

"WHERE IS GOD WHEN... PART #3:
GUN VIOLENCE AND THE HOLOCAUST"

(Psalm 42:1-11; Matthew 2:16-18, NRSV)

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[PROPS NEEDED: Series Intro Video]

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 2-2-25]

--I--

1. Read NRSV Texts: Psalm 42:1-11 (UMH #777) & Matt. 2:16-18. Pray

2. **[WATCH SERIES VIDEO INTRO (Time: 0:35) -- ends on series theme slide]**
 A--We're in the midst of a series of sermons in which we're wrestling with the question of why a loving & powerful God would allow tragedy, suffering & evil in our world.
(If you have Qs about last week's D.C. plane crash, listen my sermon from Jan 12)

 B--And today our focus turns to the many examples of human violence and evil found throughout history up to today. Things like...
 - 1--Roman Emperor Nero's reign of terror;
 - 2--The brutality of 19th-century American slavery & the racist violence of groups like the Klu Klux Klan in the 20th century;
 - 3--The slaughter of over 6 million Jews by the Nazis during World War II;
 - 4--The Al-Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001,
 - 5--The 133 mass shootings here in America over the last 30 years in places like schools, shopping malls, night clubs, and more (including the Sept. 4 mass shooting at Apalachee HS in Winder, GA last September); ¹
 - 6--The 15 New Years Eve party-goers killed just a few short weeks ago in a senseless early morning truck attack in New Orleans.
 C--And unfortunately, a few of you worshipping with us today may have even experienced violence either in your *own* life, the life of someone in your family, or at least been affected by someone you know well who it happened to.

 D--As a result, there are many people today who've turned their backs on God and walked away from faith because of the suffering that they've seen either in the world or in their own lives. ²

4. Of course, violence perpetrated by humans against other humans is not a new thing.

 A--In today's Psalm 42 scripture, the author laments God's seeming absence in the face of violence when he says to God in Vss. 9-10, *"Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me? With a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'"*

 B--And today's scripture from Matthew 2 is another example: we have there the story of an angry, vindictive king (Herod), jealous of a potential usurper, ordering the mass murder of children under the age of two.

C--So, we humans have done these kinds of horrible things to each other for thousands and thousands of years.

5. Now, I hope it's safe to *assume* that most of us know better than to think that *GOD* is in heaven somewhere *prompting* the hearts of people to commit acts of violence against others -- hopefully we know that that's NOT how God works.

--II--

6. But the question then becomes, "**WHY DOES GOD ALLOW IT?**" e.g., If He's truly good & all-powerful, then why doesn't God intervene to *prevent* things like murder, rape, 9-11, the Holocaust, school shootings, or the New Orleans New Years Eve massacre?

A--To answer that, let's go back to the opening story of Adam & Eve in Genesis 2 in the Bible: Have you ever wondered why the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was put right in the middle of the Garden of Eden? ³

1--You know, I've heard people use this fact to say that *God Himself* is really to blame for the existence of evil in our world -- because "God put it there!"

2--Yet, was the tree placed there so that Adam & Eve would be tempted to eat it? OR was it placed there as a sign of God's *trust* that humanity *wouldn't* eat it?

3--In other words, perhaps the tree in that story is NOT a symbol of God *causing* evil, but a symbol of human *free will* -- a reminder that we humans are *not* created to be *robots*, but *free moral agents*; creatures to whom God gives the freedom to *choose* right from wrong. ⁴

B--Yet, since God gives us free will -- which is a *wonderful* thing when we use it to follow *God* and do *good* -- it also means that sometimes people *choose* to misuse that freedom by doing awful things to others (like Adam's & Eve's son Cain later did in Genesis 4 by killing his brother Abel). ⁵

C--And when whole *cultures and nations* of people participate in this misuse (or at least do nothing to *stop* it) then we call it *systemic/institutional* evil/sin, and it can result in terrible things --like American slavery, the KKK, the Holocaust,⁶ or Sept. 11th attacks

D--In fact, most of us worshipping today (including myself) have at times misused that freedom, resulting in *us* hurting ourselves and/or others (even if unintentionally).

