

Today I have been asked to preach on arguably the most difficult, but maybe the most compelling topic of the summer.

Someone sent me a note, which said the following, “I would like you to preach on why God allows children to suffer, if God loves us.”

Well, so as not to create any false impressions, I’ll be honest with you right off the bat.

I don’t know.

All suffering is terrible, but there’s something about innocent, defenseless children suffering which might be the one thing that’s painful enough to make even the most faithful person question God’s existence.

So, the truth is that I don’t have a foolproof, airtight explanation for why children suffer.

People have been wrestling with this question for millennia, in fact, the topic has a name, it’s called theodicy.

Theodicy is the explanation or defense of God’s goodness, in light of the existence of evil.

It attempts to answer the very question we are asking today, why would a good God allow us to suffer from things we can’t prevent?

If I had the perfect answer, I’d probably be very notable because people have been seeking it for centuries.

So, the disappointing truth is that I don't have a perfect answer but I have some speculations and I'll share a few thoughts as we wade through these murky waters together.

One resource that I used a lot for this sermon, that many of you may have read, is the book, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People," by Rabbi Harold S. Kushner.

When his son was 3 years old, he was diagnosed with a disease called, Progeria.

He and his wife were told that their son would age rapidly, he'd never grow taller than three feet, and he would die in his early teen years (p. 4).

Rabbi Kushner had spent his life as a religious leader.

He was faithfully devoted to God and helped his congregants grow in their faith as well.

Now, he'd just received this news, which had the potential to undermine everything he'd ever believed and ever taught about a loving God.

What kind of God would allow a disease like this to exist, especially one wrecks havoc on the lives of children?

Rabbi Kushner went on a mission of self-discovery and this book is a product of that.

If you haven't read it, I highly recommend it.

Now, just to be clear, in this sermon I am going to focus on the kinds of pain and suffering that are out of our control- like physical illnesses.

I am not going to focus on the evil that humans do to one another, because I think that's a different topic and has everything to do with free will and choice.

But children suffering, natural disasters, random accidents happening, like that boy who was killed by the alligator in Florida, these are the topics that I think many of us struggle with.

How do we reconcile our belief in a good God, with these seemingly unfair and painful things that happen to good and decent people?

My honest answer: because of randomness and chance.

The truth is that I don't believe in an all-powerful God who controls us like a puppet master.

I don't believe in a God who afflicts one person with blessings and another person with pain.

I don't like it when people say, "God answered my prayers," because that works until you talk to someone whose child didn't survive, then do you have to tell them that God did not answer their prayers?

As soon as we go down the road of believing that God allows some people to suffer and not others, we're suddenly worshipping a God who plays favorites, and I can't believe that an all-loving God would choose to inflict pain on some people.

Another popular explanation for why good or innocent people suffer is because they did something to deserve it.

In fact, some religious traditions believe that people suffer because of things their ancestors did.

But if you believe this, then you are worshipping a vengeful God who keeps score of our rights and our wrongs and punishes us accordingly.

I believe in an unconditionally forgiving and benevolent God, so I can't reconcile this belief with a God who would inflict suffering upon us.

Also, as Rabbi Kushner says, this reduces God to a

“cosmic vending machine” in which we can compel God to protect and reward us depending upon what we do.

We just insert the right number of good deed tokens and God does what we want, that's hardly an all-powerful God, that makes us all-powerful, manipulating God to do our will (Pg. 46).

The Book of Job in the Old Testament is an ancient story, which was written to address this question, of why bad things happen to good or undeserving people.

Job is a faithful man, but through the course of the book, God allows Satan to attack him.

All his livestock, his servants and his children are killed.

Then, he becomes covered in painful boils from his head to his feet, and his loving wife (who is spared, for some reason), tells him to kill himself.

There's no reason for his suffering, he's a devout man who stays faithful to God throughout his trials.

He asks God questions about why he is suffering and why God is doing this to him, but he never doubts the existence of God.

In the end, his fortunes are returned to him and he's blessed with new children, but the story doesn't offer any good reason for why God allows Satan to torture him.

