

Sermon Pentecost 16 Year C Sep 20 2019: Genesis 1:1-2:3, Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16, Mark 4:35-41

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For the past few weeks we've been wrestling together with this ancient question: "**Why does God let bad things happen to good people?**" You'll remember we started by talking about acts of God, specifically Hurricane Dorian, and whether God directs the path of tornadoes and hurricanes as some sort of exercise in divine judgment. And then last week, we looked at the scripture passage about the man born blind, and these universal assumptions we seem to have for their being a connection between sin and punishment.

But today, I want to make this personal. I want to make this personal because for those of us who sit at the bedside of someone who is suffering, or stand over the grave of a child, you can't escape the question, "why did God let this happen?"

And I just want to make something clear. When I'm addressing questions like this in a sermon, I do not stand before you with then intent of offering the final word on the subject.

But rather, what I hope to do is offer some opening words on the subject; words that provide us with context and background that help shape a healthy and ongoing discussion amongst God's people.

So with that being said, to offer some opening words on this ancient question, we need to start at the beginning, like, literally the beginning.

Now most of you have heard the creation story from Genesis chapter one. And you know that there's a certain refrain that comes up again and again and again. God sees something that God has made, and he says that it is ... "good." Yes, light - good. Earth - good. Water - good. Plants - good. Birds - good. Fish - good. Animals - good. Humans - very good.

God sees everything that God has made as good. But sometimes we forget that in the very first verse of Genesis, the very first verse of the Bible, it tells us that things weren't so good. "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void." The earth was a formless void.

Now the Hebrew language has a great phrase for this - it says the earth was "tohu va bohu." Say it with me, "tohu va bohu." Okay, the idea behind "tohu va bohu" isn't really formless void. It actually means something more like chaos, turmoil, it means messy, it means swirling big mess of stuff.

It's like your hair, first thing in the morning, "tohu va bohu." And I'm sure some of you have bedrooms that are "tohu va bohu". Or perhaps for some of you, the inside of your car right now is "tohu va bohu." Chaos. Messy. Disorder. Can't find a thing. "Tohu va bohu." That's where things start out. And so the account of creation is God moving in, and making order out of disorder.

God puts everything in its place. He spins out planets and stars, and puts light over here, and darkness over there. Earth here, water over there, and water up there, birds, fish, animals, plants. And to crown it all off, God creates human beings. And when God saw everything that he had made, God says, "it is very good." It is very good, for about a minute, minute and a half.

Now these creation stories that we have in Genesis were not meant to be read literally. Rather they provide us with an account of the human condition. And so from ancient times, there existed this understanding that it is part of human nature to make some bad choices, that we are prone to disobey God's will for our lives, and that we often end up walking into some pretty dark places. And so the result of this was that "tohu va bohu" was cracked open, and it spread throughout the world all over again.

Now this doesn't mean that light and dark came swirling back together, or that the sea swallowed up the land. Instead, "tohu va bohu" was much more subtle, and much more personal.

And so when theologians try to answer the question, "why do bad things happen to good people", often they will say it's the result of sin and brokenness, which affects everything and everyone. It's "tohu va bohu."

Actually, many theologians would also point out that there are no good people, so the question is false. They point out that we all sin. So, in fact, the question more accurately would be, "why do things happen?"

And while that may be intellectually interesting, it's definitely not pastorally sensitive or satisfying. Because if we're honest, the question for us this morning isn't really, "why do bad things happen to good people". The question for us, the question that we all bring into this space, is actually this one. "Why did God let this bad thing happen to me?"

Now there are some armchair theologians who will step in right away with an answer. They say thing like "God is just using this bad thing to build up your character, just you wait a little bit and you'll see, you're going to be so strong as a result of this."

Or maybe they'll say something like, "You know what, God's going to redeem this. Something really good is going to come out of this pain, because you know what it says in Romans chapter 8, "All things work together for good for those who love God."

There are people who say things like this to those who are suffering. And you know what, they shouldn't. Because their claims about what God may or may not do as a result of someone else's pain, are insensitive and unhelpful. They can not predict for anybody else how God is going to take their pain and work it out in their story. They don't know. So they shouldn't say those things.