1--And when we multiply that times a world of over 8 billion people, with even just a fraction of those misusing their God-given freedom at any given point in time, then we have a recipe for all kinds of evil happening. ⁷

2--So, in many instances, the question is not so much "*Why does GOD allow human violence and evil?*" but instead, "*Why do WE allow it as much as much as we do? And why are WE sometimes the ones either perpetrating it, or standing by and doing nothing about it?*" ⁸

7. The bottom line, you see, is not that it's *God's* will, desire, or plan that human violence and evil occur.

A--But as much as God hates and detests it, He reluctantly *allows* it because He also refuses to deprive us of the human *free will* that He created us to have. ⁹

B--And the result is we humans exercising that free will to do evil things vs. each other.

--III--

8. So, if human violence and evil is the result of our God-given *freedom* to make choices (even when such choices result in harm), then what does *God* do in the face of such things?

A--What is *God's* part in response to human violence and evil? ¹⁰

B--Again, let me suggest that the answers given over the last 2 weeks also apply today: (#1) God *redeems* our suffering; (#2) God gives us *hope*; and (#3) He *walks* with us.

9. But to build on these, let me suggest one more: ...that when we allow Him to do so, instead of the way of evil, violence and hatred, **GOD GUIDES US INTO A BETTER WAY OF LIVING LIFE: THE WAY OF LOVE.**

A--In the Bible, Jesus says, "*Love one another as I have loved you*" (John 13:34), and to "*Love your enemies, [and] do good*" (Luke 6:35). ¹¹

B--In other words, God sent us Jesus not only to *teach* but also to *show* us concrete examples of how we're supposed to treat one another, even when we don't agree with each other -- the way he demonstrated was *the way of love*.

C--Think about it: how much suffering would be relieved in the world today if all people would simply live a life of *love* as Jesus taught and practiced?

1--There'd be no more war, murder, or famine because people would not be coveting that which they didn't have, or hoarding that which they did.

2--There'd be no more people cheating on their spouses, or being dishonest with each other, or putting each other down, or trying to demonize someone we don't agree with their politics, faith, sexuality, the way they worship, the color of their skin, or the way they dress -- because that's *not* the way of love.

D--And this is precisely why peaceful movements like that of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. have been so successful -- because they demonstrate that the power of *love in action* can overcome the hatred and prejudice that can lead to human violence and evil.

E--So, that's why the only *effective* response to the violence and evil of our world... is love -- Jesus is the one who best illustrates it, and as his followers, you and I are called to not only *live* a life of love, but to challenge and call others to do so, as well.

--IV--

10. You see, in the midst of the "tunnel" of human violence and evil, God gives each of us a "door" of love, faith, hope, and community which will enable us to make it through.
11. So, my prayer today (and God's great desire) is that we will together *choose* to walk through it -- in the way of love -- in how we live our lives!
13. [PRAY]
14. [SUGGESTED CLOSING SONG: UMH#534, "Be Still, My Soul"]

ENDNOTES:

¹ "Mass shooting" here is defined as where four or more people were killed in an incident; <https://www.statista.com/statistics/811487/number-of-mass-shootings-in-the-us/>

² Because of this, in one of his books Langdon Gilkey wrote, "*The reality of evil in our world is the greatest intellectual threat to the convincing power of Christian theology.*" [Rev. Adam Hamilton, in "*Why Does God Disappoint Us?*" in sermon series Where Was God When... (January 7, 2001)].

³ Genesis 2:9 and Genesis 3:1-3.

⁴ So, God has taken great risk in giving human beings the freedom to *choose* right over wrong, good over evil, Him over the devil and the things of this world.

⁵ Genesis 4:1-16.

