

“Are you there, God?”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
September 26, 2021

*Psalm 124 and Romans 8:31-39*

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

There’s a poem you’ve probably heard, in which a person walks along a beach and looks back upon their life, seeing two sets of footprints: one set is theirs, the other is God’s. But there’s a problem. There are moments along the path, often the lowest and saddest, when there is only one set of footprints. The person yells at God, “I don’t understand why, when I need you most, you would leave me.”

I recently saw on Facebook an illustration of this poem. In the first frame, we see Jesus, his hand on the man’s shoulder, the man smiling, as Jesus says those now famous words: “My child, I never left you. Those places with one set of footprints? It was then that I carried you.” It’s a really beautiful ending. The comic strip, however, decided to add a few verses of its own. In the next frame, Jesus is seen pointing in the distance. Now the man is frowning, as Jesus says, “Oh, and you see that long groove over there? That’s when I dragged you for a while.” In the last frame, the man glares at Jesus as he says, “Oh and look right there! One time I hid you in that little sand hole while I got a hot dog.”

So, wait, is that why bad things happen? Jesus is getting a hot dog?

When I asked you this summer to share with me your biggest questions, this was the one you asked the most: Why do bad things happen? Why does God allow evil? What do I say when someone says there can’t be a God because of the Holocaust? One of you shared how, 45 years ago, your life was a clear track to happiness; you were completing your master’s degree in journalism and about to walk down the aisle with a fellow from Yale Divinity School, when you were in a near-fatal car accident that left you with lifelong disabilities.

Why do these things happen? Why Haiti? Why the US border? Why forest fires, Afghanistan, pandemic, war, hate, abuse? We’ve lost some truly good and beautiful people here in this church. Cancer. Heart disease. Dementia. Suicide. Why? Or how about this one: A faithful servant of God, a leader of a presbytery in Tennessee, retires on June 30, with dreams of how he’s going to spend more time with his family and do all the things he never got to do during his ministry. A month later, he dies in a car wreck on his way to Florida to experience the Everglades for the first time.

It’s enough to make any of us ask: Are you there, God? Because, you sort of seem to be sleeping on the job.

Why doesn’t God stop these bad things?

The truth is I don't know. Oh, I could talk to you about the theories of Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, and Kant. I could quote C.S. Lewis, Hume, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, or Derrida. (Don't worry, I'm not going to. See, there is a God! I know what you were thinking: O God, please no.) I could tell you about free will, or natural law, or evil as privation, or the inscrutability of God. I could talk about sin, or explain that God has a greater purpose and good, or how we need struggle for our souls to grow. We're even going to talk about some of that next week. But somehow, none of these answers suffice. An answer doesn't cure cancer or bring our loved one back. In fact, these explanations often justify and trivialize suffering.

We don't want answers; we want God to make this better.

Even if we were to say, "See! Proof! There is no God! Existence is a lonely sea of meaningless moral chaos," or as my father-in-law likes to say, "Life sucks, and then you die," even if we were to go there, would you feel better? Somehow, I think not.

Maybe we're asking the wrong question. It's not: Why does evil exist? It's: What does God do about it? Because that's a question I can answer. If Scripture is largely silent, or confused, on the first question, it abundantly answers the latter. In fact, we could argue that Scripture itself exists to solve this one question: How does God respond to our suffering?

Answer: By coming to us. Whether it's the enslavement of the Israelites, or the despair of prophets, or the anger of Job, or the weeping of Rachel for her children, God answers with presence. God comes into their midst, weeps and rages with them, whispering words of guidance. And then, somehow, God takes all this bad and plants a seed. God answers death with life.

Throughout the cosmos, life fights back. Even now, out there in the universe, stars are being born. Trees are rising out of the ashes. Acts of kindness and generosity are happening every day. The wounded become healers. A boy with a speech impediment becomes a preacher. A couple bereft by miscarriage and stillbirth is loved by God and this church back to life, and adopts a child. A teenager flees the war in Syria, swimming for three hours in the open sea, pushing a sinking boat of refugees, only, years later, to swim in the Olympics as a citizen.<sup>1</sup>

God answers. God takes the world's crosses and makes them flower.

