

Sermon Note: Why Do the Innocent?

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Introduction

As we continue our worship series *Wrestling with Doubt, Finding Faith*, we come to the question that causes more doubt than perhaps any other: why do innocent people suffer? When tragedy strikes someone who has done nothing wrong—a child with cancer, a family killed in an accident, a community devastated by a natural disaster—we struggle to make sense of it. Where is God when bad things happen to good people?

This question has shaken faith for centuries. It shows up in the book of Job, in the psalms of lament, and in conversations between pastors and people whose lives have been shattered by loss. Some walk away from faith entirely, unable to reconcile a loving God with undeserved suffering. Others hold tightly to explanations that can feel hollow or even cruel—"everything happens for a reason," "God needed another angel," "this is part of God's plan."

This week we explore what the Bible teaches about suffering, about human freedom and responsibility, and about where God is when the world feels broken. We ask what it means to trust God in the mystery of unanswered questions and to know that God meets us in the midst of suffering.

Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7isb4Cu6Xc>

In this clip from *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), Chris Gardner and his son find themselves homeless and searching for a place to spend the night.

Why This Video?

This extended scene from *The Pursuit of Happyness* follows Chris Gardner and his young son through one of their darkest moments. Evicted from their hotel, Gardner doesn't know where they'll sleep. Desperate to find shelter and to shield his child from terror, Gardner transforms a medical scanner into a time machine, and together they run from dinosaurs to find a cave. In the relative safety of a public bathroom and a locked door, Gardner makes a bed on the tile floor with toilet paper for cushioning. Late in the night, someone pounds on the door while Gardner holds his son and weeps. The scene refuses to soften what homelessness looks like. It shows a child who has done nothing wrong sleeping on a bathroom floor because the systems in place have failed them.

Video Discussion Questions

1. When Christopher asks where they're going, Gardner yells, "I don't know!" What does that moment of raw honesty reveal about his fears?
2. Gardner transforms a medical scanner into a time machine, and they run from dinosaurs to find a cave. How does imagination function as both protection and love in this moment?

3. The "cave" turns out to be a public bathroom, and the bed is a tile floor. Gardner locks the door and holds his son while someone pounds trying to get in. What does this moment reveal about the limits of what a parent can do to shield a child from harm?
4. Christopher is innocent. He has done nothing to deserve sleeping on a bathroom floor. How does this scene help you think about the connection between the choices we make as a society and the suffering of people who have no power to change their circumstances?
5. When Gardner weeps silently while his son sleeps, where do you see God in that moment?
6. If you have served people experiencing homelessness—through a shelter, a meal program, outreach, or another ministry—what is one story or encounter that stays with you?
7. How has serving people experiencing homelessness shaped your understanding of suffering, dignity, or faith?
8. This scene asks us to consider how society is organized—who has housing, who doesn't, and why. What responsibility do we all have for the systems that produce suffering like this?

Genesis 1:27-28 (CEB)

²⁷God created humanity in God's own image,
in the divine image God created them,
male and female God created them.

²⁸God blessed them and said to them, "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground."

Scripture Study Questions

1. Genesis 1 describes humanity as created in God's image and given dominion over the earth. How does this gift of responsibility and freedom relate to the suffering that happens in the world?
2. God gave humans the capacity to make choices, to shape the world, to act with freedom. When have you seen human freedom lead to harm—either deliberate or unintentional?
3. The text says God blessed humanity and gave us dominion. Dominion is more about stewardship, responsibility, care than it is about domination. Do you agree? If so, how does this impact your understanding of the suffering or flourishing of others?
4. If God gave humanity freedom and responsibility, what does that suggest about God's role when human choices lead to pain? Is God the cause of that suffering? Are we? Someone or something else?
5. Some people assume that if God is all-powerful, God could stop every tragedy. If God did that, what would that mean for human freedom? Would we still be made in God's image? Would we be puppets?
6. Natural disasters—earthquakes, floods, disease—are not caused by human sin, but they happen in a world governed by natural laws that also make life possible. How do you hold the tension between a world that can sustain life and a world that can cause harm?
7. Does the Bible teach that God micromanages every event or causes every tragedy? How does your understanding of this shape the way you pray, the way you grieve, and the way you trust God when suffering happens?
8. Genesis 1 shows God creating a world that is good, and giving humanity the freedom to participate in that goodness. When you look at the brokenness around you, where do you see people using their freedom to bring healing, justice, and care?

Weekly Action

Identify one relationship or situation this week where someone you know is facing hardship—illness, loss, financial stress, grief, or another form of suffering. Instead of offering explanations or trying to make sense of their pain, just be present with them. Consider sending a text, making a meal, sitting with them. Ask what they need. Let your presence be the message that they are not alone. God may not always remove suffering in the way we would like, but God holds us in the middle of it. This week, be that presence for someone else.

Prayer

God of presence and comfort, we do not understand why innocent people suffer. We do not understand why tragedy strikes without reason, why pain lands on those who have done nothing to deserve it. We confess that we want answers, that we want control, that we want the world to make sense. Teach us to trust you in the midst of suffering, where you meet us and where you sustain us. Give us the courage to sit with grief without rushing to tidy conclusions. Give us the strength to participate in healing even when we cannot stop all harm. Remind us that you do not cause our pain, but you sustain us through it. And help us to be your presence for others who are suffering, that they might know they are not alone. Through Christ, who suffered with us and for us, and who promises that death and evil do not have the final word. Amen.