Because when a person is in pain, when a person is struggling, when a person is trying to reconcile faith in a good and loving God, with all the suffering that they are going through in their lives, the last thing they need is for somebody to push fast forward for them.

What they actually need is someone to come and sit with them, and say, "this is crappy for you." Like to really acknowledge the truth and say this is painful, this is suffering, this is bad, and I don't get it either. That's what we need. We need someone who goes into the "tohu va bohu" with us.

Besides, there's something really odd about this claim that someday you'll know why you suffered, or why this bad thing happened to you. Because there's Job, from whose story we learn a lot about suffering. And when we read through Job, we discover that he never found out why his life suddenly became "tohu va bohu," and then later on why it became reordered. He never found out. In fact, there's no guarantee on this side of heaven, or even in the age to come, that we'll actually know why you went through what you did.

There's also something odd in the question of why does God let bad things happen to good people, because rooted in that question is a very popular assumption that if we're good enough, bad things won't happen to us. Like, if we just live a good and holy life, then bad things shouldn't come our way.

And so we live an exemplary life, we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, welcome the stranger, we live a good and holy life, and when all of a sudden "tohu va bohu" breaks in, we're left thinking, "What's going on here, I've lived a good life? Isn't that the deal? I thought we had a deal...?"

But where in scripture is that deal? Where do we find in scripture anyone who was called by God, and God says to them, "Hey, I've got a this special job for you, and you're going to love it. I'm going to guarantee your happiness, and it's going to be great. Just follow me, and I'll give you health, wealth, and giggles, it's just gonna be so fantastic."

No... we don't find that in scripture. What we find are instances like God calling to Jeremiah and saying, "Jeremiah, I've got a job for you. You're going to be my prophet, and you're going to tick off absolutely everybody in the country. In fact, they're going to be so ticked off with you, they're going to throw you into the latrine."

Or how about Mary. Mary, you are highly favoured. Mary, I would like you please to be pregnant without being married. I would like you please to give birth far from home with relatives that you don't really know. I would like you please to watch your son grow up and confuse you. I would like you please to watch your son die on a cross. Yes, Mary you are highly favoured...

You see, when God invites us to accept his call and follow him, he does not guarantee a happy life. He does not guarantee a life free from suffering. I'm sorry. I really wish he did. But I don't know anyone who gets through life without "tohu va bohu" breaking out.

Now the ancient Israelites had an actual location they pointed to when it came to "tohu va bohu." They pointed to the Sea of Galilee. You see, they were desert people. They liked the land. They liked sheep. They liked wandering from place to place and setting up tents.

However, they did not like water. They were very scared of water. So when God, at different points in the story of the nation of Israel says, "hey, you're going to have to cross this body of water to get where I want you to go," they're like, "ahhh... I don't know ... I don't want to do that."

Because you see for them, living on the land was predictable. It was comfortable. It was manageable. The sea, however, was chaos. The sea was mysterious and deep. You couldn't see to the bottom of it. And in particular the Sea of Galilee was very tricky.

We know now that the Sea of Galilee was once a deep volcano that's been filled with water. And on one side, the shoreline kind of tapers out. But on the other, it's very steep into the Golan Heights. And at nighttime, cold air rushes down through the canyons that cut towards the sea, and that cold air mixes with the warm air rising from the surface of the water, resulting in high waves, and creating storms in a matter of minutes.

Even those who fished in the Sea of Galilee, they only fished around the edge. You didn't go out into the middle because that was "tohu va bohu." That was the abyss. That was chaos. You didn't go there. And you certainly didn't go to the other side. The other side was known as the

Decapolis. It was a Gentile region, ripe with paganism, where Roman soldiers retired. So no good Jew would risk venturing over to the other side.

And yet, here's how our gospel reading opens. "On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And so the disciples would be like ...

"Seriously? Are you kidding me? What good could come from this? My mom told me not to go to the other side."

