

One of my favorite Greek myths is the story of Pandora. Before she was a pioneer in internet radio, Pandora was a young woman with a box she was told not to open. She disobeyed, of course, and unleashed evil into the world. They told a story about a young woman who disobeyed the gods and unleashed forces far beyond her comprehension. They weren't too far off. The story of Pandora was a clever way for the Greeks to talk about the reality of Sin, the reality we all have to face every day: that the world isn't like it should be. We know deep down in our bones that something's wrong, something's off. Every time a natural disaster strikes, or someone with power hurts someone weaker, or any time we encounter Death, the deepest part of us cries out, This isn't right!

In those moments, those seasons, we're overcome by how *big* evil seems. It's paralyzing. We think, this is too much. We scramble for some purchase, some hope of safety and we often find it in a certain phrase. [[Pandora and Big evil?](#)]

This phrase springs to our lips in those times of distress, a sort of incantation we speaking, hoping it will drive the pain away. When we're faced with the terrible reality of our broken world, whatever incarnation it takes, we say,

Everything happens for a reason.

That's very nearly the worst thing we could say in times of pain. If all we meant was "everything has a cause" - that literally, everything happens because something else happened, then it'd be fine (if trite). But that's not what we mean.

When we say, Everything happens for a reason, we mean that *God* is causing everything. That the invisible hand behind all our troubles belongs to God. And that's meant to be comforting, because God's taking everything somewhere. That makes us like pawns in some cosmic chess game - we may just need to be sacrificed for the greater good.

Maybe that sets okay with you when it's a far-off natural disaster, like a tsunami or earthquake overseas. But when it's closer to home - a hurricane or tornado. Or a friend who's the victim of abuse. Or the death of someone you love. Then it's much harder to believe that a God who would do this, sacrifice someone you care about like that, inflict so much pain and suffering for some inscrutable cosmic good, that God is worth of love and worship?

Everything happens for a reason. Does it? Does God actually dictate that everything will happen for some greater good?

No. Let's be starkly, unequivocally clear at the outset: the pain of Death and decay, the pain of a broken world that we sense all the time, is not God's fault. It's not God's will. God does not cause these things. That's not what Scripture teaches, at all.

We like "everything happens for a reason" because it gives us a sense of control. When we face the bigness of Evil, we want to know *Why*, or at least know that someone is behind the wheel, that there's a Plan. "Everything happens for a reason" is an answer, or a partial-answer in a time when nothing feels certain. And when we're overcome by Evil, anything feels better than nothing.

But here's the thing: what we need in the midst of pain isn't answers. Knowing why doesn't fix anything or take the pain away. Answers don't undestroy or resurrect. When we're suffering, when

we're face-to-face with evil, we don't need answers and explanations. We *need* hope. We need a promise, an assurance, that this isn't the End. That hope springs eternal.

And that's what we find in the Scriptures. Not answers. Not explanations. But hope. Promise. Assurance. The Bible doesn't actually tell us *Why Bad Things Happen*. Because God knows that's not what we really need. The Scriptures teach us what we should do in the face of Evil. They tell us not *Why*, but *What now?*

So let's take a look at what the Scriptures tell us about the reality of Sin, and the better reality of God's power to save us from Sin.

During Lent, we've been in Genesis 3. This is the story of how we introduced sin and death into the world. We saw in the first week that Sin destroys our relationship with God. That because we choose our own Ways, we walk away from Life towards Death. And last week we saw that our selfishness doesn't affect only us, but also infects our relationships with other people. We move away from mutual relationships into exploitative, selfish relationships.

But there's another layer to Sin we rarely consider. Turn with me to Genesis 3, and let's look at the consequences of our Sin one more time, to get a sense of how truly huge the consequences are.

"Since you listened to your wife and ate from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat, the ground is cursed because of you. All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it. It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains. By the sweat of your brow will you have food to eat until you return to the ground from which you were made. For you were made from dust, and to dust you will return." -- Genesis 3:16-19 (NLT)

We were created to curate God's creation. We were cultivators, caretakers of God's Way, God's Order. When we chose sin, when we chose to go our own way, we introduced a cancer, a venom into that creation.

Now, what was meant to bring pure joy mixed with pain. When we try to cultivate, we get thorns and thistles. We are opposed to God's Way, so now that Way brings pain. We're like a bone that's slipped out of socket. Instead of working as we're meant to, we bring suffering.

And was that God's will? No! We choose to sin. We choose not to follow God.

But wait, you say. I'll admit I'm not perfect. I'll cop to being selfish, to having a bad day. But I'm not a monster. How can my sinfulness really be responsible for those larger evils like natural disasters?

But this is a question we know the answer to. It's why we tell stories like Pandora's Box or the Sorcerer's Apprentice. We know that in going our own way, we've messed with forces far beyond our own control. That by choosing to ignore God's Way, we've unleashed something huge, something terrible into the world.

