

Maybe you are getting tired of hearing about the pandemic in the sermons. At some point we will go back to sermons that don't refer to the pandemic, but it seems to me that at this point we should still be thinking about it in the light of the Word of God. This is a huge matter in all of our lives and how we respond to it is a matter of great importance in terms of our relationship with God.

This evening I want to preach a topical sermon on a number of passages from the word of God that are applicable to the whole question of what I am calling "Interpreting the Pandemic." I have been doing that in other sermons such as when I said that there is no question that the pandemic is a judgment of God against a sinful world. But as we began to see last week when we looked at Revelation 6:1-8 there is a certain complexity to that subject in Scripture. As we saw from the book of Revelation, at least part of the reason for these kinds of calamities in history is that they are calls to repentance. The book of Revelation mentions a number of times that people did not repent because of the disasters that they were experiencing and that implies that at least part of the reason that God sends them or allows them is in order that people might be awakened to the wrath of God against sin and turn to him in repentance and faith.

The fact is that there are quite a few passages in the Bible that speak to this issue and looking at a number of them can help us to think in a more nuanced way about the meaning of this pandemic – a way that more closely reflect the biblical teaching. Last week we saw from Revelation 5 and 6:1-8 that the disasters that happen when the Lamb opens the seals of the scroll of God's plan belong to the coming of the kingdom of God which is rooted in the death and resurrection of Christ. That is a comforting overall perspective about the meaning of "so called" natural disasters that comes directly from a specific text of Scripture.

This idea of sticking close to Scripture is an important one. What I mean by that is that we should be hesitant to make pronouncements about the meaning of this pandemic and why God has allowed it to happen that stray very far from specific texts. For instance, it is common to read of people saying that God sent this pandemic because of the unspeakable evil of abortion or because of the wide-spread sexual immorality of our time. There is no question that these things are evil and therefore the wrath of God is upon those who are involved in these things and are not repenting. But we do not have biblical justification to say that God is sending this specific judgment for these specific reasons. We stick closer to Scripture when we are less specific about God's reasons for sending this pandemic at this time. We know in general terms that it is an expression of the wrath of God against sin, but Scripture warns us against being too confident that we understand what God is up too in any specific calamity other than what he explicitly teaches in his word.

One text to keep in mind in this connection is Isaiah 55:8-9 which says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

The ESV Study Bible has a very helpful note on these two verses in Isaiah 55. It reads, “In the immediate context, this is an appeal to people to exchange their sinful ‘thoughts’ and “ways” for God’s which are higher (nobler and more magnificent). More broadly, theologians have recognized, the incomparable Creator, is far above his finite creatures and beyond their ability to describe him or comprehend him fully; though they may know him truly, such knowledge is always partial and imperfect. But because God is perfectly wise in all his thoughts and ways, his people can take great comfort amid hardship when inevitably they are unable to understand the mysteries and tragedies of life.”

That is a wonderful and comforting as well as a humbling sentiment. God is so far above us that we cannot comprehend him fully nor can we comprehend fully his reasons for his providential dealings with us and with the world. We can know some things truly because he has revealed them to us in his word, but where God has not spoken directly we must be very hesitant to speak.

There are other passages that make this same point. One of the key passages that addresses the issue of why God allows suffering is the whole book of Job. Now the book of Job specifically addresses why the righteous suffer and that is a different question than the question of why the unrighteous suffer. But even so, the book of Job teaches us that we should be very hesitant when it comes to interpreting the disasters and calamities that God allows to come upon people. Job’s friends thought that they had God all figured out. They were sure that Job’s suffering was linked to sin on Job’s part. Job himself wanted answers from God. And God’s response was basically to point to his own infinite greatness and the inability of finite human beings to understand his ways.

Here is just a taste of what God says to Job from Job 38, “Verses 1-2, “Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” That is what we must avoid – “words without knowledge” It is much better to say that we don’t know than to utter words without knowledge. And then God says to Job, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.” And God goes on to ask Job question after question of things that are utterly beyond Job’s ability to know.

And Job gets God’s point. In Job 40:3-5, we have the first part of Job’s response to God. “Then Job answered the LORD and said: Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further.” Job 42:1-3 is also a wonderful expression of the kind of attitude that God is looking for from his people. “Then Job answered the LORD and said, ‘I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.’”

Concerning the current pandemic, there is no question that there is an aspect of God's judgment upon the wicked. But while we can say that generally, there are also many other aspects, such as God's mercy in warning the wicked to flee the wrath to come and because God's ways are so much higher than our ways there is more that we do not understand than that we do understand. And the book of Job teaches us that a godly response is to acknowledge that there is more mystery in these things than knowledge. We can know the things that God has revealed to us in his word, but there is a great deal about the meaning of suffering that is hidden from us and it is God-honoring to acknowledge God's infinity and our own finiteness and thus limitations.

