

The Cross Alone Conquers Evil

A sermon for the fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B, 16th Sunday)

Every Sunday in the Prayer of the Day, after naming those who have asked for prayer, we pray for “all those who have particular need or difficulty.” I suspect that that’s goes by us as a general statement, not thinking that there are particular sorrows or needs, or difficulties, but, of course, they are among us and even in our own hearts and lives.

It is sometimes important to be specific about that because we’re asked in times of trouble: Where is God? Someone may come to you and say: “I’m old. What’s the point of it now? I’m just sitting here. I have nothing worthwhile to do, and I’m not worth anything. Why is God allowing this?”

Or then there are those terrible illnesses and weaknesses that creep up on all of us. Thinking of the big “C,” but also all kinds of things that disable and hamper us.

And also the inhumanity of man to others, the terrible things that some people do to others. People say: How can God allow that?

In journalism they say: If it bleeds, it leads. When and where there is sickness and suffering, violence and war, when terrible things happen, people ask: Where is God in all this?

Psalms 73:3-5 asks: “Why do the wicked prosper?” (Also Jer 12:1, Hab 1:13, and Job’s friends). They do all kinds of evil things, and it doesn’t bother them. And they say: “I do what I want. There is no God” (Ps. 10:4; 14:1). And those of us who are trying to do the right thing are not doing so well. You might as well go with the flow.

What do we Christians say to all this? There’s a lot of pop religion around. And pop psychology. There are many proverbs people throw out, like: It’s always darkest before the dawn. That’s not really what it’s about.

Nor are we talking about foxhole religion. (Lord if you get me out of this jam, I’ll change my life.) There’s a lot of that, and it doesn’t stick. It’s a way of trying to manipulate God. What do we say about all this? Why does the terrible evil that is all around us exist?

The dilemma is obvious. On the one hand, God is all-powerful. On the other hand, God is loving. If he is all powerful, why isn’t it life working out better? If he’s not all powerful, then his love is weak and ineffectual. If he’s all powerful, then the way things are going, he’s a monster.

We get caught in that kind of thinking. The poet John Milton talked about justifying the ways of God to man. Another word for that is theodicy. Theodicy means judging God’s justice. It’s a ridiculous thing. On the one hand, you can almost see it as a cartoon. One of us shaking his fist at heaven and saying: God in heaven, you’re bad. On the other hand, the

cartoon could have one of us saying: God, you should do it differently. If you and I would just work together, I could just tell you how to fix things. That's also pretty ridiculous. Yet, as you know, it happens all the time.

With that we come to the Book of Ephesians. It is really not a letter or an epistle. If we look at these first three chapters, in one sense, even though it's not a narrative or a parable, it is the basic story. You recall in Ephesians 1:4 it said: He chose you before the foundation of the world. Then in 1:9-10 it says: He has revealed to us the mystery that he has from eternity in Christ planned to save, to put a new head on the whole of humanity.

The underlying pulse of these chapters is found in three polarities: Hidden/revealed, formerly/but now, and far off/but near. There's a certain basic rhythm, a basic sense to these chapters. What's it's saying is: The mystery of it all is now revealed. That's different.

Of course, in the reading for today, Ephesians 2:13-22, it says: It's in the cross. The blood of the cross. That this all has been made near.

How do we speak that? The answer is not available to non-Christians. Paul in 2 Cor 4:3-4 writes: "This is veiled to those who are perishing." It's like a beautiful tapestry. If you look at the backside of the tapestry, it's obscure, confusing. That's what non-believers see, and they can't tell what it's all about. But those of us who are in Christ see the front side of the tapestry. The mystery is revealed. The big picture is unveiled in Christ on the cross. We see what it's all about. The Lord is Lord, and he is bringing in his kingdom by his power alone. Thank the Lord.

Paul writes in 2 Cor 1:20: "All the promises of God find their Yes in him." One could say, and this is not flippant, paraphrasing Paul here: The cross is the answer; what's your question?

How does this all work? First of all, in the basic, ordinary life we all live, we want to remember what the Lord did was to create cosmos out of chaos. He created order. And that ordering is there, and we rejoice in it. We could give as an example, medicine, which is part of his ordering. He gives us reason, the scientific process, and ways of dealing with things.

But, of course, it doesn't ultimately go right. And it's important to remember – which goes against all science – that in Romans 8:22 it says, nature is groaning, "the whole creation is groaning in travail." It's caught in futility, waiting for redemption and freedom. We mustn't say: Well that's the final word. There is evil and a battle going on. But the Lord is doing it his way, he is working in this to create order.

In the second place in these three chapters, it talks about the church. That is the place where there is to be help for us in all kinds of terrible things that happen. We're called upon to help. In one sense the church is no help at all. If you look at the history of the church, it surely is not like a mighty army. It is actually a terrible story of how people have

acted. We could say that the greatest proof for the existence of God is that the gospel continues in spite of the church.

The historian Herbert Butterfield said the church is like a big orchestra. Each one of us has an instrument. The Lord is the conductor. His baton is the cross. When there's a false note, he rewrites the music to make harmony.

The music proclaims the coming of Christ, the central event of all time. The event which affects all other events. The event which gives perspective to all other events.

This central and key event, that God in Christ died for you and me, was done in the past, but it is not only in the past; it is happening now and announces a world beyond this world. It is forever.

This key event, this central event is twofold, the cross **and** resurrection. The resurrection snatches victory from defeat. The resurrection brings about God's new world, God's kingdom where sickness, sorrow, and death are no more. The resurrection certifies that sin, death, and the devil were defeated on the cross forever.

Which brings us back to the Bible itself. God has made it all right in the cross. It's the message of these chapters in Ephesians, the message of the gospel.

In the first chapter of Matthew it says; "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called 'Emmanuel' (which means God with us)" (Matt 1:23). And the last verse of the last chapter of Matthew it says: "And Jesus said to them . . . lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt 28:20).

"Emmanuel," "God with us always" are the parentheses, the beginning and the end of Matthew's gospel, the gospel for us. Amen