

**WHY, GOD?
SEPTEMBER 11, 2011**

“It ain’t over til it’s over”—that’s what we were supposed to be talking about this morning. It was to be the second of a three-part series on the life of Simon Peter, particularly his amazing comeback from miserable failure to being “the rock” upon which Christ built His church.

However, as Scott would tell you, although I usually plan my preaching two months in advance, I’ve been known to change things from time to time—sometimes as late as the Saturday night before a planned sermon. It wasn’t quite that late this time. Actually it was at least 10 days ago that I realized that this sermon needed to change direction.

As we have acknowledged earlier, today is the tenth anniversary of the tragic events of 9/11/2001. However, since we are planning a community service to remember this sad day in our history, it alone did not change my sermon plans for today. But when coupled with a series of other more recent events, I was compelled to make that change.

It began with Irene, the hurricane that recently battered the East Coast.

And then, before we could take a deep breath, tropical storm Lee, brought severe flooding to the Gulf Coast and tornadoes across the Southeast, including one within a ½ mile

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of this church that did millions of dollars of damage and once again took innocent lives.

And who of us did not cringe when we saw the hundreds of wildfires ravaging thousands of acres of forest and hundreds of homes in Texas, and once again innocent lives were lost. And these were just the big things over the last couple of weeks. A mentally deranged man fires his assault rifle into an IHop in Nevada, killing four and injuring several others. A young teenager is killed by a drunk driver and a young child is killed by a stray bullet in a gang related shooting.

And if you watch and listen to those who lost property and more importantly, loved ones, you will always hear the same laments and questions that we heard after the tragedy of 9/11 ten years ago today. It may be asked in a number of ways, but at the heart of them all is the two word question in my sermon title this morning—“Why, God?”

With all that’s happened in recent weeks, and the realization that today is the tenth anniversary of 9/11, I was compelled to change my sermon plans to struggle once again with the age old question, “Why, God?”

I remember, what was it, 5 or 6 years ago that Katrina struck the Gulf Coast. Someone said to me, “You know, the

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song that keeps going through my mind is a chorus that a lot of us learned in Sunday School—"He's Got the Whole World in His Hands". One verse says, "He's got you and me in His hands" and another says, "He's got the little bitty babies in His hands."

"You know," she said, "If He had the people on the Gulf Coast in His hands last week, then it appears to me that God's not doing too good of a job protecting His possessions."

This person was not an atheist or even an agnostic. They were someone of faith who was struggling, as most all of us do, to understand, "Why, if the God who loves us, who is so powerful and in control, how could He let this happen?"

As I recalled these words last week, I also remembered the words written by one of our teenagers ten years ago in a poem they wrote about 9/11 entitled "Were you there, Lord?" that concluded with these words..."Were you there? Were you in the plane during their 45 minutes of pain? Were you there at all Lord? Yes, you must have been. You promised you would stay with us. But why, Lord? Why so many innocent people? Which leaves many to wonder, And I wonder too, were you there, Lord? Were you?"

And so we have struggled before and we struggle now with the age old question—why do bad things happen to good

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people? I know it was asked 10 years ago after 9/11. And I know it was asked 5 years ago after Katrina, and I'm sure it has been asked and continues to be asked along the East Coast and the Gulf Coast and in Texas, and yes, here in our own community.

Of course the history of this question is much older than 9/11. The issue was raised with Jesus in our text from Luke this morning. As we read earlier, it says in the first verse, "There were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate mixed with their sacrifices." What Luke was describing was the murder of some Galileans, while they were worshipping on the orders of the Roman Governor Pilate. We don't know who raised the issue with Jesus. It may have been relatives or friends of those who were massacred, trying to make sense of a senseless killing. It may have been someone who was just raising a question with no answer just to see what they could stir up. Or it may have been like those people who have been sincere when asking me over the years, "If God is in control, why does God let bad things happen to good people?"

I think a lot of people, including a lot of Christians, would be surprised at Jesus' answer. Jesus says that sometimes there is no answer. Jesus, in fact, never answered their

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questions. He never did explain why. Instead he said, “Do you think Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, No!” Jesus never answered their “Why?” questions. He simply said, “Don’t ever fall into the trap of thinking that when disaster strikes, the people must have been bad.”

Look, then, at the 4th verse, “Of those 18 who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, No!” It seems that a group of 18 people were standing on a street corner and all of a sudden a wall falls off a building and crushes them.