There are a couple of passages in the gospels that point us in the same direction. There is the story of the man who was born blind whom Jesus ended up healing which is told in John 9. Jesus and his disciples saw a man who had been blind from birth and the disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" The assumption they were making that this man's blindness was a judgment from God because of someone's sin. Here was an example of suffering. Someone's sin must be the reason for it. Of course, in a very general sense that is true. All suffering is rooted in the curse due to Adam's sin. But the specific reason for this man's blindness was not the sin of this man or his parents. Jesus goes on to say in John 9:3, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him." And then Jesus heals the man. So there was a reason other than the sin of this man or his parents. The man's blindness was not a judgment for the sins of these specific people. This man had been born blind and had lived for years as a blind person so that Jesus might heal him – that "the works of God might be displayed in him."

Now we might have a problem with that as a reason for this poor man to have to live so many years as a blind man. But then we assume that we are capable of accurately evaluating the relationship between this man's suffering and the fact that "the works of God might be displayed in him." But we have to huge limitations when it comes to making that kind of evaluation. We are finite and we are sinful. We simply cannot fully understand fully the importance of glorifying God and because we are sinful we over-emphasize the significance of this-worldly comforts and wellness. The point is that we are very limited when it comes to understanding God's purposes in allowing or sending suffering into people's lives. And Jesus' point in his comment about the reason that this man was born blind powerfully makes the case that there is not a simple calculation of sin leading to punishment in specific instances of suffering.

Now that was one man. When it comes to the pandemic we are dealing with billions of people. And God's reason for the pandemic may be different for each one of them. The story of Jesus and the man born blind teaches us that we cannot make a simple calculation between sin and suffering. And so again, there is reason for us to acknowledge that other than the broad categories of Scripture, it is honoring to God if we confess ignorance when it comes to the specifics of God's reasons for something like the pandemic.

Let's look at another passage that is very relevant to how we are to think of the pandemic in the light of the Bible. Luke 13:1-5. This passage is short enough for me to read again. ¹"There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

So there were some people from Galilee who had been slaughtered by Pilate while they were sacrificing. And some people around Jesus told him about that awful event. From what we can get from the account, they were just passing on the sad news. But Jesus took the opportunity to teach an important lesson. He asks the question, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?" So Jesus is addressing the common idea that if people experience suffering it must be because of some sin in their lives. The way that Jesus asks the question suggests that it is tempting for us to think that there is a relationship between how bad a person is and the degree of their suffering.

It is interesting that this addresses precisely the idea that God has sent this pandemic now because the world has reached a certain level of wickedness. It is that idea that is behind all pronouncements that this pandemic is God's judgment because of abortion or homosexuality or even the general level of wickedness in the world. We could rephrase Jesus' question for our context and ask, "Is this generation suffering because we are worse sinners than previous generations." Is it that God did not send this pandemic during the 1950s, say, because things were not nearly as bad then as they are now? That is the kind of sentiment that is behind any pronouncements that God has sent this pandemic at this time because we have reached a level of wickedness that is so terrible that God must now pour out his wrath in this particular way.

This is exactly the kind of sentiment that Jesus is addressing here when he asks, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?" Jesus is saying that that is the wrong question to ask when we hear about tragedies. He is saying that it is wrong to think that people who experience tragedy are somehow worse sinners than others who do not experience that tragedy. Applying that to our time means that it is wrong to think that this tragedy is happening because this generation is more wicked than earlier generations.

Jesus asks a similar question about other recent tragedy in this time. "Of those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?" Wrong question! Jesus directs our thoughts away from the sins of others and towards our own sins. He says in verses 3 and 5 "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." If we see other people suffering we should not be thinking about how they deserve to suffer, but how we deserve to

suffer because of our sins. Jesus is saying that when tragedies happen, God is calling us to repentance. Jesus is telling us to consider the fact that we deserve to perish.

That puts us on the same level as everyone else as far as what we deserve his concerned. Any hint of a thought that other people deserve to suffer in a way that I do not deserve to suffer is profoundly wrong and dangerously lacking in insight into our own sinfulness. When we see others perish our thought should not be that they deserve to perish, but that I deserve to perish. That is how Jesus instructs us to think also in our current pandemic. “Many people are perishing in this pandemic. Unless I repent I will likewise perish.” That does not mean that if I repent I will not get the virus. It means that repentance is the way not to perish eternally.

Now Jesus’ words here apply in a slightly different way depending on whether we are believers or not. If we are not trusting and Jesus and living the life of turning from sins and turning to righteousness and obedience, Jesus’ words are a warning that if we continue on the way we are going, we will perish eternally. The call to repentance is short for the call to turn from our sins, believe in Jesus, receive his forgiveness and live the life of being one of his disciples. It is framed here as a warning, but it is a warning motivated by grace and it is the good news that there is a way for sinners not to perish. It is the way of repentance – of turning from sin which also involves turning to Jesus for forgiveness and the fullness of his salvation.

