

Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling  
First Presbyterian Church  
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John 2: 1-11

**“Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism:  
What the Bible Says About Bad Things Happen to Good People**

I was not going to preach about what the Bible says about bad things happening to good people as a part of my sermon series on rescuing the Bible from fundamentalism. But when I read John Tolley’s bio in the playbill for God’s Favorite – the play currently running in the theater and that you should go see – I was inspired to tackle the subject because the play, based on the book of Job, tackles with humor the age old question of why good people suffer. Plus, the news never disappoints when it comes to innocent people suffering. And it has been one heckuva week. With an earthquake in Haiti just weeks after their president was assassinated; to pictures of people fleeing Afghanistan and babies being passed over walls from mom to soldier; and to the families of soldiers who died or were injured in that 20-year war and wonder if it was a life spent for nothing – you sometimes need to pause and ask, “Why do good people suffer? And where is God in all this mess?”

We ask it on a large scale every time an earthquake strikes, or fires ravage homes and towns or a shooting occurs. . .or, well the list goes on and on. But we ask it on a personal level when a loved one dies or there’s a terrible accident or a painful divorce or a troubled child or bouts with depression. So it’s more than just a philosophical question, this God question. It’s very personal, too.

Theologians have a name for it. It’s called the theodicy question. How do we reconcile a good and powerful God with the tragedy, injustice and evil in the world? ***How do we reconcile a good and powerful God with the tragedy, injustice and evil in the world?***

Frederick Buechner, that wonderful Christian writer I quote so much, says you cannot reconcile them. You can't have an all-powerful and all good God and say that evil things happen. You can reconcile any two of these propositions with each other, but you can't reconcile all three. One of them has got to give.

As good Presbyterians, we go searching for answers to the God question in the scriptures to hear those ancient stories that tell of the relationships between people and God. The story of Job has many answers to the question of why people suffer and where is God in the midst of that suffering. But the story of the wedding at Cana also has answers . . . answers that may surprise you and trouble you. And so I invite you to listen to the word of God, paying special attention to what some of those answers may be.

*On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*

For most listeners, there are usually three things that stand out in this story. The first is the abundance of water that is turned into wine. The second is Jesus' retort his mother: Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? And the third is the steward's response: Wow! Everyone serves the

good wine first and saves the inferior stuff for when the guests are drunk. But you've saved the best for last!

All three contain a hint of an answer to our God question. One is not very helpful, one is somewhat troubling, and one-if you're willing to go there-could provide some level of comfort. We're going to consider them in reverse order.

So first, the steward. He shares something in common with modern day readers-he doesn't believe in miracles. The miracle of turning water into wine is a problem for some modern day believers. We don't believe it actually happened. It's not a part of our experience to have problems solved by miracles. I highly doubt that any of us believe that tomorrow morning we'll wake up and everyone who wants to be evacuated will have been safely evacuated from Afghanistan. Or that Haiti will successfully rebuild, because miracles like that don't happen.

The steward is puzzled as to why this wine is so much better than the wine served earlier. But he doesn't attribute it to a miracle. He simply assumes the host had some good wine in storage. *You have kept the good wine until now*, he says. He has no idea Jesus turned the water into wine and by the sounds of it, it would never occur to him that Jesus could or would do that. Now you should know that the purpose of a miracle in John's gospel is to show people who Jesus really is. In other words, turning all that water into wine – and it could be as much as 750 bottles of wine, should have proven to the steward who Jesus really is. It proved to others who Jesus really is. But it doesn't. He remains a non-believer.

Likewise, you can either believe that in the midst of the rubble in Haiti or the chaos in Afghanistan, God is present somehow somehow by the miracle of God, or like the steward you can remain a non-believer; there is no way God is there in the midst of that mess. A NYT writer once wrote about Haiti, "Why turn to a God who seems to be absent at best and vindictive at worst? Haitians don't have any other options. The country has a long legacy of repression and exploitation; international peacekeepers come and go; the earth no longer provides food; jobs almost don't exist. Perhaps a God who hides is better than nothing." Why do bad things happen to good

people? The simple answer here is because God just isn't there. It's not a very satisfying answer, but it's better than our next one.

"They have no wine," Mary says. To which Jesus replies, "What concern is that to you and to me?" Theologians call this the scandal of divine reluctance. Why does God the incarnate one hold out? We can come up with a list of reasons and excuses, but we don't need to because Jesus himself gives an explanation for not wanting to help. "My hour has not yet come," he says. In other words, there is a plan. So be patient.

