

“One Year Later”

John 3:14-21; Ephesians 2:1-10;  
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Numbers 21:4-9

Out with the bad, in with the good.

By my tally, we've been doing this for 52 Sundays. Pretty much a year since hardly any of you have been in the Blessing Room for worship. I know it's making you mark other milestones, laments of the loss of life and loss of living, extending from what came on us so suddenly and we're still figuring out how to respond, as well as a few of the deeper Why questions.

I'd say our worship needs to deal with it, and it just so happens that today's Bible readings have snippets of Why questions, starting with a sense of the bad. Why the bad?

Ephesians may be the most simplistic, meaning an easy explanation that avoids responsibility. (Though I rarely compliment it, I admit this passage has nice parts, like verse 8—“by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God”—for some, a favorite verse of the Bible. But that good news is getting ahead of our starting question: why the bad.)

For Ephesians, an explanation for the bad, a reason for problems around us, is simply to say there's evil, a malevolent force, oppositional to the good. Maybe the devil. Our version for today used the terms “destructive spiritual power” and “the spirit of disobedience.” That's one way of sorting this out.

Not many of us likely identify the devil as the cause of the pandemic, but we should probably remain open to some explanation of spiritual evil.

Ephesians also moves toward another description, which may be our preferred or standard explanation. It goes from the devilish evil powers to say that we have been corrupted to do wrong. Our Psalm used the term sin for the rebelliousness that leads to our affliction.

This is not infrequently our reasoning: that we get sick or have problems because of our own fault, our own stupidity, our own lack of precaution or of healthy practices. In broad scale, we've heard the

pandemic attributed to human-caused deforestation and capitalism, appetites, greed, and travel, as well as aggravating factors like poverty and systemic racism. Maybe we don't prefer being culpable, but this category feels more like direct evidence; we at least know who is to blame. We have met the enemy, and they are us.

If that negativity doesn't make you feel very good, I'm not sure how much you'll like the third category: it's not the devil doing us damage, nor are difficulties inflicted through our own wrongdoings. God is the one doing it.

The reading from Numbers portrays the catastrophe as caused by God. As a punishment, as a repercussion, sure—but the bad thing is directly attributed to God. The Lord sent poisonous serpents in order to bite the people and kill them.

Our mainstream perspective doesn't often assign God's will to death and destruction like that. We aren't quick to claim the coronavirus is God's judgment on whatever ethical contagion we currently condemn. While I'm not willing to let God entirely off the hook, this explanation leaves me uncomfortable; I'd prefer for God to be the solution more than the problem.

As we turn from problems to solutions, I'll pause to say that Intern Lisa recently finished a class called “God, Evil, and Suffering,” so if you want to discuss these classifications or hear what she was studying, she'd be more adept than my quick brushstrokes manage.

Now: out with the bad, in with the good. For positive response, there are again several versions in today's readings. In Numbers, the people are prompted to change their behavior, turning from complaining against God to devotion to God, from disregard to gratitude, from grouching to praying. God gives them an object of faith to focus on, the snake on a pole for connection.

That may relate to this worship service, a focal point for your faith. Maybe it leads you to believe you should pray more if you want better outcomes. In St. Patrick's Breastplate, prayer becomes armor, protection amid bad problems.

For a next response, taking matters into our own hands, the final line from Ephesians points to

a sense of self-control and human potential for salvation. It says God created you to do good works, right deeds, and so instead of wrong-doing, you are supposed to be right-doers, Dudley Do-Rights. That's another solution to bad problems.

Again, our own behaviors are the most apparent and evident, so it's not without reason they draw our focus. Through the past year, it has meant we take confidence in precautionary measures like masks and distancing and obeying guidelines. Or, on the larger scale, putting our faith in the vaccine.

I'm not arguing against those. Just as I'd say it's worthwhile for you to sin less, not to be so harmful to yourself or others or the planet, I'm certainly not going to suggest that ways we've confronted the virus don't matter. And without evaluation or appraisal, I'd just note that—though the pandemic has regularly been part of our prayers—we could probably observe that our prayers for God's action are emphasized less than efforts for our own actions.

But let's also notice something of God's action or response, connected to Jesus. It's not a vindictive God, who will poison and kill you just because you were doing something wrong. It's not a God who will save you if you *are* properly devoted. It's not a God who's waiting around for you to do the right thing. This God recognizes that you *prefer* the wrong thing, love it even, and would hide from doing right. And yet, God loves you. God loves this whole crazy hurting world.

God so loves the world. Now, I wish the Gospel of John would've been better at underlining that about Jesus not coming to condemn and less interested in winning an argument. After all, the point is that Jesus comes for those who don't receive him, don't want him, don't love him, those who kill him. It's those people whom God so loves. It's us.

And in spite of all of it—all your efforts, all your lack of efforts, the ways humanity blows it, the ways humanity wants to go-it-alone, the things we take credit for and are proud of as having the right answers—through all of that, God so loves you.

It says, “just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,” but there's a difference. It's not “just as.” There, the poisonous serpents were what was killing people. With Jesus, it's us doing the killing; we lift him up.

And yet, it is from there that life spreads. It might spread with a vaccine. It might spread because we become more loving. It might spread as we're trying to do what God rightly intends. But ultimately it spreads because God so loves you, and because this loving God won't even let death get in the way. In the face of current realities, if that feels unclear or uncertain, maybe you can at least take confidence in good news that God doesn't want you to perish. Even more infectious than what causes death is God's way of love, life, and salvation.