Jesus says, “Is there any reason we can give to explain that? Was something wrong with these people? Did they do something to deserve their fate? Jesus never did answer, why.

Friends, I have come to believe that the reason He never said why is because there is no answer to why. Why did this last hurricane batter the East Coast instead of drifting harmlessly out in the Atlantic? The meteorologist will tell you it all has to do with high and low pressures that without them our weather would be total chaos. There are just times when the winds go crazy, and you only have to ride a couple of miles from here to see that reality.

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Storms happen. Fires happen. Accidents happen. So along the East Coast and in New England and along the Gulf Coast and in Texas and in Cherokee County, Georgia, millions and millions of dollars and damages have been wrought, many injured and lives lost. And on September 11, 2001, 2998 innocent people lost their lives in an unspeakable act of terror. Why did these things happen? There is, as best I can tell, no answer.

Are we wrong then to question God at times when the darkness of life overwhelms us? After all that I have said this morning you may be surprised to hear me say, "I don't think so." I don't think it's wrong to question God when life overwhelms us. In fact, right or wrong, it's at those times in our lives when most of us have more to say to God than at any other time. However, it often seems that God must not be listening, because it seems He is silent about our suffering and the questions it raises.

In our second scripture this morning Paul proclaims that, "...we know that God works for good with those who love Him..." If we really believe that Paul's words are true, then why do we experience silence in times of our suffering – in times of our questioning God?

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I believe that it's because we ask the wrong questions – and I would like to spend our remaining time talking about what those wrong questions are, and how we can change into them into right questions – questions that God can and will answer.

Someone has said, “The enemies of my soul are the most deadly of all.” In other words, regardless of the calamity or tragedy that befalls us, ultimately trying to understand the meaning of what has happened is a far greater problem than the experience itself. From deep within us the questions inevitably come, and if we let them they can overwhelm us. Although I'm sure there are others, I find that these enemies of my soul and the questions they bring can generally be put in one of three categories – confusion, despair and helplessness.

Confusion – confusion first appears when we cannot make sense out of what has happened to us and from it comes the first question – “Why has this happened to me?” Surely this was the first question for those thousands of families who lost loved ones in the terrible events precipitated by the 9/11 attacks.

Have you ever asked that question? When we cannot find an adequate or satisfactory answer, the work of confusion begins. Several years ago a pastor friend of mine told me a

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story about a young couple in his church. They had tried for years to have a child, without success. Finally, when they had just about given up hope, she became pregnant. They believed that God had granted them a miracle. Several months into the pregnancy, while running an amniocentesis test, the doctor had accidentally punctured the placenta and caused a hemorrhage. Although, they reacted quickly and delivered the child by C-section, the damage was irreversible and within a few hours the premature infant died.

“Why me? Why us?” The mother asked her pastor. I must be honest and say there is no complete answer to her question. Scientifically, of course, we can explain what happened, just as we can explain how hurricanes happen, however that answer will not satisfy our hearts. Why did it happen? On one level the answer is obvious. The doctor made a mistake. A needle was stronger than tissue, and when the membrane broke, blood pressure created a hemorrhage. Do you think that explanation was enough for this distraught young mother? Of course not! Indeed, at times like this ‘why’ can never be completely answered so that our hearts are completely relieved.

I believe that is when we need to change the question. That’s what Paul did in his letter to the Romans. He turned why

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into what. He implied that the better question is, “What can happen if I turn the whole matter over for God to use?” Is it easy? No. Is it possible? Yes.

John and Colby Faulk were 6 and 10 year old brothers, the joy of their parents, George & Carol Faulk. One day, 10 yr. old John, seemingly healthy, had a heart seizure and died. Two years later Colby also died suddenly. Their parents had every reason to be angry, to withdraw, and to feel sorry for themselves. Instead, they were determined that their son’s deaths would not be forgotten or in vain. They started a support group called compassionate friends to help other parents who had tragically lost children, and today it is a worldwide organization that has helped hundreds of parents deal effectively with their grief in losing a child. Something good came out of tragedy.

Ten years ago today, on September 11, 2001, there was a blood drive scheduled here at the church. It had nothing to do with the tragic events of that day. We had hoped to get our usual 20 units of blood. However, what was planned as a four-hour blood drive became a ten-hour blood drive with over 200 people signed up to give and dozens of others sent elsewhere. Something good came out of something very bad. It was a

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miracle I have seen repeated again and again. When Katrina hit, we filled two 24' trucks with food, and water, and clothing for the people of Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. When the earthquake hit Haiti, we literally saved thousands of lives and gave dozens of men jobs (because we gave them a shovel) as we filled two huge crates along with my brother's church in Elberton to send to missionaries there. Those same missionaries will be with us next month because they want to personally thank-you for your generosity and caring.

