

Once Upon a Pandemic

Infection

April 5, 2020

Thank you all for tuning in today ... and a special thanks to those who are joining us for the very first time.

And if you *are* watching for the very first time because someone invited you to do so ... a big “way to go” to that person for inviting you ...

... because, as we all know, this is a defining moment in our history as a nation, as a world and, also, as individuals. This moment in time – this coronavirus experience – will become *a story* that many of us tell our kids and grandkids in the future.

We’ll say, “Once upon a time, there was a pandemic. A highly contagious and deadly virus

spread all over the world. And then *this* happened and *that* happened and that happened.”

And we’ll go on to talk about how things changed afterwards.

And *things will change*.

As I said in the first message of this series two weeks ago, pretty much every expert on American culture is saying that ...

Things are going to be very different *after this because of this*.

Collectively, as a nation, we’re going to think and act differently about things like ...

- How we communicate with one another ...
- How we touch one another ...

- How we learn ...
- How we work ...

We're going to think and act differently concerning the relational and community aspect of life that we previously took for granted.

We're going to think and act differently concerning the frantic pace of life that we previously assumed was "normal" – a pace which drove many of us to anxiety and disconnected us from the people and things that matter most.

And the list of how things are going to change *culturally* could go on and on.ⁱ

But my concern – and the reason we're doing this series in the first place – my concern is much more *personal*.

My concern is ...

How are *you* going to be different because of this? How am *I* going to be different?

And there's no doubt that this experience will change us.

The question is *how* will it change us? *How* will you and I be different?

The obvious answer is “we’ll be different based on how we think and how we act in the days ahead; how we respond to people and events.”

But not so obvious answer is that we’re going to be different; we’re going to be changed and *maybe even at the core of our being ...*

... based on how we interact with God.

One of the things about a crisis like this is that it causes most of us to think much more deeply

about the nature of life and “ultimate reality.”

And thinking about that– and this is true even if you’re not a believer *in* God – eventually leads to thoughts *about* God.

And when we begin thinking *about* God, if we can come to understand who God is (and who God is not), will often draw us *to* God ... and that will change us.

And that’s the purpose of this series. I want it to point you to God and maybe in a way you haven’t experienced in a long time, if ever.

Now, in the first two messages, we talked about how this current crisis has revealed a truth that we rarely see when things are going smoothly: *that any control we think we have over our lives is, at best, a temporary illusion.* In an instant, everything we’ve assumed to be true,

everything we have built our lives on, can be taken away.

All it took in this case, as you know, was a never-before-seen microbe – a novel (or new) coronavirus – from the other side of the world to bring your world and my world to its knees.

We are *not* in control of our lives.

And that knowledge – and this was the point of the first message ... that knowledge is meant to push us towards God and to invite *Him* to be in control.

So, in the second message – last Sunday – we talked about ...

- What that means (and what it doesn't mean)
- And what it looks like for God to be in

control of things,

- And, then, several ways in which that practically affects our daily lives.

And, if you missed either of those messages, I encourage you to go back and watch, listen or read it in the media section of our app or our website.

The “God Question”

Now, today, we’re going to talk about a very important question that almost always comes up in a time like this.

It’s very important because your answer to it will determine how you choose to relate to God.

Here’s the question.

“If God is in control, why do bad things (like pandemics) happen?”

In fact, why does a coronavirus exist *even in its mildest form* – the common cold – to say nothing of SARS or COVID-19 and a host of other terrible and destructive diseases?

If God is in control, why do bad things happen?

Several years ago, we did a survey here at NHCC where we invited everyone who was part of the congregation to write down their personal “doubt list” – issues that bothered them about Christianity or the Bible or God.

The number one issue that emerged *by far* – and it took many forms ...

The number one issue, the number one intellectual and emotional struggle *among people of faith* – we’re not talking about skeptics here ...

The number one issue was *why evil exists* in a

world over which God supposedly has control.

And not just in abstract philosophical questions such as ...

- Why hasn't God fixed politics? Ended wars?
- If God knew in advance that giving us "free will" would cause such pain and tragedy, why did He follow thru with creation?
- Why do babies die?
- If God created everything, why does He allow Satan to have so much free reign?

We got some of those kinds of questions. But many of the doubts expressed were *much more personal* in nature:

- Why isn't God providing for me

financially?

- Why didn't God save my marriage when it would have been such a testimony to others?
- Where was God when my uncle molested me?
- Where was God when I was breaking?

