



*“Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?”
- Psalm 10:1*

By now we may be drilling down and asking “the why question.” That is, why is this coronavirus ravaging us? The why question almost always leads to dangerous theological considerations. If God is so loving and kind why is God allowing this to happen? Where, exactly, is God right now? God seems absent. If God is really in control of everything, why doesn’t God put a stop to it? Surely God knows that human efforts have been ineffective.

In a March 29th article in *Time*, entitled “*Christianity Offers No Answers About the Coronavirus. It’s Not Supposed To,*” New Testament scholar and theologian N.T. Wright suggests that during times such as this at least some Christians start searching for answers that aren’t necessarily - if ever - attainable. “No doubt the usual silly suspects will tell us why God is doing this to us,” Wright states. “A punishment? A warning? A sign? These are knee-jerk would-be Christian reactions in a culture which, generations back, embraced rationalism: everything must have an explanation. But suppose it doesn’t?”

From the beginning of time - ever since humans became aware of God’s presence and activity in the world and began to assign meaning to it - we’ve either blamed God for causing something unthinkable to happen, or questioned God’s presence or absence in the midst of difficult times, or been upset with God for not doing something about situations humans themselves created (but didn’t want to assume responsibility), or just plain lost faith in God altogether. We can be pretty sure that’s happening again right now.

Wright offers an alternative. “Perhaps what we need is to recover the biblical tradition of lament. Lament is what happens when people ask, ‘Why?’ and don’t get an answer.” The psalms offer excellent examples of lament, in which the composers both express their own personal despair and invite God to join them on the journey.

“O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; O Lord heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror. My soul also is struck with terror, while you, O Lord - how long?” - Psalm 6:1-3

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” - Psalm 13:1-2

“My soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help, like the forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand.” - Psalm 88:3-5

Those are strong words, and perhaps they resonate with us. Wright reminds us, “The point of lament is not just that it’s an outlet for our frustration, sorrow, loneliness, and our sheer inability to understand what is happening and why. The mystery of the biblical story is that **God also laments**. Christians like to think of God as above all that, knowing everything, in charge of everything, calm and unaffected by the troubles of the world. But that’s not the picture we get in the Bible.”

I think it can be helpful at a time like this to let go of our need or desire to explain everything. The fact of the matter is there are no good explanations - at least within competent theological frameworks - that will help us attach meaning to why hundreds of thousands of people around the world are dying, heaping sadness and sorrow on us the likes of which we have never experienced before. Nor is it helpful - or faithful for that matter - to think that God is somehow using the coronavirus as some kind of divinely administered tool to accomplish things that may not yet, if ever, be clear to us. Our God does not conjure up unfortunate events and perpetrate them upon us, especially ones that kill people, in order to make a point. Is God at work in the midst of this? Of course. But is this part of some master plan that only God knows, the meaning of which might be revealed to us in the future? Absolutely not!

And so we are left with this idea of lament, which allows us the freedom to express our fear, anxiety, sorrow, and despair to God, and trust that God is not only walking with us but is also filled with sadness over the rising death toll and the way this virus is tearing apart the creation. “We’re in this together” has become the rallying cry for our nation. But for Christians it takes on a deeper meaning. God is not only with us, but is experiencing what we are. Isn’t that what we confess when we proclaim Jesus is God incarnate? And so do not be afraid, for God laments with us.

Let us pray. Lord God, we are in despair over the death and destruction caused by the coronavirus, and we lament over the impact it continues to have over so many human lives. But we take heart knowing that you lament with us, and that your heart is also broken for the sake of your creation. Continue to travel with us, and always remind us that we are never alone. Amen

In Christ,

Pastor Chuck