

## Is Our Pilot AWOL? Genesis 1:27-28

I. By now we have all seen the images and heard the stories. (**images**) Hurricane Harvey has become one of the most devastating hurricanes ever to hit the United States. Although so far it doesn't rival Hurricane Katrina that killed 1500 in 2005, and certainly not the great Galveston Hurricane that killed approximately 12,000 people in 1900, it has led to unimaginable suffering. Families have been separated, hundreds of thousands of homes have been flooded and destroyed, and some towns will never recover. And as usual the most vulnerable suffer the most. Children, the elderly and the poor. As you look at these images it is hard not to ask the question, "Why, God? Why all the suffering?" It kind of feels like this. As some of you know, my brother took me on a weeklong camping and hiking trip in Washington state. Like it or not you will be hearing about that for the next few months ☺. Among our many adventures, one of the most unique experiences was on the way over. We boarded a plane in Atlanta bound for Seattle. Everyone was ready to go, the passengers, the flight attendants, and most of the flight crew. We were all anxious to get going since it was like a five-hour flight; and for those of us not in first class, like myself, and who were taller than 4 feet, we had our knees practically sticking into our noses. We all wanted to get the show going. Then the flight attendant made the following announcement. "Welcome to Delta flight number blah blah blah..." and anyone who has ever flown knows the rest. But then it took a disturbing turn. She went on to say, "We are ready to depart but unfortunately, the captain is missing. We cannot locate the captain." Now I am not a frequent flyer by any means. Not a sky priority member of any kind, but I felt fairly confident that if our captain was AWOL we were probably not going to go anywhere anytime soon. And as much as I hated being stuffed in my seat that must have been designed for toddlers and pygmies, I preferred that we remained grounded. Let the captain finish up at the duty-free shop or calling home on his/her cell. (Just hopefully not polishing off his/her last martini at the bar!)

II. And that gets us back to the point this morning. I think when we see such suffering in the world like with Harvey we wonder if our Divine Captain, God, decided not to show up to work today. Where was He this past week when the winds and the flood came? Was he AWOL, at the duty-free shop, or did He simply not care? And if He was captaining the "plane", aka world, why did He allow the innocent to suffer?

III. To address this question, we need to first consider how we understand God and how He operates in this world. As one writer points out, so much of our confusion comes from the idea that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. We might not ever say it as such but many of us grew up thinking this way: If I live a good and faithful life; if I don't steal, cheat and lie; if I read and practice Joel Osteen's best sellers on positive thinking; then God is going to take care of me and those I love, and protect us from the Hurricane Harvey's in the world. Right? But here is the problem. That is not actually what Scripture teaches. The overarching theme in the bible is not that the good are blessed with long life, wealth and nice skin, despite what Osteen preaches; but rather that God will be with us when the bad times come. This past month we followed the Moses story and the story of God's chosen people in Exodus. Along with the miracles and the redemption, they had their fair share of suffering...such as slavery in Egypt, wandering in the desert and later, if you continue to read their story, exile in Babylon. In the book of Psalms one of the most repeated questions is "How long, O Lord?" In

other words, how long will you let us suffer? Here is the point. In order for us to get our minds around this question, “Where was God this past week and why did He allow the suffering?” we need to rid ourselves of the idea that bad things only happen to bad people. It is simply not what the bible teaches. So not only does Rev. Osteen lock out the Hurricane homeless from his church, he also preaches and teaches a non-biblical theology. Maybe they just might go hand in hand?

