

Welcome

Like many of use, I've used my pandemic time to experiment in the kitchen. There's always been one thing I've wanted to make that I stayed away from because it was so intimidating - fresh pasta.

But hey, if you can't take a risk during a pandemic, when are you gonna do it? It turns out it's not as hard as I thought... though it takes some attention. And it *does* help if you've got a mixer (thanks to my homie Sue - this one belongs to her). Fresh pasta is just four ingredients - flour, eggs, oil and salt. You put it in and let it run for about 10 minutes (or knead it by hand).

We're going to talk about good and evil today, and I thought pasta would be a helpful metaphor. After all, if I were to tell you in this moment I've made some good pasta for you - you'd rightly go... uh... where?

But, in my defense, you couldn't call it *bad* pasta either. Because right now, it's just a bunch of ingredients in a bowl, getting mixed. It's neither good nor bad yet. It's just... potential. (Hopefully potential deliciousness.)

I want to suggest today that we consider good and evil in much the same way - God has created a world, inviting us to become out of chaos. And what's before us is the question: Will we join God in moving the world toward peace (which of course includes delicious pasta) or will we choose to invite chaos into the world, little by little?

As we begin worshipping together today, I want to invite you to open your Spirit to what God wants to say to you today. Will you be part of God's good work? And will this turn out to be delicious pasta?

Message

We're in the season of Epiphany! Following our Christmas celebration of God with us, Epiphany asks an important question: who is God? The answer we find in Epiphany is: God is who we meet in Jesus. Another way to say that is: If we want to know who God is, then our very best picture of God is Jesus.

This year, our Epiphany series is called "From A to Z". We're exploring some of the big themes of the Bible, themes that illustrate who God is. As you might expect from the title, we're going to see how these themes show up throughout Scripture. How they reach their fullness in Jesus. And how they help us live today as we anticipate Jesus' return.

In other words, this is a series about how Jesus shows us the God who has been at work from the beginning and will keep working to the very end.

We began with the origins of theology: the miracle of life. We saw that because we are relational creatures, we know God to be relational. In Jesus, we meet the God who created us *on purpose, for a purpose*. God desires us to live with God. Last week, we saw that to confess God as creator means that God created us to be God's partners in moving the world toward loving harmony. Creation is *invitation*.

Today, we're exploring one of the more troubling pieces of creation: the presence of evil. We live in a world where bad things happen, where bad *people* happen to good people. Where the good are not always rewarded, where bad people thrive. We've all watched good people, people we love, suffer. We've all see those who've hurt us thrive. And we wonder, where's the justice in that? How could this be?

You may remember from the last couple of weeks that we've had to face the reality that the Bible answers different questions than we ask. We want to know, for instance, *how* we got here. But the Bible is much more interested in *why* we're here. So too with the problem of Evil. We want to understand the origin of Evil. Did God create it? Does the Devil make us do it? Where does it come from?

But the Bible doesn't answer this question for us. The writers of Scripture either didn't know or didn't care where evil came from. They were much more interested in what Evil *does*. We might say they tell us what Evil *is*. And the Bible's framing of Evil only makes sense if we understand what we've explored over the last couple of weeks - the Bible's vision of God-as-Creator being one of God inviting creation to become out of chaos. Unless we understand God's primary posture toward creation to be one of *invitation*, what we find in the second creation story makes little sense.

[Scripture Slide 1] We're going to begin in Genesis 2, the story where we began this series. You may recall that in this story, God creates a human, then plants a garden and puts the human in the garden to tend it. I want to focus on a particular detail we skipped over a couple of weeks ago:

The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it. But the LORD God warned him, "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden— except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die." -- Genesis 2:15-17

A totally reasonable question at this point in the story is... why put that Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the garden in the first place? Why not just... you know... *leave it out* and then say, "Help yourself to whatever!"? After all, if you know where the story goes, you know that tree means bad news for those first humans.

But remember: the heart of God's creative impulse is *invitation*, and invitation requires potential. Invitation requires *risk*. The possibility that the invitation will be rejected. The *ability* for the invitation to be rejected (otherwise it's just an instruction).

So at the heart of the garden are two trees: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eternal life or the ability to master our own destinies. Eternal life with our creator or a rejection of our creator's invitation in favor of our own way in the world.

A surface reading of this passage renders what everyone hates about religion - God plants a tree and then, for no discernible reason, makes it off-limits. I can't tell you how often I interact with folks who see

a life of faith as a joyless life of following rules that make no sense, other than that they seem to keep us from having any fun at all.

But the heart of this story is a question: do we trust that God's way leads us to life? Do we trust enough to say Yes to God's invitation, to *follow* God's way, to live by God's instruction even when they don't make sense?

