

“THE Question: AN Answer”

I Peter 4:12-19; Matthew 13:24-30

1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

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I. Introduction

“The Ballad of Gilligan’s Island”

Just sit right back and you’ll hear a tale
a tale of a fateful trip,
that started from this tropic port,
aboard this tiny ship.
The mate was a mighty sailin’ man,
the Skipper brave and sure,
five passengers set sail that day,
for a three hour tour,
a three hour tour.

“A three hour tour.” All I have to say is “a three hour tour” and most people will rightly think of the comedy “Gilligan’s Island.” I heard the song recently and that got me thinking about the show.

I was surprised to learn that “Gilligan’s Island” only ran originally for 3 years, 1964-1967. There were only 98 episodes. But those episodes got a lot of rerun playing time, especially in the 70s. I grew up with it. And Bob Denver would forever be “Gilligan.”

The premise of “Gilligan’s Island” is that a simple “three hour tour” out of Honolulu runs into a storm and maroons 7 people on a deserted island. And so the show is about how 7 very different people learn to get along with each other. Some of the fun of the show is how they are able to make just about anything they need out of coconuts, bamboo, and vines. And then there are all the possible rescue attempts that somehow go sideways, often by something Gilligan does or doesn’t do. A lot of different television and movie stars made guest appearances.

Beneath all the comedy in “Gilligan’s Island” there were some important themes about human community: working together, accepting each other, forgiveness, and hope. But as I remembered “Gilligan’s Island” this past week I don’t remember them ever directly asking the big question that got them stuck on the island: why do bad things happen to good people? The show suggests that things like a storm can just unexpectedly happen, and that life is filled with foibles and follies of human beings. But the question is never directly addressed. And just to make sure my memory was correct I checked with AI, which said the same thing.

I suppose the 30 minute comedy model for “Gilligan’s Island” did not make room for some deep pondering about “good people and bad things.” It just didn’t fit. But I think if I was stuck on “Gilligan’s Island” for 98 episodes I’d be wondering about that. And you’ve probably had a few “storms” interrupt your life, so you wonder also. So that’s what we’ll do today: ask the question and wonder.

II. Text and Brief Exegesis

Why do bad things happen to good people? Or more generally, if God is good and all-powerful, what’s the deal with evil and good people? Those are the questions in the parable in Matthew 13:24-30. Rather than a parable, the story is really more of an allegory. Later in Matthew 13 Jesus tells us who’s who and what’s what. And it’s important to know that in interpreting the parable. Jesus is the sower. The good seed are Jesus’ followers. The field is the world. The servants who work in the field are those who share in ministry. The weeds are those who do evil. And the enemy, the one who sows the weeds, is the devil, or what we might call the force of evil opposed to God. The harvest is the end of the age. And the reapers are angels. That’s the cast. What’s the story?

The story revolves around 3 questions. They are the same three questions we ask when we ponder the situation of evil and bad things. And the answers are still important.

Question #1: How did this happen? How did the weeds get in the field? Why does a storm interrupt “a three hour tour?” Why are there bad things and evil in this world? That’s a big question.

The servants think they have the answer to the question. They wonder if somehow, God who sows good seed also sowed the weeds. If God is all-powerful, the weeds must come from God. We wonder the same thing.

But the servants’ assumptions are wrong. God only sows good seed. The source of the weeds is part of the mystery of creation and the power of evil. The story makes clear that God is good, and that evil is real and sows bad seed.

Question #2: What can we do about it? Can we pull the weeds? Do servants have the wisdom and power to weed out the evil?

Again, those who work the field think they have the answer. Yes, they can pull weeds. Yes, they can discern good from evil. Yes, they have the wisdom and power to address the mystery of evil.

And again those who work the fields are wrong. And this is important for us to hear. No, they do not have the wisdom and power. Human beings are not able to judge others and pull weeds because so much of life is a mix of good and bad, wheat and weeds. And in trying to get at the bad, a lot of good is destroyed. And many times what we think may be bad isn’t; it’s just different. History is filled with religious movements that sought to “weed out” evil, and resulted in destroying much that was good: burning heretics, the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem witch

trials, prohibition, and today Christian Nationalism. And it's often the weed of self-righteousness and pride that is the source. Humility and patience are needed, not weed pulling.

Question #3: So will it always be this way? Will the weeds always grow with the wheat? Will things ever be made right?

The field workers seem to believe that if they don't pull the weeds nothing will be done. Wheat and weeds will continue to grow in the field of God's creation. But Jesus says in the story that will not be the case. Rather there will come a time of reaping. The end will come. And all will stand in judgement and give an accounting for their life. God will bring to an end the work of evil and the weeds, not human beings. And that is the great hope into which we live; God will make all things right.

The text from I Peter also addresses the issue of good people and bad things. In this case it's persecution for their Christian faith. Belief in Jesus means they believe and live differently than the people around them. And people then, like today, don't like difference. So there were lost jobs, intimidation, and injustice. And the Christians there wondered, "we follow God's Savior Jesus, why are these bad things happening?"

And the answer in I Peter echoes the parable in Matthew. First, "do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you." Weeds grow with wheat. Evil stands against the way of God. It stood against Jesus. It will rise up against you. Following Jesus is not a yellow brick road.

Second, don't do any weeding. There is nothing here about judging others, getting even, or justifying violence. Rather, they are to respond like Jesus. They are to humbly know that human beings are a mix of good and bad, wheat and weeds. They are to do good and trust God with sorting out the wheat and weeds.

And third, it will not always be so. The harvest will come. The end will come. God's kingdom will come in its fullness. All will give an account of their lives before the gracious God who knows all things. Do good and live into the hope that the time of God's good end will come to all of creation.

III. Brief Theological Reflection

THE question is "why do bad things happen to good people?" Or more completely, "If God is loving and all-powerful, why do bad things happen to good people?" It's called theodicy. And it's one of the most fundamental wonderings of human life throughout history.

That is "THE question." But let me say I cannot give you "THE answer." Reading and thinking and preaching and teaching and studying theology and philosophy over the years has brought me to the place of understanding and believing there is not one big answer to the question of bad things happening to good people. Rather there are answers and wonderings. The subject is too big for "THE answer." Or at least, I can't do it.

Maybe it's a little like this. One morning last week I was up at six and went out to get the paper. It was still very dark. And there were no clouds, so the stars shined brightly. I just stood there for a few minutes and looked up at the stars. And I realized that I just live on some small marble named Earth in the small Milky Way Galaxy in the vastness of the universe I can't imagine. It's awe-inspiring and humbling. And I realized that people in faraway places like Arkansas or Peru or Mongolia or maybe another planet or another galaxy could look up at the same universe and see it differently because they live in a different place. "THE" universe is big. And I only have "A" small view.

So the question is big; why do bad things happen to good people? But the answers are small because we have limited points of view. And that's the whole point of the biblical books of Job and Ecclesiastes. The texts in Matthew and I Peter cannot give us "THE answer." Rather they give "AN answer." And I'm satisfied with that.

The weather started getting rough
The tiny ship was tossed
If not for the courage of the fearless crew
The Minnow would be lost, that Minnow would be lost

The ship set ground on the shore of this
Uncharted desert isle
With Gilligan, the skipper, too
The millionaire and his wife
The movie star
The professor and Mary Ann

Here on Gilligan's Isle
Here on Gilligan's Isle

Hmm. Storms still interrupt "3 hour tours," don't they. So I'm thankful for those with courage in the storm. And I'm thankful for those with me on the "uncharted desert isle" who do good. And I'm thankful for the hope that God will bring all things to God's good ends "Here on Gilligan's Isle."