

## “Wrestling with God”

Sermon by Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Genesis 32:9-13a, 24-31

Matthew 14:13-21

I want to begin this story by asking you, if you have a scar on your body, to please put your hand on it or over it if it is beneath your clothes. If you have multiple scars, pick one that stands out to you for some reason. Think of how you got that scar and how it marked you.

My daughter had a collision at Wood Park on Friday, with the playground equipment. Like a gong, the sound reverberated over the whole playground making every mother's and father's head turn. When I leapt the three paces to my crying child, her forehead was pumping blood. Luckily the police were super helpful in getting us to the hospital ASAP. She had no concussion and did not lose consciousness; after a few stitches and glue, she was patched up and ready for a night of pizza and TV with her adoring and grateful moms. I imagine she will have a scar for a long time to remind her of that day. She even gave herself a new nickname: “Shortcut: because I am short, and because I am cut.”

Jacob was also struck in a way that would mark him for the rest of his life. In a dream, he wrestled with a man of God. He wrestled all night long, until daybreak. Finally the angel or whomever it was saw that he could not beat Jacob, so he struck Jacob on the hip and begged Jacob, “Let me go!” Jacob said “I will not let you go until you bless me.” From that blessing Jacob also got a new name: Israel, which means “struggles with God”-- and he also left with a limp.

I invite you to now put a hand on your heart. Take a moment to name to yourself any scars you might have that have no physical scar or limp. Take a moment to recall your scars of the heart. Take time to think of how this scar has marked you ever since, maybe for better, maybe not so much. If you don't know what to do when remembering these kinds of invisible scars, let me suggest that we can invite God to give love and care to the unseen places that hurt.

Where is God when we suffer? Why does our powerful, loving God let bad things happen to good people? This is one of the most important struggles for people of faith, and it is also the winning letter H of my Facebook poll on our church's top questions about God and faith.

Before I answer that, let me go through some bad answers to that question. Recently I came across a different kind of greeting card for people who have cancer or other difficult illnesses. Emily McDowell, the designer, calls them Empathy Cards and they are a bit different from the syrupy sweet optimism that often covers get well and sympathy cards, usually in cursive writing.

These Empathy Cards bear messages like this:

-Please let me be the first to punch someone who says "everything happens for a reason."

-Together, we can find a cure for the phrase, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

-If this is part of God's plan, God is a terrible planner. (No offense if you're reading this, God. You did a really good job with other stuff like waterfalls and pandas.)

When we see someone we love experience tragedy, or when we experience it ourselves, we often question God's planning. If we are taught to believe that God is all powerful, all loving, and all good, then how can God have let this happen?

One answer we may come up with is that the person somehow deserved this. In some ways this thinking allows us to think the world still has order, with understandable cause and effect. If you spend your life smoking, you will get emphysema. We can see in the Bible some voices that say that if you are a righteous person who loves God, you will be blessed, and if you are an evil person who sins against God, you will be cursed. And so, people with disabilities were considered impure and were ostracized from Temple ritual, in part because common thinking was that they were living God's punishment on their lives. Of course, the Book of Job challenges this sort of thinking, because Job by all accounts-- even God's-- does everything right and lived an apparently sin-free life, yet still experienced the worst kinds of suffering. And when a Pharisee asks Jesus about a blind man, saying "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus' response is "Neither." Now, while this blaming the sufferer for their sufferings probably sounds very primitive, I will say that I know people who believe things like "negative thinking can cause cancer." I believe, and science shows, these folks are just plain wrong.

Another answer people come up with to explain evil in the world is that there are outside spiritual forces meddling to cause trouble in the world. Put more simply, "The devil made me do it." This theory may be helpful in explaining troubling events of human evil such as the Holocaust. People who believe this may believe that just as much as God is at work in an unfolding creation, working for goodness in our daily lives, there is an evil power-- or Satan-- who is trying to take power from every good God does, replacing it with evil.

I have trouble with this theory for two main reasons. First of all, as a monotheist, I believe in one God. To give that much power to Satan makes Satan into a god, and in my beliefs only God is God. Secondly, placing evil on some kind of devil creature puts humans off the hook. It removes us from responsibility. It keeps us from taking a critical look at ourselves and asking how we are part of the problem, whether it be of poverty, or violence, or the earth's destruction, or how our ways of earning power in this world may be taking away someone else's power; or how we failed to love our neighbor as ourselves.

The truth is, suffering happens for two main reasons: First, God calls us into partnership with God to work for God's goodness in the world. That is our calling. But God also gives us free will. God is not a micro-manager, and all of us neglect our calling, some in small ways and some in large ways. This is the reason we see evil in the world.

Secondly, God did not just create a perfect world and set it spinning. God's creation is continuing to unfold, and it is at times groaning with the labor pains of creation. And while we are part of that creation, we are also just a spec of it. Sometimes, nature's creatures have competing needs. Our needs will not always win. But that does not mean that God is far off.

### **How do we find God when we see and experience suffering in our lives and in the world?**

We can pray. What is the point of prayer, if it isn't going to convince God to make us a higher priority, even if just for now? Prayer helps the one praying find peace. Prayer can also put us into a sense of union with God, even as it brings us into communion with one another. Rabbi Harold Kushner gave an example in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* of the woman whose very sick husband was prayed over, but whose husband did not become well-- yet Catholics, Protestants and Jews were praying for her and her sick husband, which was indeed a miracle.

We can feed, and be fed. Whether it is our deacons bringing food to church families when someone is sick or grieving, or getting to the Center for Food Action to help feed a broader community, feeding the hurt is replicating the actions of Christ. And we can be fed too. They say you are what you eat. When we eat the communion meal, our bodies also bear the brokenness of Jesus' body and blood. Jesus knows our scars and deepest pain in a very intimate way, and he is no stranger to suffering. He is absolutely able to go there with us, to the most shadowy corners we are willing to show no one else. He can sit there with you for a while-- after all, he has all the time in the world. He also knows the path out of the tombs of despair, into God's call for our new lives. It is easy to doubt that he can do this. But we say we have faith in a man who can turn a few loaves and fishes into a meal that feeds thousands and will soon in this service feed you. Will your scarred heart make room for what Jesus can do?

We can look towards resurrection. Look for signs of life in the shadow of death, and that's where you might find God. There was a hopeful story I recently read about the Hiroshima Ginkos. The New York Times article<sup>1</sup> tells of a boy named Akihiro Takahashi, "knocked unconscious by a deafening roar and a flash of blinding light... dazed and burned, he headed to the river to cool himself. On the way, he witnessed the world that had been destroyed around him: the dead bodies with their clothes melted onto them, the dark air, and later found out that the atomic bomb had killed 80,000 people in his country; because his school was a mile from the center of the blast.

This boy grew to become a leader for global peace. As an adult he would take people to see the Ginko trees that had survived the atomic bomb. These trees not only withstood nuclear destruction; they also grew new greenery within days after the blast. "Those trees' survival was a message

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<sup>1</sup> Ariel Dorfman, "The Whispering Leaves of the Hiroshima Ginko Trees" in *The New York Times* August 5, 2017

of hope in the midst of the black rain of despair: that we could nurture life and conserve it, that we must be wary of the forces we unleash.”

God is present even in the worst of our sufferings. That does not mean that God caused our sufferings. That also does not mean that God will prevent our suffering. What it does mean is that God knows our sufferings, and is near us in them, sometimes even weeping alongside us. God is putting a hand on our scars and filling them with love. God also points our way toward resurrection, giving us signs toward survival and resistance and even toward our flourishing, so that our sufferings do not get to have the last word. Thank you God. Thank you Jesus. Amen.