Despair: The second enemy of our soul when we suffer is despair. The wrong question it produces is most closely related to the one raised in that teenagers question following 9/11.

“Where is God when bad things happen to good people?”

Despair eats away at our hopes like a cancer. And Solomon, the wisest man in the Old Testament was right – “Without dreams, without hope – the people perish.”

In a story that I have often repeated, but points out so powerfully where God is when we are suffering is told by Ellie Weasel, a Jew who survived the Nazi death camps at Auschwitz. The secret service hung two Jewish men and a boy before the assembled inhabitants of the camp. The men died quickly, but

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the death struggle of the boy lasted a half hour. “Where is God – where is he?” A man whispered. Again he cried, “Where is God now?” Weisel said that he heard a voice within himself answer, “He is there – hanging on those gallows.”

I believe that response, “God is hanging on those gallows”, provides the answer to the question about the whereabouts of God in times of pain and tragedy. First, it is an assertion about God. God is no executioner – and no spectator (which would amount to the same thing). Instead, God is in the middle of the tragedy. He is on the side of the sufferer. Second, God’s presence does not take away the suffering. The little boy still hangs from the gallows. As an Easter people, these two facts are at the center of our understanding of the agony of the cross. God does not answer our questions about the reason for suffering. Instead, he lowers himself into the depth of our pain and shares it with us. This, I think, is what Paul means, when he says that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.” Then Jesus is not the victim needed to satisfy God’s sense of injustice, but rather God making himself vulnerable to our suffering.

Again, I think Paul, in his words to the Christians at Rome, reminds us that we are asking the wrong question when we ask,

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“Where is God...?” Instead we would be far better served if we would ask, “How can I recognize that he is present with me right now in the midst of my sufferings?”

Whenever we are faced with tragedy, whether that of great magnitude like 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina, or earthquakes in Haiti, or wild fires in Texas, or smaller, more personal tragedy that affects only a few, it is easy to be overwhelmed and feel helpless, and that nothing we can do will make a difference.

If I believed that was true, then I could not stand before you in this pulpit. Last month I completed 30 years of ordained ministry, and as simple as it sounds, I know at least these two things –First, we cannot do everything, but we can do something. And second—a little can become a lot when God is in the middle of it.

I will ask the Session later this month to confirm that our theme for the coming year is to be “Mission Possible”. For a number of reasons, both real and imagined, our country’s mood is predominantly one of “We can’t” and not “We can”. It is understandable that the church can easily get caught in this “we can’t” attitude.

But friends, I do not believe that that is God’s will or God’s plan for us. It must begin with Paul’s words to the Philippians in

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4:13, “I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength.” In just a few weeks we are going to gather on a Sunday afternoon and package 10,000 meals to feed 10,000 hungry people somewhere in this world. It’s going to cost \$2500—money that we could never find in our budget as we struggle in this economy to pay our bills. But with a few M&Ms and the example of our children we are over half way “finding” that money.

At a time when church membership in mainline denomination is stagnant at best, we’re about to launch a 12-18 month effort to share the Good News of Jesus Christ to people in our community who have not heard how much God loves them.

While the newspaper tells us that many of the food ministries in our country are closing are scaling back their food ministries, we continue to serve a record number out of the Jay Weaver Food Pantry each week.

Friends, I have come to believe that the answer to the question, “Why, God?” may not be revealed to us always on this side of heaven.

Thus, instead of asking, “Why, God?” Maybe we need to ask, “What can happen if we turn it over to God and work with

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Him in finding the good that this tragedy can produce? Second, instead of asking, “Where is God?”, we need to ask “How can we help those who are suffering to experience God’s presence with them in their suffering to give comfort and begin healing? And finally, instead of asking “How can I make a difference when the problem is so immense?, we can say, “What can I do with God’s help to help those who are helpless know that God has not turned his back on His people and He never will. Friends, whatever happens in this life our hope is in Him. He has promised, “Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you” (Hebrews 12:5)

He is with us now, even in the midst of our sorrows, our doubts, our fears, our anger, and our uncertainty. We don’t have to face this alone. We can lean on the everlasting arms of Christ.