IV. The second notion I would like us to reject (and I have preached on this several times before) is the idea that everything that happens is for a reason. I know that might sound outright heretical for some., but hang with me for a moment. Let’s push this idea beyond the surface. Let’s say I am walking my dog Daisy with a cheap, flimsy leash and she sees a squirrel. In her pursuit, she breaks the leash and ends up running down a busy road and gets hit by a car. My neighbor tells me, “Ron, that must have happened for a reason.” What the neighbor is really saying is that God must have preordained Daisy’s death. Did God really, in His goodness and omniscience, decide to kill Daisy that day? Perhaps to teach me a lesson about relying on Dollar Tree goods? To give me a good sermon illustration? Or was it more like in my quest for frugality, it cost me the life of my dog? Let’s up the ante. Instead of a pet, how about our children? As some of you know my daughters were in a serious accident that totaled our car this past week. Thank God, they are okay along with the other driver. But what if one of them were killed? Would God have done that for a reason? Killed my daughter to teach me, my wife, or my other daughter a lesson? Or because He needed one more soprano in Heaven? What does that make God out to be? A loving, all-good God of the universe, or a cosmic being that makes Hitler look like Mr. Rogers? A deity that not only purposely kills teen drivers but also drowns young children and their mothers in raging flood waters? Get my point? So what if we left behind this notion that God is orchestrating every event around us and in our world. Yes, I believe He is in a sense “captaining” the universe but it is far more complex than that which we will look at in a moment.

V. Let’s read **Genesis 1:27-28 NRSV**. This story, the entire story, is foundational to us being able to answer this question. The story of Adam and Eve, by the way, was not a scientific explanation for creation but theologically tells us these three truths. First, God has given humanity caretaker status of creation. Second, God has given us the freedom to choose good or evil. Third, humans too often choose evil over the good, with far reaching consequences. We see all this in Genesis. Let’s take a few minutes on each. We see in verse 27 that God has given humanity dominion over the earth. Dominion here means “the right to govern.” Writer John Ortberg points out that this idea is radical. The God of the universe giving human beings (all human beings, not just the king or Pharaoh) the privilege to administer God’s creation. So what does this mean for us and how does it relate to our question? Let’s say you were the manager of a 4 Brothers gas station. The owner has given you the responsibility to ensure the store is stocked with twinkies, tasty cakes, energy drinks and all that good stuff we all want but don’t need; ensure the underground gas tanks are full; oversee the employees and their work schedules; etc., etc. You don’t own the shop but you have a great say in what happens...including a big part in whether it succeeds or fails. The owner is ultimately in charge but you have an enormous responsibility. The same goes with creation. Genesis 1:27 teaches us that God is not a micromanager. He allows an amazing amount of freedom to us humans. In a large sense, God is letting us mind the shop...or co-pilot the plane. For better or for worse. And too often it is for the worse, isn’t it?

VII. And this gets us to the second truth. The fact is we do have the ability to choose good or evil. We see this in the story of Adam and Eve in the garden. The choice is laid out for them. They can follow God's path or the way of the serpent. One leads to blessing and life, and the other to pain and death. It is a frightening amount of freedom He has given us. This has led many to ask, "Why didn't God simply create a world where humans could not choose evil?" If God is truly good and all-powerful, couldn't He have done this? Let me share what I think is the best argument as to why He didn't. And what I am going to attempt to do is to share the explanation of Alvin Plantinga, a well-known famous Christian philosopher, using the example of Superman. Superman (**image**) can do almost anything right? Leap buildings in a single bound and so forth. But what can't Superman do? He cannot operate in a way that violates his nature. In other words, we wouldn't find Superman kicking kittens down the road or painting graffiti on the Hall of Justice? Can he do it? You bet. Would he do it? Not a chance. That would violate his "Superman-ness." And when Superman does something, such as stop a bank robbery, he doesn't simply take the money back from the robbers. He disarms them, ensures all the bank employees are safe, and hands the villains over to the police. He can't do any less because that is who he is. That is the very fabric of his being. So how does this relate to God and good and evil? When God created the world, He created the best of worlds. He did this because that is who God is. To do otherwise would violate His "God-ness." The best possible world is one where humanity is given the freedom of choice. The downside is it allows for suffering and pain caused by those who live in ways contrary to God. So suffering of the innocents is not God's plan but is simply the price of freedom. You cannot have one without the other. We might still say, "But He is God, He can do anything!" But again, He cannot create anything less than the best. And the best of all worlds is one with true freedom which unfortunately allows for evil.