And the questions we're thinking about right now are personal, too, aren't they?

- Why is my son – who is only in his 30s – terribly sick with coronavirus?
- Why are people I love having to face financial ruin?
- Why is God letting my business fail? I've tried to do everything right.

- If I get sick, too, will God let me die?

See, this “God question” isn’t merely an intellectual and philosophical exercise. It’s personal.

More importantly, it’s question of integrity because ...

It’s impossible to honestly and wholeheartedly engage with and relate to a God who, at times, seems to be indifferent to the existence of evil and the suffering it causes.

How do you treat a being like that – supernatural or not – with respect and honor? How do you even *like them* let alone *love* them?

Of course, in answer to that question, a skeptic would say ...

- “Well ... maybe your God is not completely

good. Maybe He (or She) has a dark side, and this is how it comes out.”

- “Or maybe your God isn’t all those ‘omnis’ you think he is – omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. Maybe your God simply *doesn’t* have control of things. Maybe *He’s* overwhelmed by the situation, too.”
- “Or maybe – and, actually, this is the most likely case – maybe *there is no God*. Maybe the universe and with its built-in capriciousness and randomness is all that exists. Maybe we’re all at the mercy of its whims.”

And, quite frankly, I can understand why someone – especially someone who is uninformed about what Christianity teaches – I can understand why someone would think and even believe those things.

Why Bad Things Happen

So, let's talk for a bit about what Christian theology says about the existence of evil and suffering in a world where God is supposedly in control.

There are four main causes and, taken together, they make up the overall answer to the question. And these are not in any order of significance.

1. First of all, evil and suffering exist – bad things happen – because we humans are sinners.

Christianity teaches that God created us as free moral agents, meaning that we each have the ability to decide on our course of action.

And *that* means, obviously, that we can choose at any time to go counter to what He would want us to do, to fall short of how He intends for us to live ... which is called “sin.”

And we *do* choose to do that – to sin – all the time.

Maybe it's not extreme, but in some form or another, we are constantly sinning. We are constantly falling short of what God intends for us.

And that has a cumulative effect on the world at large.

James the brother of Jesus once explained it like this:

Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.
James 1:14 (NIV)

Notice – and this is very important – notice that temptation doesn't produce evil desires. That's already in us. That's already inborn. It's what makes temptation enticing to us.

Then, James says ...

Then, after desire has conceived

...

After it's been tweaked and impregnated by giving in to temptation of some sort ...

... it gives birth to sin;

And this is the most important part ...

*... and sin, when it is full-grown,
gives birth to death.*

James 1:15 (NIV)

What a strange and bizarre metaphor!

Sin is the “love child” of temptation and desire, but more importantly, sin is “the mother of death.”

Now, clearly James isn't talking about physical death. You and I don't *literally* die when we sin. Instead, he's saying that, every time we sin, we

bring death into the world.

- Maybe our conscience or our principles die a little each time we sin, which then affects the people and world around us.
- Maybe it's the destructive behavior that sometimes comes out when we sin, which then affects the people and world around us.

Point being ... evil and suffering exist because people like *us* – sinners – are continually choosing to sin.

“Oh, come on Rick, you can't be serious that *I* am part of the reason that evil and suffering – *death* – exists in the world?”

I am serious.

In fact, you probably don't realize it but all of us

good, decent, upstanding church-going men and women are, given the right situation, shockingly capable of the worst kinds of evil. It's already in us.

- For example, have you ever experienced a burst of out of control anger at another driver?

Fan that into flame often enough and it becomes the kind of “road rage” that can take a life.

- For example, ever thought or said or done something truly hateful that surprised you? It came up in your mind or out of your mouth and you thought “where did *that* come from?”

Fan that into flame often enough and it will lead to actions that are malevolent and maybe even murderous.

Now, obviously, those are extremes to which few of us ever go but those basic evil desires are there, which is why all of us are part of the reason that evil and suffering exist.

2. Another reason evil and suffering exist in our world is because our world itself is cursed by sin.

In the first book of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis), God warned Adam and Eve that the curse of death would follow if they disobeyed the one simple rule He had given them.

“Don’t eat the fruit of this particular tree.”

And again, by “death” God wasn’t referring just to their physical death (and yours and mine).

He was also warning them that sin would become imbedded in them (those inborn evil desires James talked about), leading to the decay and warping of everything about them.