"They shall call him Emmanuel, God-with-us" (Matt. 1:23). In those few words is the summation of all Scripture. Wherever there is suffering, Jesus is there. He's there to get down on bended knee, and wash our feet, to break bread and pour wine, to tell stories and laugh with children, to weep and pray, to hang on a cross and rise to life. Wherever there is suffering, Jesus shows his wounds and says, "Peace." These are the true miracles: Jesus humbly and lovingly being with people, in all their heartbreak, turning it to hope, like water to wine.

God *is* here—not because evil does or doesn't exist, but because somehow, despite everything, evil does not overcome. Beauty, wisdom, goodness, and love persist.

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<sup>1</sup> Yusra Mardini

How is it possible, asks the Psalmist, that this bad thing did not destroy me? It should have swallowed me, drowned me in the raging waters. But here I am, alive. Answer: Because God is here.

Paul says, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

How does God respond to our suffering? Maybe the best answer is a story. It's a story that's been retold many times, but it comes originally from a scientist named Loren Eiseley.

In his book *The Unexpected Universe*, he recalls walking the beaches of Costabel. Everywhere are shells and sea animals, stranded there by the waves, crabs being eaten by seagulls, pieces of sponge and octopus. On this beach, he says, "Death walks hugely and in many forms," as creatures desperately try to get back into the ocean, only to be cast back, by the waves. To Eiseley it is confirmation of the life Darwin described as "purely selfish struggle."

One morning, he goes out before dawn. The dark beach is full of people filling their buckets.

Starfish cover the beach, their tiny pores stuffed with sand, suffocating them. A storm has just receded, and there at the rainy horizon, Eiseley spots a rainbow, and at its foot is the distant outline of a person. He's looking at something in the sand. He stoops and flings the object into the ocean, beyond the surf. It's a starfish. He turns to Eiseley and says, "It may live... if the offshore pull is strong enough... The stars throw well. One can help them." Eiseley walks away, seeing him throw one star after another. For a moment, he seems a god, but Eiseley returns to his cynicism, thinking, "The star thrower is a man, and death is running more fleet than he along every sea beach in the world." He watches the others, huddled around their "steaming kettles in which beautiful voiceless things were being boiled alive."

He returns to his room, troubled by what he has seen. "Here, at last, was the rift that lay beyond Darwin's tangled bank. For a creature, arisen from that bank and born of its contentions, had stretched out its hand in pity."

Of course, he's a fool. It's folly to defy death. "Nevertheless," he writes, "I had seen the rainbow attempting to attach itself to earth." He seeks out the star thrower again. Slowly, Eiseley kneels in the wet sand and picks up a starfish, still alive, and tosses it far out into the sea. Eiseley looks at the man and says, "I understand. Call me another thrower." For hours, they throw the starfish back into the sea. "I flung and flung again while all about us roared the insatiable waters of death. But we, pale and alone and small in that immensity, hurled back the living stars."

I think, all over this world, there are people stranded and suffocating like those starfish. We ask, "Are you there, God?" Feeling only the waves, the beach, we think not. But there, in the dark, is the outline of one who walks these beaches, day after day, brushing the sand from our bodies and hurling us back into the ocean, back to life. Little do the ones who see only the waves know that all along it was God picking them up and throwing them back into living waters. Every chance

they got, every breath, every moment they briefly soared through the air, flying, that was God, defying death with every stroke of his arm.

I have felt those hands in the hospital, and at the grave. I have felt those hands in my greatest times of doubt and hopelessness. I have felt those hands here with you. Always, they reach out.

For, surely, God waits to be born in you. To walk beaches with your feet and fling wide the arm of compassion—we, the star throwers, linked by Christ, the first star thrower.

Why is there evil? I do not know. But I know this: wherever I can, I will answer it with whatever goodness and love are in me, and I will do so, because God does so. God stands in shadow on every beach of every sea, battling the waves, casting stars back to life. **Amen.**