John 9:1-7; Luke 13:1-5; John 11:17-44 *Glad You Asked: The Question that Never Goes Away*

***Why?***

I took the title for my sermon today from a book by Philip Yancey. It’s this little book called “The Question that Never Goes Away”. This is the copy from our church library. It talks about the Tsunami that hit Japan in 2011, the ravages of war that took Sarajevo from an Olympic town to a burned out shell, and the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut in December of 2012.

The question that never goes away is, of course: “Why?”

Why do these senseless, tragic, evil things happen in our world? Why does the crust of the earth crack and shake and send walls of water into the shore with the speed of a jetliner? Why do people feed on hatred and racism and greed to fight wars that never seem to end? Why does a young man from a privileged background force his way into a school and methodically start shooting first graders?

Why?

Pick just about any month, in any year, and the news cycle will be dominated by stories that make you ask why. The month of August, 2019, was particularly horrifying. The month got off to a bad start when a gunman shot up a garlic festival in Gilroy, California on July 28. He killed himself and three others, and wounded 17 people. That story hardly had time to stay in the news, however, when on Friday, August 3, an armed man walked into a Wal-Mart in El Paso and started shooting. 22 people were killed and 24 people were injured. A manifesto published online by the shooter indicates that the shootings were racially motivated. Just 13 hours later, a shooter opened fire at a popular nightclub district in Dayton, Ohio. In just 32 seconds of shooting 10 people were killed and 27 people injured, before police were able to shoot and kill the gunman. Among the dead was the gunman’s own sister.

Most the rest of August was dominated by news of Dorian, a hurricane forming in the Atlantic and slowly making its way towards the U.S. For a long time we were told it was aiming directly at Florida. In the end, it struck Florida only a glancing blow, and brought significant rain to the Carolinas. But where Dorian did the most damage was in the Bahamas. It hit the islands as a Category 5 hurricane and then it seemed to stall out. For over 24 hours on the last days of August and the first days of September1 it seemed to hover over the islands of Abaco and Grand Bahama. Pictures show complete devastation. Over 70,000 people are said to have lost everything. Currently, the official death toll sits at 50, but 2,500 people are considered missing.

And the question is: why? Why do these terrible things happen? If God is real, why does he allow tragedies like this to take place?

We are doing a series of sermons called “Glad You Asked.” About a month ago, we created a submission form on our website and invited you to send in your questions about God, the Bible, and Christianity. I’ve looked through those questions, tried to group them up where appropriate, and set out to answer at least 6 of them here on Sunday morning. **And here’s the “why?” question:**

We live in a world where terrible things happen every day. Children are shot in school. People are killed buying groceries. How do you answer people who ask: "If there is a God why would He let that happen?"

It’s a good question. A hard question. As the title to Yancey’s book says, it’s the question that never goes away.

We actually did a series of sermons like this 10 years ago, where we invited people to submit questions. Coincidentally, it was in September of 2009, and I preached on the question: “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Last year, when we had a series called “Christian-isms” I preached on the saying “Everything happens for a reason.” In both cases, I attempted to answer the “why?” question. We’ve taken the text to both of those sermons and posted them on the resources page of our website, along with a discussion guide to go along with the sermon today.

My point is, I’ve offered sermons on this topic before. In a way, I feel like almost every sermon I preach is an effort, in some way, to answer the question of why bad things happen. The question doesn’t go away; and it seems like no matter how often we wrestle with it, we’ll never fully get the question answered. And I’m afraid that’s going to be the case today. I’m going to address the question, but I’m not promising that I’m going to give a final, satisfying answer that solves the problem of suffering once and for all. I’m afraid I do not possess such an answer. This won’t be the last time we ask why, and it won’t be the last time I preach on it.

***The Question Asked of Jesus***

Instead, what I want to do today is look at the times in the Bible when Jesus is asked this question.

By my count, there are at least three times when Jesus is asked, essentially, “Why?” “Why did this thing happen…Why did this terrible thing occur?” At least three times, probably more, where Jesus is asked “why?” I’d like to look at these stories with you, and think about the ways that Jesus responds.

And I’ll tell you, right up front, that Jesus never really does answer that question. He never really explains the problem of suffering. But he does leave some suggestions of what we should do when we are faced with that question.

So, three stories about Jesus.

***“Do the Work”***

The first one comes from John 9. **John 9:1-2:**

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. **2**His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Do you hear the question that never goes away? Essentially, they’re asking: “Why?” Why is this man blind?