They would always fall short of what God intended. They would not only *suffer* evil but *propagate* it.

By the way, if you're a skeptic or someone who just wonders, don't get all wrapped up in whether or not Adam and Eve were literal people – at least as it relates to this point.

In other words, don't discount this point because you doubt their literalness because, even if they were just intended to be allegorical figures, the allegory is perfect. You experience it every day and so do I.

Sin always leads to death in some way or another.

But there was another consequence to their sin (and ours). The curse fell on creation itself.

The Apostle Paul once put it like this:

Against its will, all creation was

*subjected to God's curse.
Romans 8:20 (NLT)*

The plants and the animals and the oceans and the mountains and the weather and the microorganisms – everything about nature was injured and twisted and turned from perfection by the curse of sin.

And, in another interesting (and, frankly, somewhat bizarre) analogy ...

Paul continues ...

*But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay.
Romans 8:21 (NLT)*

It's almost like creation is a singular living entity which somehow "knows" that something is wrong with it.

It “knows” that it’s not supposed to be producing evils like COVID-19 ... and cancer ... and autism ... and mental illness ... and floods ... and earthquakes ... and ... and ... and.

It “knows” that it’s not supposed to be producing conditions that lead to all the suffering we see.

And so, Paul says, it’s looking forward to the day when that won’t happen anymore. It’s longing to produce a world without the death and decay that is a byproduct of sin’s curse on it ...

... which is why he finishes his thought by writing ...

For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Romans 8:22 (NLT)

Whereas James said that the sin in us gives birth

to death and evil and suffering, Paul says that creation itself is laboring to give birth to a *new* creation that is free of those things.

Anyway ... point is ... a lot of the evil and suffering we see (and experience) is because our world is cursed by sin.

3. Another reason that evil and suffering exist – another reason that bad things happen – is because of “the satan.”

Both those who were inspired to write the Hebrew Bible and those who wrote the New Testament were very clear about the fact that, in the same way God is a personal being, there is also a personal being known as “the satan” who is at war with God.

And the way “the satan” wages his war is by working (along with his army of demonic angels) to destroy both humanity and creation.

This is why one of Jesus’ best friends, the

Apostle Peter once wrote:

Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.

1 Peter 5:8 (NLT)

Though it's not exactly clear how that happens, Peter wouldn't have written that if it were not a real possibility.

So, this – the demonic forces of evil – is another reason why bad things happen.

By the way, these first three reasons are why I said last week that God being in control of your life doesn't mean that everything that happens to you is His will for you.

Clearly, our sin, the curse of sin on the world and the work of the evil one and his minions are

constantly working to thwart God's will which, again, is why Jesus taught us to pray "Thy will be done *on earth* as it is in Heaven."

The only realm in which everything that happens *exactly* as God intends ... is Heaven. And this is not Heaven.

One more answer that is sometimes given in response to the question why bad things happen is that ...

4. Evil and suffering exist because of God's discipline of sinful behavior.

Now, I hesitated to include this one because while God's discipline may *look like* evil and may cause us to suffer, its *purpose* is nothing like the purpose of the first three causes.

In the evil and suffering caused ...

- by our sin

- by the curse of sin on our world
- or by the work of “the evil one.”

There is *no good intent*. All of it is meant to steal, kill and destroy.

On the other hand, as one New Testament writer puts it:

God’s discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness.

There’s always a redemptive purpose to it ... even though ...

*No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it’s painful!
Hebrews 12:11 (NLT)*

It causes us to suffer!

But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way. Hebrews 12:11 (NLT)

In other words, the intent of God's discipline is always for our *good*. Even though it may destroy things in our lives, and it may be very painful, it's never intended to destroy *us* – like the other three causes are.

It's always designed to break away in us what's wrong and create in us what's right.

So, based on that, here's a little pop quiz – a question to consider: *is the coronavirus the work of God? Is God doing this? Is God behind this?*

Well, is the disease meant to make us better as people or is its purpose to destroy us?

I think the answer is pretty clear. This pandemic is not the work of God nor is it the will of God.

The Problem with Answers

So, if you want to know why, if God is in control, evil and suffering exists in this world, those are the are the four best answers Christianity theology has to offer.

But there are two big problems with all of these answers.

1. First problem is that they are speculative in nature.

And what I mean by that is, unless God pulls back the curtain between the natural physical world and the spiritual world and gives you a special revelation into what's going on behind the scenes, it's almost impossible to determine which of those causes or combination of causes is behind any given situation in your life or in the world at large.