Basically, at the end of the story, God asks Job a bunch of rhetorical questions and the lesson we learn is not to question God.

Rabbi Kushner writes that the moral of the story is found not in what Job says or does, but from the perspective of the author.

The author believes that, *"Bad things do happen to good people in the world, but it is not God who wills it."*

*God would like people to get what they deserve in life, but He cannot always arrange it.*

*Forced to choose between a good God who is not totally powerful, or a powerful God who is not totally good, the author of the book of Job chooses God's goodness...*

*God wants the righteous to live peaceful, happy lives, but sometimes even He can't bring that about.*

*It is too difficult even for God to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent victims.” (Pg. 48-49)*

Now, this might cause you to seriously doubt your belief in God at all, and if it's a matter of worshipping an all-powerful God or no God, then you might have to make a tough choice, but that's not a choice I feel that I need to make.

I worship a God who is all-caring, all-loving, all-forgiving.

I worship a God who weeps with us when we are suffering and who celebrates with us when we are joyful.

A God who is still on our side when bad things happen to us and is not the cause of them.

I worship a God that I can turn to for help, and rather than asking why bad things happen to me, I ask God for help when they do (pg. 50-51).

Kushner says, *“If we can bring ourselves to acknowledge that there are some things God does not control, many good things become possible.*

*We will be able to turn to God for things He can do to help us, instead of holding onto unrealistic expectations of Him which will never come about.*

*The Bible, after all, repeatedly speaks of God as the special protector of the poor, the widow and the orphan, without raising the question of how it happened that they became poor, widowed, or orphaned in the first place.” (Pg. 51)*

We need to focus our energies not on why bad things happen, but how to respond to them, how to allow them to shape us into better people.

God doesn't promise us a life free of pain and disappointment.

God doesn't promise us that all we have to do is good works and coast our way through a pain-free life as we earn our ticket into heaven.

But, God does promise us that we'll never be alone in our suffering that we will always be able to draw on something greater than ourselves for strength and courage in the face of tragedy.

This church is a manifestation of that promise.

We gather together in God's name to support each other, and you might be disheartened by the idea that God isn't all-powerful, and it might make you lose your faith.

But imagine if none of us had faith, then none of us would be here, and that time when you came to church because you needed someone and they were there for you, that never would have happened.

Our faith in God works.

It is the mechanism through which we're able to change each other's lives.

If you don't believe me, then leave the church, and try to go it alone and let me know if that's any better.

We cannot choose the tragedies that befall us, but we can choose how we respond to them.

They give us the opportunity to grow closer to one another through love and support.

They give us the opportunity to gain a deeper appreciation for what we do have, for the blessings in our lives.

And in the midst of tragedy, rather than shaking our fists and blaming God, we can lean into God's love for us, reassured that God hates suffering as much as we do, that God weeps and laments with us.

Our response to tragedy is what gives it meaning.

I don't believe that random, unpreventable losses have inherent meaning; we create meaning depending upon how we respond.

If we choose to curse God, to lose faith, to be resentful and take out our anger and rage on others, we've let negative or evil forces win.

But if we allow these experiences to expand our capacity for compassion, mercy, forgiveness and love, if we allow them to draw us closer to others who reach out to us, then we've used the pain as an opportunity to affirm life rather than death, love rather than pain, witnessing to God's love rather than a world devoid of it.

As for me, I don't worship a controlling God, or a vengeful God or an interventionist God who keeps score and favors some over others.

I don't worship a God who answers one person's prayers while ignoring the pleas of another.

I worship a God that holds my hand to get me through suffering, that hand made manifest in every person who reaches out to me when I need it.

I worship a God who knows suffering intimately through the crucifixion of Jesus and who redeems it through the ways in which we respond to it.

And ultimately, I worship a God who calls us to spend our lives trying to relieve the suffering of others, as we extend our hands out to each other in compassion in love when we need it the most.

This, my friends, is the all-loving, all-loving, ALL-LOVING, God that I worship.

Amen.