The disciples see an interesting theological problem. Is his blindness a punishment? Did his parents do something wrong? Or was it his own sin that caused his problem? Which is especially intriguing, since he was born this way. Did he somehow sin while he was in the womb? Eventually, this becomes an interesting case for the teachers of the law and the scribes and the Pharisees to argue about as well. They hunt down his parents to make sure he was really blind from birth, they begin to believe that maybe he was faking it.

What we see here is the question in its essential form. The disciples are expressing a world view that was common at the time, and one which is common today as well. Ancient Jews had never heard the word Karma, but that’s basically what they believed in. They believed that if something bad happened to you, it’s because you did something bad. And if good things happened to you, it’s because you did something good. And if people believed that you were a good person, and then something bad happened to you, then that was proof positive that you weren’t so good after all.

At that time, if a man was wealthy it was considered evidence that he was a good person. If a man was poor, it was the result of a pattern of sin. And if a man was blind…well, you get the idea.

That’s the idea behind the eastern religion concept of Karma. What you do is what you get. The cosmic scales of justice must balance out for each and every person. As Christians, we don’t officially believe in Karma, but a lot of us want to believe the world works this way. We want to believe that if we do good things, good things will come our way. And when something bad comes our way, we can’t help but wonder what we did wrong…

So, for the disciples, this blind man on the side of the road represents an interesting theological question. There is all kinds of speculation and guessing. But in the midst of their theological debate, there is one thing they forget: the man himself, the man who is suffering.

But not Jesus**. Even as His disciples wonder**, Jesus goes directly to the blind man, spits on the ground (which is kind of gross), makes some mud with his saliva, and puts it on the man’s eyes (which is even grosser). Then he sends him to wash in a pool and he comes home seeing. (John 9:6-8)

Instead of answering the “why” questions, Jesus goes to help. Here’s what **He says to the disciples:**

**3**“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. **4**As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. **5**While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

I’m not completely sure what to make of all of Jesus’ answer. He seems to be saying that in this particular case the man’s blindness is preparation for the miracle Jesus is about to do. That makes this man’s suffering unique as compared to pretty much every other case of suffering in the world.

Jesus does seem to dismiss the Karma ide though: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” There is not a direct cause and effect relationship between someone’s wrongdoing and the dysfunction in this man’s eyes.

But the most important part of what Jesus says seems to be in verse 4: “As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me.” (John 9:4)

What Jesus is saying is that we must not let the interesting theological problem blind us to the fact that there are people suffering right before us. When Jesus saw the blind man He did not see a question that needed to be answered; He saw a man He could help.

We must be very careful that our quest to answer the why question doesn’t lead us to overlook the people who are suffering.

I’ll give you an example: this week there were headlines about a pastor in California who committed suicide just hours after officiating the funeral for a woman who had also committed suicide. The story made national news because the pastor had achieved a national profile for being an advocate for mental health issues and had been very open about his own battles with depression. I don’t know a ton of other details, but the whole thing is very tragic and a reminder of how difficult issues of mental health and suicide can be.

But in some corners of the internet, the occasion of this pastor’s suicide has been an opportunity to kick around the question: can a person commit suicide and still be saved? In other words, some people would rather skip over the tragedy in order to debate an issue. And I’m not saying that a question like that is not worth examining, but let’s make sure we meet suffering with the compassion it deserves.

Compassion is a word that means “to suffer with.” In the face of inexplicable tragedy, that’s what Christians are called to do. We must suffer with those who are affected.

A university researching pain recruited volunteers to see how long they could keep their feet in buckets of ice water. They found out volunteers who had a companion in the room could endure twice as long as those who were alone. “The presence of another caring person doubles the amount of pain a person can endure”, the researchers wrote in their report on the experiment. All too often, our pain-avoiding and death-defying culture does the opposite: we isolate those who are suffering from normal human contact. We prefer to not get too close to someone else’s suffering, as though we are afraid it is contagious. (Yancey, *The Question that Never Goes Away*, p. 57-58)

The truth is: there doesn’t have to be an answer, an explanation. Why was this man born blind? I don’t know. But Jesus saw someone who needed help.

Why do people kill complete strangers? Why do storms devastate one island while leaving another island completely untouched? We don’t know. There might not ever be an explanation. But don’t let the search for an answer get in the way of suffering with those who are hurting.

***“You too Will All Perish”***

The second story comes from Luke 13. **Luke 13:1:**

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.

We don’t get a lot of details, but we can speculate a little. Obviously, this would have been a big headline at the time. Israel was an occupied country, under control of the Roman Empire. Apparently there were some men—from the region of Galilee--that the Romans suspected of conspiring revolt against the empire. So the Roman governor—Pilate, who has a big role to play later in Jesus’ story—ordered his soldiers to follow them to the temple and then kill them as they approached the altar. Their blood was mixed with their sacrifices. It was a horrible abuse of authority. The kind of state sponsored terrorism that still makes headlines today.