But they get into their boat anyways and push out. And then Jesus falls fast asleep because he's been teaching for days on end. And since it is the evening, a storm comes up and they're like, "See! This is what happens when you enter into "tohu va bohu". My mom was right!"

And the guy who told them to do this, the guy who said, "let's go across to the other side just when evening was falling," where's he ... well, he's asleep on a cushion. And so they're way out in the middle of the lake, and the sea is swirling and churning, and it's chaos, and the water is coming into the boat, and they cry out, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

And that's the question isn't it...? That's our question. When our boat is being swamped, and we're scared out of our minds, and we don't think we're going to make it ... "Teacher, don't you care... don't you care that I'm perishing?"

Now this is an old, old question. In the book of Exodus, "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out." David, in Psalm 13, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?"

Job cries out in the midst of his story, "The arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me." Isaiah begs, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." And the disciples, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

And what does Jesus do? Does he get a bucket and start to bail? Does he gather everyone around for a little prayer time? No. Jesus stands up, and he looks out at the "tohu va bohu" and he says, "Peace. Be still. Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why were you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

And the disciples, whose eyes are now as big as golf balls, the disciples say, "Who is this? Who is this? Who is this who stands in front of "tohu va bohu" and commands it to be still? Who is this, who speaks a word, and the calm comes? Who is this, who says let there be peace, and let their be quiet... and there was peace and quiet. Who is this, who speaks, and order comes out of disorder. Who is this...? And there's only one answer to that question.

It must be God. Because it is only God who speaks, and order comes out of chaos. It is only God who speaks and "tohu va bohu" is pushed back. It is only God who can stand and command waves and chaos and disorder to be still, and it will be still. It is only God. And so in this little fishing boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, we have a glimpse of what God has been working on ever since "tohu va bohu" broke out again in Genesis. We have a glimpse of God pushing back "tohu va bohu," and saying to us, "this is what's going to come for you. This is what we are working for.

The chaos in your life, the pain in your life, the turmoil in your life, someday I will stand, and there will be peace, forevermore. Someday I will stand, and there will be life, where there's been no life... hope, where there's been no hope... and joy, where there's been no joy."

Now right at the entrance to our church, just off to the side, there is our old baptismal font. And if you ever take the time to look closely at that font, you'll see that it has eight sides. One side for each of the first seven days of creation, and an eighth side for the first day of new creation. That's why most baptismal fonts have eight sides.

So when you come into this space, and you see that font, you are looking at God's promise of renewal and restoration. You are looking at God's promise that he is working to push back "tohu va bohu," and yes, things are not the way that they're supposed to be, but they're not the ways things will always be. Because we worship a God who will stand in the middle of this chaos and say, "Peace. Be still."

We worship a God who hears you in the middle of the night when you're crying. Who knows your darkest secret and loves you. Who turns towards you when the rest of the world turns away. Who sits in quiet with you when the rest of the world is too noisy. Who reaches out to you, and holds your hand, and guards your heart, and gives you hope.

That's who our God is. The God who takes things that are broken, and puts them back together again, including you. And as members of the Christian community, God invites us to participate with him in pushing back "tohu va bohu," and renewing this world.

Some of you will know that at the very end of the Return of the King, the last book in the Lord of the Rings series, Samwise Gamgee is waking up, and he sees at the foot of his bed Gandalf the great wizard, robed in white, standing brightly before him.

And for awhile, Sam just stares in bewilderment until he finally says, "Gandalf, I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead! Is everything sad going to come untrue?"

And the answer is yes... everything sad will come untrue. Everything sad in our life... The scars that you bear. The wounds that you walk with every step of the way. The heartache that you carry. The chronic fatigue of grief that marks your days. Everything sad that you have accumulated over your years, everything sad will become untrue.

Because we are given a great vision of restoration at the very end of the bible, in the book of Revelation, when John writes, "And then I saw a new heaven, and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more." There was no longer any chaos. There was no longer any "tohu va bohu."

"And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; He will wipe every tear from their eyes."

"Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. And the one who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making everything new." Everything sad will become untrue. This is our hope. This is our God.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.