The best you and I can do is to speculate at the cause. The best we can do is to guess.

Furthermore, let's say that we *did* know for sure – that we somehow guessed right or that God miraculously pulled back the curtain and let us see what was really happening – what good would that do us?

For example, what good would it do if an angel appeared to you and told you that ...

- “Hey, the coronavirus is a plot of Satan to destroy the world.”
- Or “it’s the work of malevolent men and women gathered in a lab somewhere who, in their sinfulness, are trying to destroy the world.”
- Or, “it’s just the way things are in a world cursed by sin. Creation is always producing stuff that can kill you if you’re not careful, and people weren’t careful.”

If an angel came and announced whichever of those was correct, it might satisfy our intellectual curiosity because the situation is hypothetical and “out there somewhere.”

But let’s say it gets personal. The angel says to you ...

- “Hey, God wants you to know that the reason your mom is sick and dying of coronavirus doesn’t have anything to do with spiritual warfare. It’s because she (or those around her) didn’t follow the social distancing guidelines. It was a choice she (or they) made and a very foolish one. Sorry.”
- “Hey, the reason your wife left you isn’t because of God’s discipline in your life. It’s because she is a free moral agent, she was deceived by Satan and that’s what she chose to do. Sorry.”

- “The reason *your house* was flattened by a tornado instead of *your neighbor’s* wasn’t because you were singled out by Satan. It’s because you live a sin-cursed world where everyone is subject to random acts of senseless destruction. Sorry.”

Do you see what I’m getting at?

Having the answer, even the *right* answer, to the question of evil and suffering might satisfy our intellectual curiosity if the situation is hypothetical and “out there somewhere.”

But when it’s personal – when it’s something that happens to *us*, it’s a whole different ball game.

2. An “answer” even if it’s directly from God, doesn’t address the pain we feel. It does not produce hope.

And that means that it’s just not worth very

much.

Now at this point, some of you might be thinking, “wow, Rick, what a *terrible* message.”

- “You raise the question of evil and suffering ...
- “Then you give Christianity’s best answers ...
- “And then tell us those answers don’t help us very much.”

“I could’ve stayed at home for that!”

Ummm ... you *did* stay at home for this.

Sorry ... my feeble attempt at livestreaming humor. 😞

Actually, the reason I just dragged you through all of that theology ... and this is really, really important to understand if you're a follower of Jesus; if you're a Christian.

The reason I dragged you through all of that is that I want to destroy any notion you might have that Christianity's answer to the problem of evil is to be found in its theology. It's not.

And I want to destroy any notion you might have that Christianity's answer to the problem of evil is to be found in the Bible. It's not.

Christianity's true answer – God's answer, actually – is found in a person: *Jesus of Nazareth*.

And until you understand that and believe that, you will never find peace concerning the bad things that happen both to you and to the world at large.

Jesus the Answer

So, what does it mean that “Jesus is the answer” to the question of “how, in a world where a good and all-powerful and loving God is supposedly in control, *bad things* – *evil things* like coronavirus and the suffering it causes – still happen?”

And before I attempt to explain that let me just say, for anyone who is skeptical that Jesus of Nazareth existed, that recent scholarship (and I’m talking about secular scholarship) has removed all doubt.

And if you have questions about that and the eyewitness accounts that were written down and preserved for us, you can email me at pastor@northheartland.org.

So how is Jesus the answer to the problem of evil?

I think the simplest way to explain it is in the words of the Apostle Paul.

He wrote:

God made him ...

... meaning Jesus ...

... who had no sin ...

... meaning he was perfect, he never sinned ...

God made him who had no sin to be sin ...

... meaning that, on the cross, Jesus became the sacrificial lamb of God who took into Himself the sin of the whole world.

He “became sin” ...

... for us so that, in Him ...

... meaning “by believing in Him and trusting in Him and giving control over to Him” ...

*... we might become the
righteousness of God. 2
Corinthians 5:21 (NIV)*

... meaning that the curse of sin would be undone, reversed, removed.

What Paul is saying here (and, actually, in many of his letters to first-century churches and Christians) ...

What Paul is saying here is that, for the curse to be reversed ...

- God had to take the sickness of sin into himself in order to heal it.
- God had to experience the death of humanity in order to put death to death.

