Ash Wednesday sermon follow-up
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My Ash Wednesday homily focused on three Lenten themes: repentance, suffering, and the cross. I want to take each one in turn and say a little more about it here.

Repentance is essential to salvation. There is no hope of pardon without it, as the WCF says.

But repentance is badly misunderstood. Repentance, like faith, is not so much "demand" as it is "gift." Repentance is our action. But it is also God's work in us, changing our minds, renewing our hearts, and redirecting our wills. While repentance certainly includes an emotional element, it is not groveling, as if we had to somehow convince God to show us grace. The emotional side of repentance includes *both* contrition over our sin *and* a delight in God's mercy.

If you want to learn more about repentance, both misconceptions as well as the biblical teaching, you may enjoy this sermon I preached on Jonah 3 some years ago. I use Mark Twain's misunderstanding of repentance as a foil for presenting the biblical view:

http://www.trinity-pres.net/audio/aa-sermon04-03-14pmjonah11.mp3

Lent focuses on suffering from a number of angles: suffering in God's providence, suffering as a consequence of sin, suffering death (including martyrdom), suffering for the sake of self-denial and sacrificial service, etc., as well as God's suffering on our behalf on the cross.

In the sermon, I approached suffering first from an apologetic standpoint. Why this strategy? I think the so-called "problem of evil" (If God is all-powerful and all-good, how can there be evil?) is the most powerful "defeater" of Christian faith in our time. Because of news media, we are aware of the pain and suffering of others throughout the world as never before. Because of technological advances, modern people are prone to think they should not have to suffer. So when suffering comes, they usually poorly prepared to bear it.

If God is good and all-powerful, whence evil? How do we deal with this objection to our faith? In the sermon, I looked at the problem of evil from a secular point of view. Obviously, it would be worth looking at what other religions say about suffering and comparing them to Christianity as well, but I chose to frame the objection from a secular point of view for two reasons. First, hard core secularism is making a lot of noise in the media right now. The "new atheism" of men like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris is getting a lot of attention and a lot of respect in the national press and in academia. Second, I think many of us in the church are tempted to live

dualistic lives. We function as Christians in some ways, going to church and trying to adhere to biblical morality. But in other ways, we live like "practical atheists," essentially screening God out of daily life. Because we are pressured to privatize our faith, we have a hard time connecting biblical truth to the events swirling around us, including the tragedies we hear and see reported on tv, radio, and the web. We are tempted to think like the secularists who dominate our culture's major institutions and power structures. Part of developing a more consistent Christian outlook is being able to examine and explain events from a biblical point of view.

When a secularist objects to Christianity based on the problem of evil, he is actually dependent on the very worldview he is supposedly rejecting. He is borrowing capital from the Christian view of life in order for his objection to get traction. He relies on the resources of Christianity in order to critique it. But, obviously, if this is so, then the objection is self-refuting.

All we have to do is probe the objection a bit more deeply to see that it really doesn't work. Think about this in a couple of different ways.

Some will say, "I cannot see any meaning in the evil and suffering around me. Because God should stop it and doesn't, he must not be there." Note what's being assumed here: *If I cannot discern the meaning of suffering, then there is no such meaning.* But while Christians certainly claim that God has a good reason for the suffering he chooses to allow, he does not always reveal what that reason is. Just because evil *appears* meaningless to us does not mean it really is; the meaning might be a mystery known only unto God. We do not always have the right vantage point, but our limitations must not be imposed upon God.

Of course, sometimes believers can get at least some glimpse of God's good purpose in suffering. As I pointed out in the sermon, many believers would testify to how God has used their pain to actually draw them closer to himself. But even if we do not come to see the purpose in our suffering, that does not mean there is no such purpose.

We're all familiar with this dynamic of purposeful-but-mysterious suffering. Most parents take their small new born to a building where they allow a total stranger to stick needles into his tender skin. The child has no idea what's going on or why – he only knows it is painful. But the parent knows what's going on: it's a vaccination at the doctor's office. It serves a good purpose, even though the child cannot understand it at present. In the same way, when we see evil around us, we may not know why it happens, but we must trust that God has his reasons.

But there's an even deeper answer to this objection. The objection presupposes such a thing as real, absolute evil. It cannot arise from a relativist worldview. But how are such moral absolutes grounded? In other words, how do know that these things are really evil, that they ought not to be? If we cringe at injustice and ask, "Where is God?!" we need to realize that injustice does not disprove God's existence, but assumes it. C. S. Lewis is helpful:

> My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I gotten this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? If the whole show was bad and senseless from A to Z, so to speak, why did I, who was supposed to be part of the show, find myself in such violent reaction against it? A man feels wet when he falls into water, because man is not a water animal: a fish would not feel wet. Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too — for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies. Thus in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist — in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless — I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality — namely my idea of justice — was full of sense. Consequently, atheism turns out to be too simple. If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning: just as, if there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. Dark would be without meaning.