Plus, there had recently been an accident in the town of Siloam. Jesus Himself brings it up in verse 4. Some men were constructing a tower when it fell over, killing 18.

So the question for Jesus is: Why did these things happen? Were these men worse sinners than everyone else? Why?

But again, Jesus does not answer the why question. In fact, His response may seem a little harsh to us. Here’s what He says, **verses 2-5**:

 **2**Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? **3**I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. **4**Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? **5**I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

Jesus doesn’t pursue the question of why. He’s not interesting in speculating on what any of those who died may or may not have done. Rather, he wants to speak to those who are still living. He says, in essence: Let this moment be a moment to take stock of your own life. Let these events be a reminder that you too, will one day die.

We live in a fallen, broken world. The Bible is very clear about that. If there is an answer to the “why?” question, that’s it. The world is broken. In those sermons I mentioned earlier, I talked about how the consequences of the fall contribute to bad things happening to us. In a nutshell, here are three reasons bad things happen:

1 **) We live in a fallen world.** Because of sin, God’s good creation has been corrupted and compromised. As it says in Genesis, childbirth became painful and weeds started to grow. (Genesis 3:16 & 18) As it says in Romans, “creation was subjected to frustration” and is in “bondage to decay.” (Romans 8:20-21)

It’s because we live in a fallen world that healthy cells within our bodies mutate and go from being helpful servants to our well-being to cancerous traitors that threaten our very lives. It’s because we live in a fallen world that sharks attack, horses stampede, and bears rip up campers’ tents. More than that, it’s because our world is fallen that many of the laws of nature that we count on to be helpful and predictable can also work against us and cause great damage. So the gravity that keeps us from flying right off the surface of this planet is the same gravity that causes poorly supported towers to fall on 18 people and kill them.

Or, **2) We deal with fallen people.** Sometimes bad things happen because the people around us are sinful and some of the sins they commit directly impact us.

Larry Osborne writes: It’s not “a coincidence that the first story in the Bible after the fall of Adam and Eve is about a bad guy killing a good guy. That’s what happens in a fallen world. Bad people do bad things and good people get hurt.” (*10 Dumb Things smart Christians Believe,* p. 94)

So make a list of the worst things that people can do to each other: racial discrimination, sexual harassment, rape, child abuse, trafficking, murder, mass shootings, government approved assassinations—those bad things happen not because God has a good reason, but because sinful people are committing sin.

And it’s not just the really, really bad things. Sin is a universal condition. Everyone you meet is a sinner. And that means sometimes your friend will betray you, sometimes your boss will lie to you, sometimes your spouse will lose his or her temper and say an unkind thing. Those are bad things too, and they happen because we live in a fallen world with fallen people.

But, those aren’t the only reason bad things happen. **3) We have a fallen nature**. The bad isn’t just out there, it’s also in here. Let’s face it: a lot of the bad things that happen to us are the result of choices we have made.

Not all of those choices are necessarily sinful, some are just foolish. Maybe we didn’t think a decision all the way through, maybe we didn’t do enough research. But if you make a bad investment and your portfolio is wiped out; if you fail to look both ways and drive into oncoming traffic; if you wear socks with sandals and ruin your social status; those choices have consequences. It’s silly to blame God for our bad choices.

Moreover, a lot of bad things happen to us because we do make sinful choices. If you fail out of school because you didn’t go to class and you didn’t do your homework; or if you are in jail because you’ve been writing bad checks and skipping out on your creditors; or if your marriage falls apart because you were stepping out on your spouse; don’t ask why God is making you go through this. Sometimes the chickens come home to roost.

The world is fallen. Other people are fallen. We are fallen. In a world like that, bad things are going to happen.

So **back to Jesus’ answer in Luke 13**. He’s not interested in explaining why these bad things have happened, He just wants us to note that sometimes they do. The more important issue is, if something bad happens to us, will we be ready?

“But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

This is a hard reality: death is coming for us all, often without warning. And so, as Jesus says, you need to be ready. You need to take a hard look at your priorities, at how you treat others, at how you are living your life. When news of tragedy comes our way, it should be a moment that forces us all to take stock of our own lives.

***Jesus Wept***

The third story comes from John 11.

Jesus had two close friends named Mary and Martha. Sisters. Whenever he travelled to Jerusalem, he stayed at their house in the nearby village of Bethany. Mary is the one who anointed Jesus’ feet with perfume. And Mary and Martha had a brother named Lazarus. He was Jesus’ friend too. When he got sick, the sisters sent a message to Jesus saying “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

But Jesus didn’t leave immediately to go be by Lazarus’ side. The Bible says He waited two days. And when He and the disciples finally got to Bethany, Lazarus had already died and been buried for four days.

