

**New St. James Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, February 4, 2018**  
**The Rev. Dr. David Thompson**  
**“Has God Forgotten You?”**

Why is there so much suffering in the world?

Text: “Though he slay me yet will I trust Him!” (Job)

Bill telephoned Pastor Robert. He said, “Pastor I have been really suffering lately!” “What’s the problem?” said Pastor Robert. “Well to tell you the truth pastor your church service is held at the same time as my favorite baseball games. Today is the final game and I can’t miss it. Pastor I know that The Sunday church service is important, but I am a lifelong fan of baseball!” Pastor Robert replied. Bill that’s what video recorders are for!

Bill is really surprised: “You mean that I can tape the Sunday church service?”

Richard Dawkins in his book The God Delusion writing about suffering says: “If there is only one Creator who made the tiger and the lamb, the cheetah and the gazelle, what is He playing at? Is God into blood sports?

Dawkins says that the universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

When I was a boy soprano in England I was taught to sing the William Blake poem:

Little Lamb who made thee  
Dost thou know who made thee?  
But Blake also wrote another poem;  
Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
In the forests of the night:  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?  
When the stars threw down their spears  
And water’d heaven with their tears:  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Quite obviously William Blake is aware of the problem of suffering and killing that Dawkins raises in his tiger and the lamb example. But Dawkins makes **a conclusion** rather than leaving **a question**. He concludes that God does not exist and that nature is indifferent. Blake is sure that a good God made the lamb but he is not so sure about the tiger and so he leaves instead a question: “Did he who made the lamb make thee?”

The Abrahamic religions beginning with Judaism attempt to deal with the questions of suffering by describing a Paradise which has been lost through the assertion of the free and disobedient will of human beings. Adam and Eve choose to eat the forbidden apple and paradise is lost. Ever afterwards Nature suffers with us.

Some religions attempt to explain suffering by dualism. There must be two gods, they say. One is good, the other is bad. The good God creates all that is good. The bad God or Satan stirs up trouble. If

something bad happens it must be the bad God or Satan at work. If something good happens then it must be the good God. There is a constant war going on.

But religions who believe in One God have then to deal with the question as to why God would create evil to mess up the world? Couldn't we just have peace on earth without all this conflict? Why couldn't nature just be benign? Why have cancers, deadly bacteria, early death, the tiger killing the lamb for food? Why couldn't the tiger eat straw like the ox and leave the lambs alone?

All religions attempt answers because they want to avoid Dawkins conclusion that there is no God and that nature is indifferent. In other words they prefer to be with Blake who asks questions rather than Dawkins who provides conclusions.

Is there any way to know which path is more helpful?

I believe that Dawkins is making a mistake that perhaps is leading to an erroneous search for a conclusion that nature is indifferent and that God doesn't exist. **He places human morality at the center of things.** He forces down over nature our human moral compass and tries to place that same moral compass over a possible God as well. He cannot conceive of a God who would be cruel by our standards or indifferent by our standards. But who knows whether our standards have any relevance when it comes to nature or God for that matter?

C.S. Lewis the former Oxford professor has written a book called The Problem of Pain. He says: "The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of a God who loves, is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word "love", and look on things as if man were the centre of them. Man is not the centre. God does not exist for the sake of man. {And} Man does not exist for his own sake."

Have you ever watched the movie *Babe*? It's the story of the pig who, when saved from the slaughter house, finds the love of a farmer, by acting like a sheep dog. The movie is profound because the little pig believes that the farmer is a good being who is kind. But the prize cat fills the pig in. As a pet cat he is in the protected category. But Babe is a pig and pigs are eaten.

Why? Because ***that's the way things are.***

That assertion may well be a clue we need to pay attention to.

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the movie for me is the quantum leap that the farmer makes to get beyond the assumptions that pigs are only for food. When the pig demonstrates his abilities the farmer transcends the stereotype. At the sheep dog trials the whole crowd makes the quantum leap together and there is great excitement. The most beautiful part of the movie to me is when the farmer dances for the pig to get him out of his depression. He loves the pig and lets him know it.