Every time I try to make a new dish, I follow the recipe pretty closely - even when it doesn't make much sense in the moment. Pasta dough has to be pretty dry and during the mixing process, I always wonder if it's *too* dry - there're so many crumbs in the mixture. But I trust the recipe, and let the mixer do its work. I'm rewarded with this beautiful dough ball.

But here's the thing - if I were serving you this, and I called it 'perfect pasta', you'd be a little disappointed. Even if I plated it up and served it with a nice sauce. Because it doesn't matter how well the process has gone up to this point... it's not finished.

Perfect pasta is the end of a process. If you can understand that, then you can understand maybe my favorite verses in the Bible:

Even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered. Having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all those who obey him. -- Hebrews 5:8-9

The author of Hebrews says that Jesus' suffering "made him perfect". We want to scratch our heads and say, "Hold on... what do you mean it *made* him perfect? Wasn't Jesus born sinless?"

Yes and yes. When we hear the word 'perfect', we hear the connotation 'flawless' - like a diamond with no flaws in it. This sort of perfection either is or isn't. But when Biblical writers use the word 'perfect' they mean it in terms more like we talk about perfect pasta... something that is finished, something that has been completed.

So Jesus was perfected. He was completed by what he suffered. What could that possibly mean?

[Scripture Slide 2] Turn over to Romans 5 with me. Paul helps us out in his letter to the Church in Rome. The Roman church was ethnically blended - Jewish and Gentile people from very different backgrounds working to figure out how to live together. Paul spends the first part of his letter illustrating why Jesus is good news for everyone, both Jewish and Gentile. BY the time we get to chapter 5, Paul is comparing Jesus to that first human, the Adam. And Paul frames all of this in terms of Jesus' obedience to God vs Adam's disobedience. Let's read it together:

When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. Yes, people sinned even before the law was given. But it was not counted as sin because there was not yet any law to break. Still, everyone died—from the time of Adam to the time of

Moses—even those who did not disobey an explicit commandment of God, as Adam did. Now Adam is a symbol, a representation of Christ, who was yet to come.

But there is a great difference between Adam's sin and God's gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ. And the result of God's gracious gift is very different from the result of that one man's sin. For Adam's sin led to condemnation, but God's free gift leads to our being made right with God, even though we are guilty of many sins. For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ.

Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone. Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners. But because one other person obeyed God, many will be made righteous. -- Romans 5:12-19

Got that? Adam didn't trust God. Adam rejected God's loving invitation to flourish, and so Adam introduced sin into the world. Adam's evil is a distrust of God, a temptation to go our own way, be our own gods (or follow some other god like money, politics or family).

But Jesus is the second Adam. Where the first Adam rejected God's invitation, Jesus received God's invitation. Jesus remained faithful to God's way. Even when it got really hard for him to stay the course. Even when he wanted to give up. Even when it cost him his very life. Jesus never wavered, never turned away.

And, not to be trite, but all that pressure, all that suffering made him worthy to be our savior. He chose good over and over and over throughout his life. He chose God when it was easy and he chose God when it was very scary to do so.

And *that's* what proved him worthy. It's what *made* him worthy. Jesus' suffering perfected him.

So back to that question of Evil. The Bible either doesn't know or doesn't care where Evil comes from. What matters in the Bible is Evil's *goal*. Evil is what happens when we refuse God's loving invitation. We decide to be masters of our own universes and we bend the world a little more toward chaos.

But the good news is that Jesus shows us how to be faithful. He shows us that pain and suffering don't automatically mean God has cursed us. Sometimes our very faithfulness to God causes pain and suffering.

So the question before us today is, are we following the way of Jesus? Not, "do we understand the way of Jesus" or "do we agree with the way of Jesus" or "is it expedient to follow the way of Jesus" but "are we *following* Jesus?"

It might not make sense to turn the other cheek. Or to welcome the stranger. Or to love our neighbor the way we love ourselves. Or to pray for our enemies. But Jesus says, pick up your cross and follow me.

Do we trust, as Jesus did, that God is with us? Do we trust that God's way is the way to life - even if that way leads through a cross? Do we trust that God is *good*?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus shares his table with us.

1. When in the last week have I trusted God to provide for and protect me?
2. When have I lashed out or fought for what I think I need?
3. When in the next week will I be tempted to fight rather than forgive this week?
4. How can I trust God this week?

Assignment + Blessing

And they sang a new song with these words:

“You are worthy to take the scroll
and break its seals and open it.
For you were slaughtered, and your blood has ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation.
And you have caused them to become
a Kingdom of priests for our God.
And they will reign on the earth.”

Then I looked again, and I heard the voices of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and of the living beings and the elders. And they sang in a mighty chorus:

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered—
to receive power and riches
and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and blessing.”

And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They sang:

“Blessing and honor and glory and power
belong to the one sitting on the throne
and to the Lamb forever and ever.” -- Revelation 12:9-13