In the Scriptures, Sin isn't merely a bad decision someone makes. Sin is a living, active force that seeks to destroy us. God describes it in Genesis 4 as a creature crouched just outside our door, waiting to devour us. Paul describes it in Romans 7 as a monster inside us, controlling us. Peter describes it in his first letter as a lion, prowling about looking to consume us.

And while the Scriptures don't explain everything, they do paint a clear picture of our predicament. In choosing Sin, we've unleashed forces into this world that are beyond our control. Paul tells us as much in his letter to the Ephesians. Toward the end of the letter, he warns them and us that:

We are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. -- Ephesians 6:12 (NLT)

These spiritual rulers and authorities, these mighty powers and evil spirits are real. They infect every human culture. The Scriptures teach us that the Curse of Sin operates at every level of human society. This is why we look at people who lived in the 1800s and wonder, How could they think it was okay to own other people? How could anyone ever think that was okay? Their whole culture was steeped in Sin.

Or, How was there ever a time in history when women were considered property?! Who could think that was right? Cultures immersed in Sin.

And lest we think we're getting better because we have Civil Rights, let's remember we still live in a world where the power of evil and sin seems beyond us. More humans live in slavery today than at any point in human history. Right now. On our watch. In our nation, in our state. In our city. How many of us don't even give a thought to our unfair trade practices that exploit the global south? Or our attitude toward immigrants - how we build walls instead of welcoming the stranger among us as God commands?

If you brought someone from 200 years ago to our culture, they'd be disgusted by the sinful way we all manage our time, the wanton consumption that characterizes *our* culture. Today. Right now.

Sin is so much *more* than just a personal bent away from God. Yes that is part of it. But our whole culture, our whole society is bent away from God. We are raised in an atmosphere of Sin. We breathe in rebellion every day. From the day we're born. We don't even have a chance.

God told Adam that "**the ground is cursed because of you.**" The whole earth bears the weight of our Sin. Like Pandora, we unleashed terrible evil into the world. We thought we were enough, that we could be like God, bear the weight of the knowledge of Good and Evil, but it overcame us, surpassed us. We had a tiger by the tail, and it turned on us.

Talking about Sin at this level paralyzes us. We think, How can I make a difference? Those sins, those evils, they feel too big. The issues are complicated. How can one person make a difference? Or bring any clarity to a discussion of the right way to go?

It's that same despair we feel in the face of a loved one's death. This despair is the awful, crushing weight of the reality of Sin. That despair that says, This is too big. This is more than cutting someone off in traffic or stealing a piece of candy or telling a white lie. This is that sense that the world is against us, that creation itself is out to get us, that the darkness is closing in, that the sun *won't* come up tomorrow. That all that's left for us is pain. Despair. Death.

Sin is big. Sin is powerful. And we sold ourselves to it without even understanding what we were doing. We can't unring the bell. We can't close Pandora's Box. Sin is loose in the world and we can't actually master it. Knowing that we caused it doesn't help. Being able to assign blame, to point at Sin and know *that's* why doesn't help. Knowing that sometimes, we are the victims of someone else's Sin, or even of a sinful, unjust, unfair system doesn't help.

And if you're like me, you find that profoundly unfair. You think, I didn't know. I didn't sign up for this. I shouldn't be held accountable for it. And you're right. It is unfair. But it's real. We're in a lot of trouble.

That's why knowing why, having answers doesn't help. What we need is hope. We need rescue. We need a promise, an assurance that this isn't the End. That things are going to get better. That Sin doesn't have the last word.

And that is what we find in the Cross. In Jesus' Death and resurrection we see a picture of God's rescue.

The Cross itself is profoundly unfair. Jesus, who was perfect, who never sinned, never succumbed to the culture of Sin, Jesus experienced the consequences of Sin: Death. Jesus bore the full weight of Evil. And then, even when Sin did its worst, when those rulers and authorities did their worst and *killed* God, God rose from the dead. God conquered Sin and Death. God put those power and authorities under his feet and stood tall.

Jesus' Death and Resurrection are an unfair solution to our unfair problem. Jesus' Empty Tomb is God's promise that Sin is not the End. Jesus' death and resurrection give us hope that what we see isn't the last word. Paul tell us this in Romans 8. He says:

What we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

Paul says that all this pain we're experiencing *is* the result of our sin. He says the whole world groans under the weight of that curse. It's real pain. It hurts. It's not nothing. It's not No Big Deal. But he compares these pains to the pain of childbirth. They're temporary, and they're the gateway to something so much greater, a joy that's coming that will redeem all this pain. He goes on:

And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us. We were given this hope when we were saved. (If we already have something, we don't need to hope for it. But if we look forward to something we don't yet have, we must wait patiently and confidently.)

