

Sermon: "What is God like? – Part I"
Scriptures: Isaiah 65:6–11; Colossians 2:6–12
Date: 2 August 2020
Where: Mowbray Presbyterian Church
Occasion: Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 55:6–11

*Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call on him while he is near.
⁷ Let the wicked forsake their ways
and the unrighteous their thoughts.
Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.
⁸ 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,'
declares the Lord.
⁹ 'As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.
¹⁰ As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
it will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

Colossians 2:6–12

In Christ the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form

⁶ So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

⁹ For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰ and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. ¹¹ In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self, ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

INTRODUCTION

One of the questions raised by this pandemic is, What kind of God do we serve?

-That is, what is God like?

This question is raised by the problem of evil and suffering in our world.

Philosophers call this problem, the question of *theodicy*.

-The dictionary describes it as the attempt to vindicate divine providence in view of the existence of evil.

-If God is Lord of all, how do we account for evil?

-I would take the issue one step further and ask, if suffering is bad, and it is self-evident that this is the case, how do we vindicate divine providence in view of the existence of suffering?

-If God is Lord of all, how do we account for suffering in this world?

Of course the idea of evil and suffering immediately become integrally linked in this second question because the existence of suffering begs the question of the person of faith:

-“Is suffering the result of God’s punishment for human rebellion and evil?”

On the face of it, you might argue that the answer is obvious.

-Just look at the biblical accounts of God sending plagues.

-Just look at the history of Israel in the Hebrew Bible.

-We repeatedly read of foreign powers occupying Israel and Judah, and of them being taken off into exile, all as a result of the evil of some or other Israelite ruler.

What about the worldwide crisis of the Coronavirus pandemic?

-On the face of it, you might argue that it’s obvious that God is punishing us for our sinfulness as a nation.

-It might strike you as obvious that God is punishing us for our promiscuity, our liberalism, our flaunting of God’s standards and laws about opening businesses on Sundays and allowing Christian ministry in schools etc.

But Jesus warns us not to be too quick to draw straight lines between suffering and God’s punishment . . .

-Remember the account in John 9:1–12 of the man who had been blind from birth.

-When encountered by Jesus and his disciples, his disciples asked him:

'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' (John 9:2)

-But Jesus' reply simply sweeps their assumptions out the window . . .

³ 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' said Jesus, 'but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.' (John 9:3)

Jesus is saying, don't be too quick to decide that suffering like this is the result of God's judgement on sin.

-Sometimes it just is what it is – to God's glory.

-And then Jesus immediately turns to focus on himself, who he is and what is the nature of his own ministry in relation to the Father who sent 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.' (John 9:4)

And I think that's a good place for us to start today . . .

The problem of suffering and evil raises the foundational question of what kind of God it is that we serve?

-What do we know about God?

-Is God a vindictive and angry God who needs to be appeased through suffering and who is revengeful in the way he dishes out punitive punishment for wrongdoing?

And at this point I want to make my assertion, and it is an assertion that I believe will, in the end, address this issue of what is God like and the related question, is this pandemic a manifestation of God's judgement on South Africa for our abandonment of God's ways?

GOD IS LIKE JESUS

Here is where I believe the answer lies:

-God is like Jesus!

In reply to Philip's request to Jesus to show them the Father, in John 14 Jesus says:

'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"?' ¹⁰ Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority.

Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. ¹¹ Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. (John 14:9-11)

Jesus says to him,

Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.

Listen to the way the author puts it in Colossians:

⁹ For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form . . .

God is like Jesus because Jesus is God

And in Jesus the fullness of the Godhead is evident to all.

You want to know what God is like?

-Look at Jesus.

You want to know what God will or will not do?

-Look at Jesus.

You want to know if this pandemic is God's punishment on our sinful and evil nation?

-Look at Jesus.

Knowing God, and knowing what God is like, all begins with our personal relationship with Jesus . . .

⁶ So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. (vv. 6-7)

Have you received Jesus as your Lord? Have you acknowledged him as your Master and King?

-You have then come into a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

-The Bible repeatedly refers to this relationship as being "***in Christ***".

-This is a relational description, akin to me saying that Reneé is in my heart and I am in hers.

We are urged then, having come into this personal relationship with God through Jesus, to continue to grow closer and closer an ever-deepening relationship . . .

. . . continue to live your lives in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. (vv. 6-7)

Our faith in Jesus is our faith in God.

-We have been taught through the Scriptures that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life:

⁶Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.' (John 14:6-7)

One of the key marks of this new relationship with God through Jesus is a life filled with gratitude . . .

. . . continue to live your lives in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. (vv. 6-7)

-a life overflowing with thankfulness.

-not fear of retribution, but gratitude for who Jesus is and what he has done for us – who God is and what God has done for us.

CONCLUSION

I come to understand then that evil is, as CS Lewis has helped me to understand, good gone wrong.

-God did not intend evil, create evil and God does not send evil upon the human race . . .

-Evil and suffering are the consequences of our bad choices and God in Jesus has come to redeem our suffering and to turn even the suffering into a blessed opportunity for sanctification and renewal.

AMEN