**Love that leaps over walls** may also be a clue we might keep in mind.

In the movie *Avatar* the Goddess of the planet Pandora acts when human beings come in to destroy nature with their machines and equipment. Jake is told: "Our great mother does not take sides, Jake; she protects the **balance** of life." That too may be a clue. Nature appears not to take sides but when the balance is lost for any reason it seems that nature works to restore it. Why?

The great religions at their best are not prepared to place human beings at the center of all things. They teach that we need to be open to other forces and questions rather than jumping to conclusions. We need to struggle to understand- a spiritual jihad if you will.

Is there perhaps a better question to ask? Instead of 'why is there so much suffering in the world?' why not ask 'why is there so much good in the world?' Why so much beauty, so much grandeur? Does death have a purpose? What would happen to this finite world if we didn't die and kept on multiplying? What then?

### **The Way Things are:**

What if there is a reason that the tiger eats the lamb and the reason is the survival not of the fittest, but the survival of LIFE itself? We appear to be relatively free as human beings on earth to determine our destiny. We lift up freedom in Canada as a primary value. But at what cost comes our freedom? Is suffering the cost? Is that what Life may demand of us?

C.S.Lewis writes: "Try to exclude the possibility of suffering, which the order of nature and the existence of free-wills involve, and you find that you have excluded LIFE itself."

How often have we tried to fix the world in our favor only to discover that we have messed up the balance of nature? Life seems to have its reasons, whether we like them or not, or whether they fit in to our concept of what God should be like or not. We build a nuclear power plant and a tsunami arrives in Japan and all sorts of unintended consequences arrive as well. When we were building the plant, we didn't pay enough attention to such consequences, and so not respecting nature gets us into suffering big time.

We can use the law of gravity in our favor all the time, but fall off a building and there is a price to be paid- usually we lose our life. Nature does not change her rules when we get into trouble. Is that indifference or **the way things are**? There are many forms of life on this planet and they can come into competition with each other. Cancer for centuries has checked our numbers as have bacterial infections. Solve these problems and what then? Will we respect **the way things are** or try to keep changing things in our favor? At what cost?

What if God is like the Goddess in the movie Avatar?

"Our great mother does not take sides, Jake; she protects the **balance** of life." Is Mother Nature like this? Is 'balance making' 'indifference' or *is there a preferential option for balance?*

If so where is it coming from?

We know that Life as we know it cannot exist in its great variety of forms without balance. So is LIFE itself the great balancer?

Perhaps the Gai hypothesis is what we need, to better understand the **way things are**.

As Ken Rubin a geologist writes: "**Gaia is theorized to be a living entity that is greater than the sum of all the living and non-living aspects of the Earth... In this theory, the whole Earth is a sentient "being" that regulates processes in the natural environment by balancing various aspects of it against others. Gaia does not have an "anthropocentric" (centered on humans) perspective and we are only one small part of the overall entity that Gaia is theorized to represent...**

Perhaps then Life or Mother Nature is not so indifferent after all? Perhaps the Abrahamic traditions are right, when the Deity after creation says " God saw everything He had made and indeed it was very good. Perhaps then there is a purpose as to why things are the way they are. That purpose is LIFE. And Life is a great good that makes all other goods possible.

I was at the Doctor's one day and asked him whether I could reduce the headaches I get from my asthma medications. He said "What happens if you stop taking them? I said "My lungs seize up and I can't breathe." "Well" he said, "you have a choice, do you want to seize up or have headaches?" Sometimes a headache, all things considered, is good! 😊

### **Lastly I want to talk about Love, all things considered.**

Our faith teaches us that human beings cannot think as God thinks. That should be a caution when we seek to judge God negatively. **For we critique merely our human construct of God.** That happens when we put human beings at the center of all things. Its called arrogance and projection.

Rather, our faith teaches us, that God is at the center of all things: Hebrew Scripture says: "Thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created."

But can we trust this kind of Creator?

The Jewish tradition has a very important contribution to make to our quest. They teach something they call 'Tikkun Olam' or the duty of human beings to repair and make the world better. Today 'Tikkun Olam' is often used as a way to work with the balance of nature to improve the world.