VIII. And this gets us to the third truth that the Genesis story teaches us. We too often choose our own path, rather than God's. We see this later in the story when Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, and we see it in our own lives too. I don't know about you but too often I choose to act selfishly. At times, I have nourished a resentment against people who did me wrong rather than simply forgiving. I have allowed my mind to dwell on thoughts that were unkind, impure or outright mean. I reflect on how too many times I massaged the truth to make myself look better or smarter. And as I reflect on each of these frankly embarrassing moments, small or not so small acts of rebellion against God's way of living, I see how I stepped away from the Garden. I have moved away from a closer connection with God and His path for me. And by doing so I invited pain and hurt, first to me and then to those around me. So Adam and Eve's story becomes my own. It's not just their story, or my story, I believe it is all our story. And every act of going our way, away from a God-centered way of living, leads to suffering and pain...and, depending on the action, it impacts more than just us...and way too often it hurts the innocents. Now I don't have time to get much into this today, but our corporate rebellion against God and His reign of the world has even impacted the natural world. You might say, going back to the earlier illustration of our lack of managing the store, or in this case the world, it has led to serious consequences. The obvious are dumping toxic materials into our rivers and oceans and producing greenhouse gases that impact climate. I believe what Paul the church planter writes in his letter to the Romans. Our rebellion against God has impacted creation from the moment we turned our back on God. The natural world suffered in ways we can't understand but experience, like with Hurricane

Harvey. So it's not like God didn't show up to work but more like He put us in charge and we tossed the store. Or in keeping with our first illustration, we as God's co-pilot jacked up all the controls. So the innocents suffer.

IX. Let me offer a poor illustration to sum up what I believe the bible teaches us on this question. Let's say that we all have been selected to be part of a reality TV show called "Go Fly A (wait for it) White Plane Around The World". Okay it's a working title. We are given the instructions for the plane, just enough food for the trip, and the locations of the airports we can refuel. We are also told that an expert captain who can give us sound advice on any topic is sitting in back and available to consult with us at any time. We will be richly rewarded if we can survive. Now this shouldn't be a problem. We are a smart group here. I know we even have some pilots among us, medical folks, chefs, law enforcement and great type A's that will keep us on task. And Pastor Bob and I would love the fact that we have a captive audience on Sunday mornings. All seems perfect....and then we take off. Right away one of the bathrooms gets clogged, I began complaining about the food (I am very picky), and a fistfight practically breaks out between the women and men on the temperature. For our ladies it's too cold; for the men, too hot. And it gets worse from there. Before we even reach London, our first stop, Steph has me in a headlock to keep me from griping any more about the small seats. Needless to say our plane goes down somewhere over the Alps once it is determined we already drank all the coffee. So was that the expert captain and producers' plan? Was that their will? Is it their fault? Or was it that we were acting like a gaggle of numskulls and we did it to ourselves? I think this, in a very shallow way, sums up what I am getting at with this question of suffering. One word. God-given *freedom*. Now the problem with this illustration, as with all illustrations, it breaks down quickly. It suggests that God simply created the world and then stepped back and let it go. This is the god of deism, the god of Jefferson, but not the God of the bible. Instead what we find is that God is intervening in the Old Testament to woo us back to Him...culminating in Him becoming one of us in Jesus Christ. But despite this, the suffering continues. So why doesn't God do something about it?

X. Ready for the answer? Better than telling you, let me show you. (mirror) If you are a Christ follower, we are the answer to the pain and suffering in this world. The New Testament teaches us this seemingly crazy revolutionary idea that the very Spirit of God, the essence of God, lives in us and directs us to do His work in this world. So we are the answer to the "why". And where is God? The church, the community of men and women connected to Christ, is God's physical presence in the world. I can't stress this enough. This is not to rule out miracles, or God intervening apart from us, but that is not His normal MO. We are. So the simple answer to the question, "Why do the innocents suffer?" is because of the gift and misuse of freedom. It has harmed the very core of creation and we have storms like Harvey and wars like in Iraq. But the more important question this morning is the one, "Where is our Pilot?" The answer: He is in you and me, and wants us to get out there and alleviate the suffering. Not sit around and blame Him, or the government, but rather do something about it. Help righten the plane, or the world, by sending resources down to Texas or maybe even going to Texas ourselves. Unlike my flight to Seattle, our pilot is not AWOL. He is right in our midst...so let's go do His work.