As soon as Jesus approaches, Martha comes out to meet Him. **John 11:21:**

**21**“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

In other words, “Why didn’t you get here sooner? You could have stopped this. Why did you let this happen?”

And Jesus’ response is simply to say: “Your brother will rise again.”

Then Mary comes out, and she says exactly the same thing as her sister. **John 11:32:**

**32**When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

You can hear the question that never goes away: why Lord? Why?

But Jesus doesn’t answer. He never gives an explanation for our suffering. He doesn’t deliver a sermon about God’s will or judgment for sin or anything like that. Instead, He goes to the place where they laid him and He weeps. It’s the shortest verse in the Bible, and also one of the most profound. **John 11:35.**

“Jesus wept.”

He stands outside of the tomb of his friend, and He cries.

Jesus sees their sorrow and their grief, and He joins them in it.

We don’t ever get a full answer to our “why” questions. Mary and Martha didn’t get an explanation. We don’t know God’s reasons for everything that happens.

But we do know how God feels about our suffering. We know, because God gave us a face, streaked with tears.

***The God Who Comes Near***

A couple of years ago, at a Christmas Eve service, I told this story:

One day I was channel surfing on my TV when I came across one of those real life video shows. It was cell phone footage of the aftermath of an accident between a motorcycle and a car. The motorcycle was wedged under the back of the car, and the car and the bike were both on fire. And the driver of the motorcycle was trapped under the car.

There were some people gathering around the accident, bystanders and passing motorists and the like, and eventually they figured out that the motorcyclist was still under the car. Right away, they sprang into action. Four or five of them rushed up to the car and tried to tip it up onto its side. But they couldn’t move it. The fire was getting worse. One of the bystanders knelt down and tried to talk to the motorcyclist, but he was unconscious. He couldn’t crawl out.

Then a few more people come into the picture, a bunch of construction workers from a nearby worksite, and they all put their shoulders into the car. With about 12 people lifting and pushing they were able to tip the car up far enough that somebody could grab the motorcyclist’s ankles and pull him to safety. The ambulance eventually came and the man was rushed to the hospital, seriously injured but still alive. Meanwhile the car and the motorcycle burned to the frames.

And all of this, remember, is being captured on cell phone. As you watch it, the only sounds you can hear are the people with the cell phone: “Oh no, he’s still under the car!” “Somebody help him! Somebody help get that car off of him!” “He’s out! He’s out! They got him!” This human tragedy is all playing out in front of an IPhone lens.

So as you watch it, you can’t help but get annoyed with the people holding the phone. Why don’t they put the phone down and go help? This man might die, and they’re just filming it all?

In their defense, they were in an office building about 10 stories up and on the other side of a busy freeway. There was no way they could get to the accident site in time to do any earthly good. All they really could do was watch. But it’s still kind of disturbing. This man could potentially die in a car fire, and they’re filming it all.

And I think that’s sometimes how we feel about God. I mean, here we are on earth and it feels like we are on the scene of an accident--mass shootings and terrorist attacks and islands stripped down to the very studs--and it feels like God is up in an office building, just watching it all. It feels like we are struggling to lift the car, to make a difference, to fix what’s wrong—and God is just a voyeur taking it all in—too far away, too far removed, to actually help.

But the story of the Bible, the point of Jesus weeping outside the grave of Lazarus, is that God didn’t stay up in the office building. He didn’t stay at a distance. He waded right into the midst of our suffering and sorrow. He may not answer our questions, but He’s willing to suffer with us.

It’s in the tear stained face of Jesus that I find hope today.

***The Resurrection and the Life***

And, of course, the ending to that story about Lazarus is that Lazarus didn’t stay dead. Jesus called to Him, and he walked out of his tomb. In fact, every time Jesus attends a funeral in the Bible, the funeral ends when Jesus raises the guest of honor back to life. There’s the story of Lazarus. The story of Jairus’s daughter. The son of the widow woman in Nain.

And, of course, there’s Jesus’ own funeral, which ended on Easter morning with an empty tomb and a whole new hope.

Ultimately, that’s why Jesus came into the world, so that He could enter into our suffering, experience our death, and then break the power of death with new life. As Jesus said to Martha, **before bringing Lazarus back:**

25I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me will live, even though he dies; 26and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this? (John 11:25-26)

That’s what I leave you with today.

We don’t get answers to all our why questions. But we do get a God who suffers with us. A God of compassion. We get one in whom we can place our hope. So I end with the same question Jesus asked:

 Do you believe this?