

## Suffering: The Roots

“...man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7).

What does it mean to be human? This question makes philosophers of us all. We approach it on multiple levels, all of them spider-webbed together. Theologians ask what it means to bear the *imgao dei*, the divine image. What is stamped upon humankind that makes us more like God than any other being in *all* of creation?

On a more personal level, taking an inside look, we wonder: what is it that uniquely identifies us as human? It must certainly have something to do with our longings: for love, for beauty, for significance and worth, for freedom, for self-realization, for knowledge. We long to know and to be known—for relationships of intimacy and acceptance. Humans aspire to achieve: to accomplish great things, to embrace great causes.

If we take one step back from these longings, we must acknowledge also the capacity for reflection itself. We think about what we think about. We have profound, complex conversations within ourselves about our longings and what they mean to us.

I have had a number of pets, and I can say with some confidence that none of them has ever assumed the posture of *The Thinker*. They showed no capacity for reflection on the deeper meanings of life.

On a more colloquial level, we say that to err is human. Radio host and political pundit Al Franken makes this observation: “Mistakes are a part of being human. Appreciate your mistakes for what they are: precious life lessons that can only be learned the hard way. Unless it's a fatal mistake, which, at least, others can learn from” (*Oh, the Things I Know*, 2002).

But at a deeply existential level, how we experience life, I would suggest that to be human is to suffer. That's not the whole story. We experience joy and laughter, great happiness and contentment.

But we also recognize that life is too frequently punctuated by pain. We resonate with Job's lament: “...man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7). We get that. Pastor John Ortberg writes: “I assume that everyone I talk to knows about suffering. They are suffering now, or know someone who is, or will be suffering in the near future.” He adds: “...suffering causes people to ask questions like no other force in the world. It snaps the threads of our illusions of control and sufficiency.”

I have been having a long series of email exchanges from a lay leader in a church that has just gone through a split. His pain bleeds through the conversation. He hurts for his church and he hurts for himself. He is by turns deeply wounded, depressed, and sometimes so angry and bitter that it frightens him.

Every person sitting here this morning—every one of us—has a private history of pain. We have memories etched upon our hearts, wounds we just don't get over. We know instinctively it's not supposed to be this way. But it is. To be human is to suffer.

We are going to take these next four Sundays, Lord willing, to explore human suffering. It's a risky undertaking because we crave certainty. We want hard answers for confusing improbabilities. We want answers in no small measure because we crave a sense of control. Knowledge, we think, is power. If we can get a handle on suffering, maybe we won't have to hurt so much. Maybe we can fix it.

What we hope to accomplish in this little series is to advance our conversation with the questions introduced by our pain. While the Bible speaks into human suffering like no other book, the certainty we crave is elusive.

Solomon, speaking about life horizontally, as we encounter it, said this: “I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all. Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them” (Eccl. 8:11-12).

Why is the world this way? Why are we sometimes “trapped by evil times?” Why do we hurt? This morning we want to explore the three roots of suffering.

- *The Fall*

It all begins with humanity’s plunge into sin recorded in the opening chapters of creation. God placed a moral test before Adam and Eve and warned them of the deadly consequences of disobedience. They chose to believe the lie that humans could make their own rules and decide for themselves what was right and wrong. They wrongly thought they could act with impunity and without consequences. Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and with that brash act, unleashed a swarm of evils.

Death began to work along with all the human ills that result in death: aging, disease, accidents, deadly assaults by both humans and animals, natural disasters. Our genetic code began to fail exposing us to disabling and sometimes fatal conditions.

Many of our struggles with suffering emerge from death’s indiscriminate and indeterminate ways. There’s no discernable or predictable pattern. As Solomon observed: “...men are trapped by evil times that fall *unexpectedly* upon them.”

We expect old people to die. We do not expect young people to die. But death works upon people of all ages. A plane falls from the sky killing everyone on board. A terrorist destroys countless lives at the cost of his own. A Tsunami causes massive loss of life. Death does not discriminate and we can’t figure out why.

It is desperately hard fully to acknowledge, much less to live with, the consequences of humankind’s sin. We want to blame God. But Adam and Eve, by their one act of rebellion, unleashed the death and dying and all of its processes that have been both certain and unpredictable throughout human history.

Along with death, the Fall of humankind exposed us to damaged and broken relationships. Even the intimacy God designed between a husband and a wife would be touched by distrust, manipulation, self-protection and a struggle for control. Marriages would fail and families disintegrate. Adam and Eve would witness sibling rivalry descend into murder when their son, Cain, killed his brother, Able.

