've preached and that you've heard at worship, to consider it next, where we are with respect to our Gospel reading for today, and finally, to look ahead, as we journey with Christ to the foot of the cross.

Now this may sound like a daunting project; don't worry. My estimate is that each summary of the sermons I've preached should only be about an hour, and I've timed it in a way so that you will remain seated here until Kyle begins his recital at 4 pm, so like I said, buckle up. ☺

The first Sunday of Lent, we heard the story about how Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. We ask, based upon Jesus's reply to Satan in that story, "What does it mean to tempt God?" Or, as Jesus said to Satan directly, "not put God to the test." We learn, in turn, that putting God to the test means having God *prove* Godself, by forcing God to intervene according to *our* expectations or on our terms. This was evident when Jesus is told by Satan to jump off the temple and trust that God or God's angels will catch him: this is putting God to the test.

But faith, we discovered, is not about having God intervene or about having God do *our* work. It's about *us* doing *God's* work, insofar as God, through the Spirit, empowers

us to care for the poor, to strive for justice in a time of increasing tyranny, to love our neighbors as ourselves; all as an anticipation, and you might say, pre manifestation of God's coming Kingdom.

That was week one. Last week, the second Sunday of Lent, we talked about three misconceptions regarding the Christian faith. That 1: it's inherently *patriarchal*; 2, that it's *apolitical*; it concerns matters of spirituality alone; and 3: that it's *other-worldly*, that its focus is not on life before death, but rather life after death, when the soul scooped out of this body returns to its source in heaven.

Jesus calls each of these into question. We saw, for example, how Jesus refers to Herod (who was plotting to kill him) as "that fox," suggesting that politics can't intervene with his ongoing work for the sake of the kingdom.

We saw how Jesus refers not in terms of patriarchy, but in terms of maternal love, regarding his feelings about Jerusalem, and we saw finally how this love would not deter him from fulfilling his mission, not in a world *after we die*, but *here on earth*.

Today, I'd like to focus on one more misconception, again, a "fourth misconception" about the Christian faith, and more generally, about the Bible, and this is it: that suffering is somehow a sign of God's judgment because you've done something wrong.

Some of you may recall a story I shared a few years ago, about my time as a hospital chaplain while I was in seminary. This was easily the hardest part of that journey. There was one time where a young woman, at 21 years old, who had been swimming, she was in great health, had, suddenly, a brain aneurysm, was taken to the emergency room, and I was called as the chaplain on duty. I remember rushing to the room to find her mother and her mother's pastor outside the doors of the ICU. I spoke a few words with her mother, trying to say something at least that might be a little helpful. Her mother went back to her daughter's bedside.

Then I turned to the pastor. As the young seminarian. I asked her, "What do you say to someone in a situation like this?" She replied, "I just told her God's honest truth, that she's being punished by the Lord for some kind of sin she committed."

Now, sometimes I like to think that people go to seminary to *unlearn* this kind of bad theology: the kind of theology, as the theologian Catherine Keller observes, that "increases the burden of suffering by turning God into an abuser who punishes us for our own good."

Thanks be to God, Jesus, in our Gospel reading for today, calls this way of thinking about God in relation to sin *totally* into question. Take a look, if you will, at verses 1-2 of our Gospel reading for today. At that time, that very time, there were some present who told him about the Galileans, that is, the Jewish Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. Jesus asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than other Galileans? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Two things here to observe. First, most scholars agree, as one commentator puts it, that “this group of Galilean Jews died at the hands of the Roman government while engaging in some form of resistance. Pilate adds insult to injury here by mixing their blood with the animals they used in sacrifices.” Now, according to the common Jewish belief of the time, a painful experience like this is a sign of God’s judgment: these Galileans must have done something wrong.

Take a much less serious example. Whenever I get sick, that’s my default theology. “I must have done something wrong.” I think it’s almost hardwired into us. When things go bad, at some level, we suspect God is punishing us for our sins, as God ostensibly punished those Galileans.

But notice what Jesus says in response: again, verse 2, Jesus asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you,” – if you have a pen or pencil, I would underline those four words – “no, I tell you.” Neither suffering, nor execution, nor death in general, come from God, according to Jesus, in these four words.

The Apostle Paul confirms what Jesus says in 1 Corinthians 15, when he says, not that death is an instrument of God, that death is the *enemy* of God. Death is demonic. It is the final power, over which God *conquers*, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now, as I said at the beginning, I want all of us to take a moment and pause; to reflect this Lenten season, to meditate on a single and simple truth: God, at least according to Jesus, does not punish you for your sins by making you suffer. Suffering is not an expression of God’s will, is not some part of God’s mysterious plan, nor is it a penalty for some kind of “hidden sin,” the way it seems to have been for the pastor I met the emergency room.

As Jesus says elsewhere, “a kingdom divided cannot stand.” If God, whose nature is love, in Jesus came “so that we might have abundant life” (That’s John:10), then God cannot and *is not* the source of death and misery. In this way, God *is* on our side. In this way, God *is not* our enemy. In this way, God wants life, not death.

During this season of Lent and well beyond, I invite you to think about God not as your enemy, but as your friend and companion. God is not the source of your suffering; God, in Christ, has taken the first steps to *remove* your suffering and ultimately, to heal all of creation.

May that single point stay with you this week and this season, as we find ourselves journeying with Jesus to the foot of the cross.

In His name, we pray. Amen.