But Jesus’ words are relevant to believers as well. If we are believers, we are assured that we will not perish. Jesus is our Saviour. He has paid the penalty for our sins. We are right with God. We are adopted by God. We live in hope of final salvation in the presence of God forever. We have eternal life. It is well with our soul. But this call of Jesus to repentance is a reminder for us that the Christian life is a life of ongoing repentance.

And if we think of the current pandemic in the light of this passage, we who confess Christ as our Saviour, should be asking ourselves whether repentance is an ongoing reality in our lives. Clearly Jesus is saying to all of us that when we see people dying in tragedies our focus should not be on what others deserve but what we deserve and the absolute necessity for repentance. There is also the gospel offer of salvation through faith in Jesus’ name and that is glorious beyond words, but what Jesus is emphasizing here is the necessity of repentance. And so that gives us an important interpretation of the current pandemic. For believers it is a call to examine ourselves and to remind ourselves that repentance is an essential part of the Christian life.

And that means fighting against sin in our lives. It means pursuing growth in holiness which includes love for God and love for others and purity and fellowship with God and looking forward to enjoying God and his victory at and beyond the return of Christ. It means fighting idolatry which means fighting against living for the things of this life. And indeed there is much for us to think about when it comes to the priorities of our loves when so much of what we love and enjoy is under threat in this pandemic and its aftermath. This is a time to

ask ourselves where our treasure really is, and I think that all of us will find areas where God is calling us to repentance.

One last passage about interpreting the pandemic. Here we go back to a passage where Jesus addresses large scale disasters and hardships directly. Listen to Jesus words in Matthew 24:6-8. ⁶"And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸All these are but the beginning of the birth pains."

First Jesus tells his disciples not to be alarmed. And the reason they are not to be alarmed is that all these things must take place. I remind you that this is the "must" of the divine plan. As we have seen recently in one of the sermons on Revelation, when the Bible says that certain things "must" take place it is because they are part of the plan of God. They are part of what is written on the scroll of God's plan that is now in Jesus hands.

Because of this the disciples are not to be alarmed. Now that is not a exhortation to be passed over lightly. "See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet." Jesus is saying wars and rumors of wars and famines and earthquakes and we may add pandemics must take place because they are part of God's plan for the coming of his kingdom and therefore disciples are not to be alarmed.

It is normal to be alarmed when such things happen. They are alarming. They are scary. You don't know what is going to happen. You don't know what is going to happen to you and your loved ones. There is great uncertainty. The possibility of pain and suffering is high. These are the kinds of situations that alarm people - as we are seeing very clearly in our time. And yet Jesus expects his people not to be alarmed and the reason that he expects his people not to be alarmed is that they are all part of God's plan. They do not just happen. They must happen.

That is supposed to calm us. The fact that all of this is part of God's plan is supposed to keep us from being alarmed. And the reason is of course that God is good. God is mysterious. God does things that are alarming to witness and experience, and yet because of who God is for his people, they are not to be alarmed. Another way of saying the same thing is that we are to trust that God would never do anything to harm us if we are his people. God loves us. He has proved it supremely by sending Jesus for our salvation. He is highly invested in our true and eternal good. He knows what we need better than we do ourselves. He has promised to bring us safely to his heavenly kingdom. And in the light of who God is and who he is for us, we are called not to be alarmed.

But notice something else about Jesus' words about the calamities that must take place. Jesus' says in Matthew 24:8 that "All these things are but the beginning of the birth pains." Jesus compares huge earth shaking calamities to the beginning of birth pains. The pandemic is a labor pain. And what this and similar

labor pains will bring forth is the end of the world at the second coming of Christ. And that end is a good thing for the people of God. That end is the goal of their salvation and their lives. This is our hope. And this is when our faith will be made sight and when the Lord shall descend and he will say, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” (Matthew 25:34) This is how Peter describes the posture of the people of God in 2 Peter 3:13, “But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells.”

Birth pains. Labour pains. That is what this pandemic is. It is one of many through the ages. And they are the agony that leads to the anticipated birth. I have it on good authority that labour pains are painful. And yet they are a very peculiar kind of pain. The pain of labor is not a pain of despair but a pain of hope. The pain of labor is not enjoyed, but it leads to joy and there is a willingness to endure it because of the birth that it leads to. Labour pain is so very different from pain that leads to death. This is a pain that leads to joy and it is the anticipated joy that gives labour pains their peculiar character. The pain is real and very intense and yet there is hope and anticipation in it because of what it leads to.

That Jesus is saying is how we are to think about the calamities of this present age. That is how we are to think of the pandemic. There is no minimizing the pain we may have to go through. But Jesus, by comparing it to labour pain, is putting into a positive and hopeful perspective. May God grant to us to be so longing towards the glorious future that he has in store for us that we truly experience whatever pain we are or may have to suffer as a labour pain – a pain of hope – a pain of anticipation.