Throughout all their lives humankind would struggle for a sense of worth that we only partially realize. We earn our living by hard sweat from a world that resists our best efforts. Significance and contentment seem both to tantalize and frustrate us.

Our world groans under the curse caused by humanity’s sin. There’s something wrong with everything. We feel the disturbing disconnect deep in our bones and we groan.

Humankind’s plunge into sin, what theologians call the fall of humankind, is a primary taproot of human suffering. This is not life as God intended but as sin and death have made it.

- *Our Foes:*

A second root of suffering comes from the evil done to us by others. For instance, Fox news reported the following: “Megan Meier thought she had made a new friend in cyberspace when a cute teenage boy named Josh contacted her on MySpace and began exchanging messages with her. Megan, a 13-year-old who suffered from depression and attention deficit disorder,

corresponded with Josh for more than a month before he abruptly ended their friendship, telling her he had heard she was cruel.

The next day Megan committed suicide. Her family learned later that Josh never actually existed; he was created by members of a neighborhood family that included a former friend of Megan's."

Evil people do evil things to us. Criminals lie, steal and cheat. Sometimes they act violently. Personal enemies spread gossip or slanderous rumors.

Sometimes the evil done to us comes from our friends, or family members. We are vulnerable because they betray our trust. That was King David's lament: "If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were raising himself against me, I could hide from him. But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God" (Psalm 55:12-14).

One of David's close friends, someone he used to go to church with, turned on him. That drove the pain deeper. How do you protect yourself from those closest to you?

On a societal level we may be victims of systemic evil—suffering rooted in the political and economic systems of a culture. Think, for instance, of the many thousands of people who are losing their homes because of lending institutions who abused their financial power for the sake of greed. Or governments who suppress populations in order to stay in control. Evil may be embedded in systems of power and cause suffering in our world.

And sometimes suffering comes from spiritual enemies. Sin exposed us to the ancient struggle between the spiritual forces of good and evil. Satan leads a militant host of malevolent spirits who want very much to destroy what God has made. Sometimes people are not the enemy, by captives of the enemy, used to do his will. We may be victims of demonic influence, temptation, attack and sometimes control. No wonder Jesus taught us to pray: "Deliver us from the evil one."

Part of what it means to bear God's image is having the responsible privilege of making uncoerced moral choices. God doesn't make us do good and he doesn't always prevent us from harming others. The gift of choice is double-edged and as a result, we sometimes suffer the consequences of the evil done to us by others.

#### *Our Failures:*

But even more distressing is the suffering we endure because of our own failures. Some of them are accidental, like the infamous, self-inflicted hammer blow to the thumb. We guess wrong at a yellow light and wreck our car. We transpose digits in our checkbook and get dinged for being overdrawn.

While those may be head-slappers, they don't compare with the consequences of unwise or sinful choices: the evil we do or the good we fail to do. For instance, a college student may find himself trapped in debt because he abused readily available credit cards.

James, a brother of our Lord Jesus, laments the wicked impact of his tongue. He calls it "...a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of [our] life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (James 3:6). How much grief have we caused ourselves simply by what has come out of our mouths.

And like our primal ancestor, Adam, we are adept at shifting blame for our own actions. I heard one unmarried, pregnant teen blame God for the shameful consequences of her moral failure. "If God didn't want me to get pregnant, he should have stopped me." Solomon sagely observed: "A man's own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the LORD" (Proverbs 19:3).

All of us lament the outcomes of our own bad choices, foolish choices, careless choices,

reckless choices. They cause us suffering that is sometimes acute and sometimes lifelong.

We suffer because of our own stupidity and folly. We suffer because we are victims of the evil done to us by others. And we suffer because we live upon a planet touched by a curse, a world in which disease and deformity and death work inexorably and indiscriminately.

None of this satisfies our most pressing question: Why me? Why this? Why now? The questions expose our discomfort with vulnerability. If we can figure out the “Why?” questions, maybe we can protect ourselves next time. Maybe we can recover at least some measure of control over what Solomon called “time and chance.” Or maybe we at least know who to blame.

It’s hard to accept that the answer may be found simply in the reality that on this broken planet to be human is to suffer. None of us is exempt. All of us experience times when we groan inwardly. This isn’t heaven—not yet!

If that is our reality, then how do we respond to the suffering that is sure to come our way? How do we live with uncertainty and dependence? Where do we go with our pain?

Suffering is a sure word in our lives, but it is not the only word, nor is it the final word. That’s what we want to talk about over the next several weeks. Next Sunday we want to ask: “How do I respond to suffering personally? What can I do?” Then we want to discover some of our important resources for coping with personal pain. Finally we will inquire about God’s purposes in suffering. If God never wastes pain, then what is he about? Can I trust him?