... which is why Jesus – God in the flesh – turned Himself over to the full force of evil – the full force of our sin and the sin and hatred of “the satan” on that Good Friday when He was nailed to a cross.

The only solution to evil and suffering and death was nothing less than the death of God of Himself at the hands of evil.

Only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying.ⁱⁱ

In the Orthodox Church they have this wonderful little phrase that sums up this gracious act of God.

It’s “trampling over death by death” and it comes from a reading they do every Easter Sunday which goes like this.

Let no one fear death, for the Savior's death has set us free.

He that was held prisoner of it has annihilated it.

By descending into Hades, He made Hades captive.

He embittered it when it tasted of His flesh.

It was embittered, for it was abolished.

It was embittered, for it was mocked.

It was embittered, for it was slain.

It was embittered, for it was overthrown.

It was embittered, for it was fettered in chains.

It [meaning sin and death and the demonic horde]

It took a body, and met God face to face.

It took earth and encountered Heaven.

It took that which was seen and fell upon the unseen.

And because that's what happened when Jesus of Nazareth died and was laid in the tomb, you and I can not only be forgiven of every sin, we can be released from the curse of sin and death.

Conclusion

Listen friends, I'm not smart enough to unravel the paradox of a good and powerful God and the existence of evil and suffering at the same time.

But I don't have to be.

All I need to do is to trust a person and what He has done not just for me but for the whole world; for anyone who wants to come to him and believe in Him and receive Him and follow Him with no strings attached.

And I know what some of you are thinking right now.

“That all sounds nice and everything, Rick, but it still doesn’t answer the question of why, if the victory was won at the cross ... God allows things to continue as they do. Why God doesn’t intervene and put a stop to some of the evil and the suffering it causes?”

The Apostle Peter once addressed this exact question. People were asking, “why hasn’t Jesus returned and finalized the victory?”

Here’s what he wrote in response:

*Do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. 1 Peter 2:8
(NIV)*

Now, here’s the important part:

*Instead he is patient with you,
not wanting anyone to perish,
but everyone to come to
repentance. 1 Peter 2:9
(NIV)*

Friends, if God was going to immediately solve all the problems caused by sin, God would have to immediately remove all sinners. That means He would have to remove you and me and everyone else from this earth.

But he doesn't want to do that.

Instead, because God loves you, God loves me, and God loves this world, He is willing to graciously bear with our sin so that we can have the opportunity to repent.

And "to repent" (as we say all the time around here) doesn't mean "clean up your life" or "get your act together" and then maybe we'll talk.

It literally means "to change your mind." It

means to change the way you look at life; particularly the way you look at yourself and at God – to stop believing that God is some far-off, disinterested, impersonal force and instead, to believe, as Jesus often put it “that the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”

So, I think maybe some of us need to do that this morning.

If you’re not a Christian, this is your opportunity to turn to Jesus and say, “I get it. I’m a sinner and you’re the savior. This world is the way it is because of Satan and sin and I’m part of the problem because I’ve been deceived, and I’ve participated in making this mess. And I want you to forgive my sins and be my leader from here on out.”

For others of us who have already made that decision, what we need to do is to remember what’s been done and to rejoice in it.

So, what I'm going to do is to say a prayer right now. And then our band is going to lead us in another song that invites us to come to Jesus in whatever way we need.

And then I have a few more comments so please don't tune out just yet.

OK, let's pray.

Father, we need to admit two hard truths:

1. That we are infected with the disease of sin that will not only destroy our life and others but will also follow us into eternity, leaving us separated from You.
2. We need someone to heal us of that disease. We need someone outside of ourselves who can save us from ourselves.

So, right now, God we recognize that there is

such a person who can do that. His name is Jesus. And we turn to Him and receive him.

Amen.

Let's sing together.

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. If you prayed to receive Jesus, would you please let us know?
2. Wednesday evening 730 & 830, we will broadcast a half-hour experience of worship, communion and remembering what Jesus did to trample over death by death. Prepare in advance for communion.
3. Next Sunday livestream at 9:30, 11:00 and – for one day only – 5:00. Invite someone to watch along with you.
4. I will be doing the FB prayer time this

week, looking at the Lord's Prayer. Hope you will tune in.

Endnotes

ⁱ For one example see

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/19/coronavirus-effect-economy-life-society-analysis-covid-135579>

ⁱⁱ Hebrews 2:14-15 (NLT)