

Out of the Ashes
Comes Wholeness
Psalm 107:1-3, 12-17

After an intermission last week for your guest preacher, I'm returning to our Lenten series entitled *Out of the Ashes*. There are those times when our lives are reduced to ashes. The Psalmist experienced those times of difficult and wrote about them. But he ends his Psalms with joy and celebration of how God brought something good out of the ashes.

This week we turn to Psalm 107, and I especially want to lift up the 17th verse: *Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured afflictions.*

I want to start out by making something clear. Iniquity is another word for sin, and sin is sin because it causes afflictions. We need to make that clear because some people wrongly believe that sin is sin because God said not to do it, and if you do it, God is offended and will punish you because you disobeyed God. That's just not true.

My youngest brother, the Baptist preacher, once served a very difficult church. It was so difficult that he decided he needed to leave the pastoral ministry. He made that announcement to the church. He and the church agreed he would stay with them another month or so, to give everyone time to prepare for the changes.

One morning during that time, he decided to work on his motorcycle. I don't know why he would decide to work on his motorcycle. He's a preacher, not a mechanic. But his fuel line was stopped up, and he thought he could take care of that himself. When he took his fuel tank loose, he spilled some gasoline on the floor. The water heater was in the garage, and the flame caught the gasoline vapors on fire. Before he was able to get out of the garage, his legs were badly burned.

The neighbors quickly saw what had happened and called the fire department and an ambulance. They got his family out of the house and gathered around Doug, as he was lying on the grass in his front yard.

One of the neighbors looked down at him and said, "I knew something like this would happen to him when I heard that he was leaving the ministry."

It was clear what she was saying. She was saying that this was an act of God. She was saying that God was punishing him for betraying God by leaving the ministry. She was saying that he deserved to be punished, that this was his fault.

Well, it was his fault. But it wasn't because he had betrayed God. It was because there is a law of nature that says if you mix gasoline and fire you will get an explosion. He violated that law and suffered the consequences.

When this world was created, laws were put into place by our Creator to govern us. There are natural laws, moral laws, spiritual laws and social laws. If we violate those laws, we will suffer afflictions. When God tells us not to do something, it is not because God is trying to force us to be obedient and will punish us if we aren't. It is just the opposite. God wants to save us from the afflictions we will suffer if we violates the law.

When we are being afflicted, it's natural to ask whose fault it is. "Why is this happening to me? Who's to blame?" Sometimes you are an innocent victim, either of somebody's sins or just victim of circumstances. However, more often than we really want to admit, the right answer is, "It's my fault. I did this to myself."

Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured afflictions.

What do you do with someone who is enduring afflictions because of their own iniquities? Well, people usually respond in one of two ways, both of which are wrong:

There is what I call the "soft-headed" response. Some gentle, compassionate, caring people see others suffering and they immediately try to rescue them. Now, if a person is a true victim, that's a good thing to do. But if a person is enduring afflictions because of their own iniquities, that may not be the best thing to do for them.

Once Becky and I were stopped in a line of traffic at a stop light. A car coming from the other direction suddenly veered over into our lane and hit the car stopped right in front of me. Both drivers were badly injured. The driver who hit the stopped car was drunk. The ambulance came and took both drivers to the hospital. They both recovered from their injuries. The driver who was hit went on to live a long, good life. The other driver was soon involved in another DWI accident. This time he didn't survive.

In his case, simply taking care of his injuries wasn't enough. They simply enabled him to keep doing what he had been doing until it destroyed him.

The soft-headed response is to treat the symptoms, but not the disease. The soft-headed response is to try to save sinners from the consequences of their sinful ways without saving them from their sinful ways. That just enables them to continue doing what they are doing until they finally destroy themselves.

That's why soft-headed people are called "enablers." Enablers are people who will loan money to someone to buy gasoline for a car they are driving off a cliff, instead of saying, "Until you turn that car around I'm not doing anything to help you keep going in the direction you are going."