God is not finished with us. Even now, we have the Holy Spirit working within us, showing us how to overcome Sin, compelling us to move toward that future. We hope.

And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will.

The best news is that even when we don't know what to do, even when we're faced with huge, impossible-seeming evil, the Holy Spirit is helping us. Praying for us and with us even when we don't know how or what to pray.

God hasn't abandoned us to our Sin. Yes, we messed up. Big time. Yes, we're in way over our heads. But God is already at work, right now in the world, overcoming evil with Good. Turning death into life. Taking the evil and Sin that we introduced into the world and making it into beauty.

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. -- Romans 8:18-28 (NLT)

Notice Paul doesn't say "God causes everything for a reason." Paul says that God causes everything to work together for our good. That's different. Paul says God is faithful to us even when we are unfaithful to God. This is God will not allow Evil and Sin and Death to have the final word. That God takes everything that happens – including the Sin we've chosen – and weaves even our sins and scars into a beautiful tapestry that is much better than we can even imagine at this moment.

This is the heart of hope. Hope says, I know Sin is big. But I believe God is bigger.

Hope is what fortified Jesus as he marched into Jerusalem, to his certain death. This is what gave Paul the courage to stand before Nero, the ultimate Evil Emperor, and proclaim his faith in Jesus' resurrection even as he was sentenced to execution. This is what empowered to early Christian martyrs to cling to Jesus even in the face of death. They all knew that Rome is big, but God is bigger.

Hope is what empowered William Wilberforce to fight to abolish the slave trade in England. The same hope that inspired the abolitionists in our own country to fight, to run the underground railroad. They knew that evil institutions like slavery are big, but God is bigger.

Hope that inspired Phineas Bresee, the founder of our denomination, to leave his position as an appointed pastor in his church to serve the poor and homeless in Los Angeles when his superiors didn't embrace his calling. He knew that Poverty, Alcoholism and Homelessness are big, but God is bigger.

Hope that motivated Mother Theresa to dedicate her whole life to one of the poorest communities in the entire world, to work until she died among the sickest humans on the planet. She knew that Disease and Death are big, but God is bigger.

Hope that inspires our own Jon and Ashley Barchus, who run the Arbre de Vie orphanage in Benin, where they don't even have running water or electricity. They knew that God loves the children of Sakate, Benin as much as God loves us, so they moved there, sacrificed every comfort they've known and now are a beacon of God's love in a country that does not know God. They know that the challenges facing Benin are big, but God is bigger.

Hope motivated this church to lead the way in Feed the Creek. When we learned that hundreds of kids in Beavercreek were going home hungry on the weekends, the conviction that God hates it when kids go hungry lit a fire under Sharon Fulcher, Alice Webb, Marilyn Osterday and Sue Luebcke and now every weekend over 200 kids are taking home enough food to eat all weekend and they're not done yet.

These people and so many countless others in the long history of God's people are not blind. They're not naïve. They know the world is a terrible place. They know it's full of all kinds of evil. The kinds of evil like poverty and injustice that can seem overwhelming.

But they know that God is bigger than Sin. God is bigger than Evil. They know that God is working right now to combat that injustice. To bring beauty out of ashes. They have hope.

And they choose to stand with God. To join in where God is already working to bring about restoration.

So the question before us today is: will we join in, or will we resist? Will we search for what God is doing and join in? Will we take up God's invitation to restore, or will we allow fear, anxiety and insecurity to paralyze us?

Before we close today, I want you to take out the card you were given when you came in. The band is going to perform a song called Control, and it's an opportunity for you to reflect on this challenge. On one side of the card is a blank.

During the song, I want you to consider prayerfully what Evil paralyzes you. Something you probably try not to give too much thought to because it scares you. It's too much. Maybe that's the reality of human trafficking. Maybe it's illness or death in your family. Maybe it's a broken relationship.

Write it down on your card. You're keeping it, so only you will see it if that's what you choose.

Then, on the other side of the card is Romans 8:28. It's a reminder, a promise that God is bigger than what you wrote down. That God has not and will not abandon you to that.

Consider what hope looks like in your situation. How is God calling you to confront that Sin? How does Hope free you to move?

Evil can seem like an endless ocean we're all drowning in. But let us remember that God is our lighthouse, shining into the darkness, showing us the way to go. When we are in doubt, let us look to Jesus. He shows us how we ought to live, how we ought to face injustice.

Let us remember that the Holy Spirit is within us, praying for us, changing us into people who can stand tall against evil. Sin is big, but God is bigger.

Communion Set Up

We close with Communion today. This meal is the ultimate proof that God is bigger than Sin and Death. When we eat the wafer, we remember that Jesus, the only one who never sinned, was broken

for our Sin. And when we dip the wafer in the juice, we remember that his blood was poured out for us, to heal us from our Sin and reconnect us with God.