This is probably the most troubling answer to the God question. Because we see a world in need but in this story, Jesus-God incarnate-doesn't want to help. One of the biggest needs in Haiti right now is clean water-they don't need fine wine. They need something as basic as water. Why has the hour not come?

It may seem like a travesty to turn a story about God's abundance into a trial of God, and yet it's stories like this one about divine extravagance that make God's absence in the face of poverty and devastation stand out. How do we reconcile the generosity with the need? If God is both generous and able, then apparently God continues to express Jesus' attitude: What is that to me?

This is not a good answer to the God question. I, for one, really don't want to believe that God doesn't care. Now, I suppose you could argue that God does care because Jesus changed his mind. But the only reason Jesus changed his mind is because his mother prodded him. "Hey, they have no wine," she said. She noticed it first, which begs the question, "Does God really need a nudge from us to be generous?" Do we need to give God a little prodding, like Mary had to do with Jesus? Is this what it takes to get God to respond to human need? Lord I hope not, and help us all if it is.

The third and final answer lies in the abundance of wine, and it is this: that in this world of pain and suffering, where sometimes indeed the wine runs dry, there **are** moments of unexplainable grace. And the best explanation we can give as to why these horrific events occur is to give no explanation

at all but instead to stand as a witness to God's love with those who suffer. Let me explain.

The reason the Haiti earthquake occurred has nothing to do with God. My late grandfather was a geologist, and if he were alive today he could probably give you a good explanation for why this earthquake happened. There's no need to pin this thing on God. The worst thing we could do is follow the lead of the insurance companies and call it "an act of God". Because if it was an act of God, it would mean that for some unfathomable reason, God willed this earthquake to happen. Likewise, is it really God's will what is happening in Afghanistan, or is it a botched withdrawal? I know well-meaning people mean well they say, "Well, God won't give you more than you can handle," but it's not very helpful.

The late William Sloane Coffin lost his son to a horrible car accident. Days after his son's death, Coffin climbed into the pulpit of the Riverside Church in Manhattan and preached these unforgettable words:

*As almost all of you know, a week ago last Monday night, driving in a terrible storm, my son Alexander . . . who enjoyed beating his old man at every game and in every race, beat his father to the grave. When a person dies, there are many things that can be said, and there is at least one thing that should never be said. The night after Alex died I was sitting in the living room of my sister's house outside Boston, when the front door opened and in came a nice looking lady with about 18 quiches. When she saw me she shook her head, then headed for the kitchen saying sadly over her shoulder, "I just don't understand the will of God." The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, "It is the will of God." Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex died, but in believing that when the waves closed in over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all hearts to break."*

The answer to the God question is not that God wills them to happen, but that God suffers when they do. In order to find this answer satisfactory, you need to be willing to let go of the idea that God is all-powerful, which probably makes some of you very uncomfortable, which is why people say

things like, “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” On the whole, we prefer power, authority and control to vulnerability, love, and engagement. And yet, let us not forget that we worship a God who came to us in the form of a helpless baby, and took on unbearable pain on a cross. That’s a vulnerable God.

Where is God? I believe that God is there in the midst of the rubble. I believe that God is there with Haitians who are living on the streets and have no idea when or even if they’ll ever a home again. I believe God was with the 2 year-old child who was trampled to death while crowds surged the gate at the Kabul airport. And I believe God is with her mother, who is living in terror.

Ultimately, our response to tragedy is not one of explanation, but one of witness. Our job is not to make what has happened rational or understandable, but is to witness to a God who loves us so abundantly that God would suffer with us and for us, even while filling our cups to the brim.

Amen.

*God of mercy, as wildfires and wars rage, earthquakes shake the planet, and <sup>1</sup>tropical storms threaten, we are at a loss as to what to say or do. In these moments of anguish and fear and grief, we turn to you in prayer, Holy God, confident that you hear the cries of your people. Great God of all, you know us so well. You know our pain. You know our loss. You cry with us as tragedies plague your people. You work beside us in ministry and mission. God of grace, open our eyes, hearts and hands to the movement of your Spirit in this broken world. Restore hope to the suffering, mend the hearts of the hurting, and grant us all the strength to support those in need. As we forage for hope along the path of tragedy, may we bear the good fruit of faith, turning to each other and to you in love. Restore us, Holy God, with your hope. We pray this in the name of Christ. Amen.*

*Sources:*

*Feasting on the Word, year C, Volume 1*

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