In other words, our moral sensibilities only make sense if there is a God. If our moral judgments are only a matter of personal preference, they do not constitute an objection to anything. If they are the product of evolution, they are blind and arbitrary (and contradictory, given that evolution can only proceed through suffering, violence, and death). Why do we say people *ought* not to suffer? Where does the "ought" come from? The truth is that if there is no God, there is no "ought." If there is no God, there is no such thing as evil. If there is no God, there is no reason to be outraged at evil and no hope that anything will or can be done about it. The secular objector has borrowed moral judgments from the Christian worldview in order to object to Christianity. If he true to his secularism, he would have to admit he has no basis for moral obligation or moral evaluation. Russian Orthodox writer Fydor Dostevesky captures this well in his sentiment that if God does not exist, all things are permitted. But Doestevesky also knew that Christianity does more than justify morality and our horror of injustice; it also provides hope that suffering will be overcome:

> I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a painful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man, that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood that they've shed; that it will not only make it possible to forgive, but to justify all that has happened.

Thus, this objection needs to be turned on its head: If you object to great wickedness and suffering in the world, you already believe in God whether you admit it or not. That is not to say the Christian worldview makes suffering any less painful. But at least we know

that [a] it really is evil and God objects to it as much as we do; and [b] God is determined to do something about it and so there is hope even if the mystery of "why?" remains unsolved. Christianity provides resources for coping with suffering and making the most of it that no other worldview has. God's purposes will be justified in the end.

It is important for Christians to know that their faith is well grounded. Once we understand that secularism has no basis for morality, we realize there is no reason to be intimidated by secularism. We also realize that it is very dangerous to privatize our faith and let secularism have free reign in the public square. Secularists routinely use high-sounding jargon for their moral views but when pressed they are never able to follow through on these notions. Many secularists regularly contradict themselves, not only borrowing capital from the Christian worldview even as they claim to reject it, but also by espousing moral relativism (e.g., "every person would be allowed to decide right and wrong for himself") at the same time that they try to claim to moral absolutes (e.g., "racism is wrong.")

Faith does not make the problem of suffering go away. But at the very least, we have shown that suffering is actually a much bigger problem for the secular unbeliever and the biblical worldview gives the believer a way of grappling with suffering in confidence and hope.

Finally, we come to the cross.

Ultimately, Lent points us to the cross. The season reflects back on Jesus battling Satan as he is tempted in the wilderness for forty days (hence, Lent's forty day length) and on his approach to the cross (hence, Lent's conclusion with Good Friday and Holy Saturday, with Jesus dead and entombed). Lent is not just about our personal piety, e.g., learning greater self-discipline through a season of asceticism. Lent ultimately points us to the suffering God who has won our salvation.

This important: If our thoughts above handle intellectual objections to the Christian faith based on the problem of evil, emotional objections often remain. For those objections to be dissolved, the objector has to see that the cross is the place where God "takes his own medicine, so to speak" (in the words Dorothy Sayers), or God "puts himself *on* the hook of suffering," in the words of Peter Kreeft.

The Father sent the Son into the world so he could die for our sins. In other words, as it has been said, the crib and the cross are cut from the same block of wood. The helplessness and defenselessness of the baby in the crib ultimately leads to the helplessness and defenselessness of the man on the cross. The gospel story moves from God in a crib to God on a cross. God experiences godforsakenness so that we who ought to be forsaken by God because of our sin can have communion with God once again.

Lent is a time for reflection on the cross. In one sense, that is sobering. We obviously cannot reflect on the cross without considering the magnitude of sin and the inevitability

of death. But the cross also brings us joy, and this joy is always woven through Lent when the season is done right. There is always light at the end of the Lenten tunnel, and that light is the light of the world, it is the light of our salvation. In the cross, God takes on our suffering and evil and dies for them. But in dying for evil, he defeats evil. Our sin is buried with him – but it does not rise with him the third day. The victory is won!! The injustice of the cross leads to the even greater justice of a world set to rights through the risen Christ.

Lent is thus a vital chapter in the story of calendar, as it mimics the story of redemption. It is (thankfully) not the last chapter. But it is a vital chapter, and one we must pass through if we are to fully grasp and enjoy the significance of Easter.