What this means is that we are involved in a partnership. As people of faith we work on alleviating suffering, wherever we find it. We are pro health care for all, we are into research into deadly disease but always we respect nature and do not do anything we cannot undo. Gai is our friend, not our enemy, and we help her to maintain everything that leads to life.

We may fail however, because we are awesomely free. We are not controlled by the deity, although we have to respect the laws of nature. That said, our inhumanity to each other fills the news and media daily. Our wars and economic systems cause pain and suffering and death. As people of faith we are called upon to take the rout of compassion. We live lives of balance and integrity, confident that when we do, so God walks with us.

The love, that religions talk about, is no superficial thing. It cuts deep and performs surgeries on our souls, for this world is a place to make our souls. Trouble and suffering can deepen character whereas success often does not. **That's the way things are.** But let's note also that love heals us; love leads to joy; and joy to peace and good will. In situations of suffering there is nothing like being loved unconditionally especially when we are sick.

The book of Job, which specializes in suffering, and was well known to Jesus, taught an amazing truth: "Though he slay me yet will I trust Him!"

Jesus appears to have manifested that kind of trust. On the cross, he cried out, asking, why God had forsaken him? But then he returned to trust because his last words to God were: "Into thy hands I commit my spirit."

Three days later the Christian tradition reports God raised Jesus to Life. The message? **This kind of trust in Me is not finally misplaced.**

As the book of Isaiah teaches us, **God cares deeply for us: You might feel abandoned but that is not the end of the story.** Isaiah says: "Why do you say that your way is hidden from the Lord and that your rights have been discarded? God's understanding, although unsearchable gives power to the faint, strength to the powerless. Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

That is **the way things are** when we put our faith in God. It boils down to this: that no matter what adverse circumstance we come across, we are to trust God anyway for a final good outcome!

What about death?

Our faith teaches us that the Jesus Christ of history did not remain dead but that God raised him from the dead. Nearly all the faiths teach that there is life after this life.

If this is so, all things considered, one has to take into account that God, in God's own time and way will work all things together for good. For God by God's nature operates in two dimensions at least. This dimension of the here and now and in the dimension where Life goes on after death.

That is my faith.

The hand that made the lamb and the tiger's fearful symmetry **will work all things together for good.**

Stacy Smith a freelance writer tells of her visit to India. In India she saw incredible suffering. She saw overcrowding on trains, cockroach infested beds, bodies cremated before her eyes, starving lepers in the streets but it was when she visited Mother Theresa's Sisters of Mercy that she was shaken to her core. In a room of the very sick and dying she saw one emaciated woman who was clearly dying. On an impulse she took the dying woman's hand. The woman was gasping for breath with great effort and suffering greatly.

Stacy felt utterly helpless but then she remembered Mother Theresa's words, that she should imagine this poor woman as God in disguise. Suddenly she felt a wave of compassion sweep over her and she could not bear to leave her bedside. Gingerly she sat down and held her hand and began to sing to her as a Mother sings to a little child. The only song she could think of was that great all year round carol Silent night, so she began to sing it softly. The woman began to visibly relax as her tired and undernourished body released tension. She began to breathe more easily and Stacy knew that she was listening. She wondered had this woman ever known love? Had she ever held a child in her arms and sung it to sleep? Why was she alone? Where were her friends and loved ones? Suddenly the dying woman's eyes flashed open. She looked directly into Stacy's eyes with a clarity that stunned her. For a moment in time the gap between them was bridged. They were just two women, bound together in time of need, each staring deeply into each other's spirits. Stacy knew that she was saying 'thank-you.' It was not long until the woman lapsed into a deeper sleep and before long Stacy saw that she was no longer breathing.

Stacy writes: "The frivolities of my problems back home...will seem shallow now. Part of this woman will remain in my heart forever, and some day when it is my turn, I may find her on the other side waiting for me. We will smile and sing 'Silent night' in our common language of the heart, and dance in the glory of an existence **without sadness or pain.**"

Silent night, holy night  
All is calm, all is bright  
Sleep in heavenly peace

That is my faith.

Is it yours?