⁶ To many, the Holocaust caused by Hitler in the 1930s and 40s was the greatest threat to many people's intellectual approach to the faith in the last century. After the holocaust, many Jews walked away and said they didn't want any part of God anymore. When you go to Europe today, the cathedrals are half empty because the people of that generation could not reconcile the problem of evil that they saw firsthand with the goodness of God. So what do we do with Hitler? Couldn't God have just bumped off this one man?

Yet, if we take human free will seriously (as God does), then we have an interesting dilemma: Hitler was just one man -- by himself incapable of killing 6 million Jews. So we know that he also had many followers, not all of which held his "cooky" values ideas, but at least his programs put bread on the table, and so they supported him. The result is that he is elected to office by thousands of German voters, who were then unable to get him out of office once he was there. Thousands more were then willing to carry out his sick plans for the holocaust, and millions more who would work for him (or at least not against him). How many people, then, did it really take to put to death 6 million Jews? Estimates are about 3 million people: those who actively participated; as well as those who did *nothing* but watch as their neighbors were hauled off in railway cars.

So the question becomes: where does God stop in taking away freedom from us as human beings? Does he stop by knocking off the *one* man (Hitler)? Or would he have also had to knock off the 3 million? Or more? And if God did *that*, then wouldn't that make Him just as much a mass murderer as Hitler himself? Of course, there *was* a time in history that God did this very thing -- the story of Noah and the flood in Genesis 6-8, destroying all humanity. But God's heart was so broken over that event that He promised never to do it again (and the rainbow is a sign of that promise).

⁷ One way of describing this is that evil is partially caused by the fact that we as human beings are bound together (interrelated) to one another -- what *we* do affects others. As Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, *"I cannot be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you cannot be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be"* [Martin Luther King, Jr. *"Beyond Vietnam,"* an address delivered to the Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, at Riverside Church, 4 April 1967 New York City, cited in The Upper Room devotional guide January 19, 2009]. In science, a similar concept is found in quantum physics, which says that one cannot observe an environment without changing it -- what *we* do affects others, so if we can offer love, that can be passed on to others, as well (Read Margaret Wheatley, The New Science).

⁸ For example, all while the Nazis were making their rise to power, where were the German and European churches and national leaders? It's true that a small few tried to stand firm against the tide of evil in their midst (most notably, church leaders like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German industrialist Oskar Schindler, and Corrie ten Boom). But most church and government leaders acquiesced to or appeased the Nazi Party and remained silent while the Jews were slaughtered. Edmund Burke is often quoted as saying, *"All that is necessary for evil to triumph in the world is for enough good men to do nothing."* So the question in this instance is not *"Why did God allow the Holocaust?"* but *"Why did WE?"*

⁹ As one website put it, *"God gives mankind freedom of choice. We can choose to follow Him and take a stand for righteousness, or we can rebel against Him and pursue evil. The problem resides in the heart of [humanity]. The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"* (Jeremiah 17:9). *Until [humanity's] heart turns to God, the world will continue to witness "ethnic cleansings, "genocides, and atrocities such as the Holocaust"* [From <https://www.gotquestions.org/God-allow-Holocaust.html>]. Likewise, in his book Where Is God?, Sam Althaus chronicles his eye witness experiences before, during, and after the Holocaust. He asked that question while he was confined to the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. Now, however, he now understands that the atrocities of that time were committed by evil people who were exercising their God-given free will to choose evil behavior.

¹⁰ Although time does not permit to expound on it in today's sermon, first of all I think God is outraged when we treat His good gift of free will with such levity and indifference. At times I think He must want to wring His hands in disgust and say *"What are these creatures of mine doing to each other? How long must I put up with this nonsense?"* And so, He sends the prophets and priests of the Old Testament, but since we ignored them, He finally sends His own son, only to have him killed by the world's violence, too (through his execution on a cross). Yet, even through all of this, he refuses to take away human freedom.

¹¹ Also read Matthew 3:43-47 and 1 John 4:7-21.