You don't respond to people who are enduring affliction because of their own iniquities by enabling them to keep doing what they are doing. The soft-headed response is wrong.

So is the other response. I call it the hard-hearted response. The hard-hearted say, "I have no sympathy for anyone who would do this to himself. You got yourself into this mess. You get yourself out of it."

We are hearing a lot of that these days. Actually, we've always heard a lot of it. It's just being said about different people. It used to be we heard it being said about the poor. "They got themselves into that mess. Why should we help them get out?" Of course, the truth is that few people get themselves into poverty. Some are born into poverty and some are pulled into it kicking and screaming.

Nowadays, when we say, "They got themselves into that mess. Let them get themselves out of it," we're not talking about the poor. We are talking about the super-rich, many of whom, I suspect, used to say that about the poor.

Jesus said, "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with the judgment with which you judge, you shall be judged." Or, the way we would say it today, "What goes round comes round."

God is neither soft-headed nor hard-hearted. Sin is sin because it causes afflictions. God does not stop that from happening. However, neither does God turn away from us in our afflictions. When the world was dying in sin, God could have said to us, "I gave you paradise, and look what you have done with it. I wash my hands of you." But that's not God's nature. God does care about us, even when we are "sick through our own sinful ways."

It is painful to suffer with people. It is even more painful to suffer with those who wouldn't have to suffer if they would just stop what they are doing. But on the Cross God was saying to us, "I haven't hardened my heart against you. I am willing to share the suffering your sins have brought on you."

God is neither soft-headed nor hard-hearted. God does not save us from the consequences of our sins, but God will save us from our sins. When we decide that what we are getting out of our sins is not worth what it is costing us, when we call out to God for deliverance, God will be there to deliver us.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress; he sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from their destruction.

One time a woman came to me who was enduring afflictions because of her iniquities. Her husband had left her. And now she was alienated from her grown children and grandchildren. She wanted me to talk her children into being reconciled with her. I told her I wouldn't do it. I knew why her children had cut her off. She was obnoxious. She turned every discussion into an argument that she had to win at any price, including dirty tricks like using sarcasm. If I had guilted them into being reconciled with her, she would have quickly driven them away again. I would not save her from the consequences of her sin. And I told her so. She reacted the way I expected. She said I was a poor excuse for a pastor. How in the world could I be so cruel to a parishioner who had come to me with a simple request for help. I told her that I cared about her and hurt with her and for her. But until she was willing to change her ways, I would not help her. She stormed out in a huff, saying she would never be back. But she did come back. I was the only person left who would talk to her. After several visits, she finally said, "I think you may be right. Nobody will have anything to do with me. Maybe it's something I'm doing. But I'm too old to change." I said, "With God's help you're never too old to change. You might not be able to change yourself, but God can change you, if you really want to change." She said she did. I took her hands and I prayed that God would help her make the changes she wanted to make. Slowly over the next weeks and months, she did change. She went to her children and apologized for the way she had treated them all their lives. They didn't believe her at first. But slowly they realized she was sincere and she was changing. They were reconciled.

If I had been soft-headed and simply sympathized with her when she ranted about how awful her children were, I wouldn't have been helpful. If I had been hard-hearted and told her that she was a mean-spirited old bat and I didn't want anything to do with her, I wouldn't have helped her. But because I followed the model God has set for us, I was able to direct her to God's saving power, when she was ready to repent and change her ways. God delivered her, and out of the ashes of her self-destructive behavior, God made her whole.

What about you? Do you keep enduring the same afflictions over and over again? One of my seminary professors used to say, "If you don't get it right the first

time, don't worry about it. You'll get another chance. In fact, it will keep happening until you do get it right."

It may be that you have an iniquity that will keep afflicting you until you do something about it. It may reduce your life to ashes. But if you will recognize your iniquity and call out to God for deliverance, God will free you from your sin. Out of the ashes of your self-destructive behavior God will bring wholeness.

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