

Living in the Real World

John 6:35, 48-51

“Why do bad things happen to good people who deserve better?” The congregant who posed this familiar question then offered the followed comment: “the old answers of ‘It’s God’s will,’ or ‘we don’t question God’ just don’t work for me any more.” A few weeks ago, an *Air France* jet broke apart over the Atlantic Ocean. Everyone aboard died. In the past few days, a small plane collided with a tour helicopter over the Hudson River. Again, everyone aboard both aircraft were killed.

There are seemingly an endless number of stories of people going about their lives and being suddenly killed or having their lives tragically changed apparently through no fault of their own. They were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sometimes tragedies are due to human error, human malice, or a freak of nature. It can have been a foreseeable accident or even a lack of caution and innocent people die. Sometimes gross human malice combines with gross human negligence to create the unspeakable suffering of genocide or holocaust.

There is no dispute -- bad things happen! They happen to all sorts of people most of whom, as far as we can tell, cannot be blamed or otherwise held accountable for the tragedy. This process seems to reflect a fundamental unfairness or caprice underlying life. Bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people as well! Evil seems to prosper without regard for our deserving. Some in our government are in the pockets of lobbyists. Banks are paying exorbitant bonuses despite record losses. Some professional athletes are using illegal performance enhancing drugs. How many people cheat and seem to prosper? How many good, innocent, and maybe powerless people suffer?

So is this God’s will? Can we pin the responsibility on God? Is it our fault or some deep cosmic justice come to rest on us? Is it just bad luck or cosmic caprice? It would seem reasonable to blame God -- if God is truly God. God is all-powerful and able to do anything, make anything happen, right? So God must be responsible for this pain and suffering! Who else is to blame? So I guess, since God is all powerful, then God must not be good, at least as we understand *good*. The world certainly does not appear to be good.

On the other hand, perhaps God is good and wants to protect people from bad things -- from evil and harm. In some cases, maybe God manages to do so, but often just cannot. In that case, God is good, but not all-powerful -- not really God in the way we tend to think about God.

So the question assumes either that we worship an all-powerful God whose idea of good is far different from ours or that we serve a sentimental Spirit who wants us to be happy, but without the ultimate power to make that happen. And we are left with a choice that God chooses things to happen. It is God’s will -- how this God manipulates circumstances, or unsuccessfully desires to manipulate them, for reasons we can only guess.

The Air France crash then seems to be either the choice of a *not good* God or the failed effort of a good *not God*. Given such a choice, many people opt not to believe in God at all. Accidents are either the result of human failure, human evil, or just random misfortunes without

explanation. For many who choose not to believe in God, the greatest reality is human ingenuity through art and through science technology. Science is at least understandable and puts us in some measure of control.

What you believe about God, God's existence, and God's essential nature is vital to understanding any answer to the question, "why do bad things happen to good people?" The Bible, for the most part, assumes that God is a supernatural being who lives outside our world, in heaven. This God watches people all the time and shows up, on occasion, to change or otherwise affect circumstances according to mysterious and divine wisdom, i.e. God's will. There is a well-known story about a group of people describing an elephant in the dark when they had never before seen one. They were using only their sense of touch. None had the complete picture. Each touched a part. In addition, they had to describe what they were feeling in concepts and language they already knew. We understand God only in part. Our descriptions use terms and concepts we already know. (attributed to Jalaludin Rumi as retold by Francis Dewar, *Invitations*)

The biblical concept of God reflects or challenges the existing cultural ideas of God in the world out of which it was written. We need to remember that our understanding of God and our interpretations of experiences we have of the divine are not identical with who God actually is. In large measure, they reflect us: our own experiences, fears, and insights.

There is a minority view of God expressed in the Bible: that God is being itself. There is no place outside God. God is reality rather than a particular being existing eternally in time and space. God is not a "being" *per se*. No one can observe God objectively. God cannot be known that way. At the same time, God is personal and available for relationship. God is knowable subjectively, in relationship: knowable in the world around us, in relationship with others, within ourselves, and in our own struggles and inspirations. Such an understanding of God helps me see myself and my life more clearly in relation to what is ultimate.

This biblical view is that everything is within God. God is within us – oneness. The universe reveals God to us to the extent we are able and willing to accept and see. Our capacity to know God grows as we work through circumstances that are often painful, even tragic. The noted American philosopher John Dewey has written: "There is an element ... of suffering... in every experience.... It involves reconstruction which may be painful." (*Art as Experience*, 42)

He suggests that the bad things that happen to us and others, even good people, are part of the experience living that is unavoidable. Perhaps what we would not choose to avoid or reverse even if we could when all is said and done. In a recent online article, I invited my readers to share some of their life wisdom. One response also speaks well to this issue. Given the reality of awful things, losses, and tragedies we face in life, "not to grow from tragedy makes it a double tragedy. We can learn to see the world from a new perspective. No, life can never be the same. But sometimes, you wouldn't want it to anyway." (Kate Barber, *Enotes from Jack*, www.crossroadschurchkc.org, 8/5/09)

If meaning in life is all about our growing as spiritual beings and coming to know – and remember? -- God in that subjective, relational way we can know God, then perhaps we can affirm the value, and even the benefit, of these struggles of our lives. Without going to the extreme of saying that tragedies are good things, and clearly they are not, but that they function

in our lives in ways that can bless us. So, we seek understand why as our journey draws us toward God, toward truth. And we realize that perhaps what life is about in an ultimate sense is happening at a level other than concerns for our personal safety and security or what lets us stay comfortable, even complacent.

The value of our lives is wrapped up with the value of other peoples' lives. Our shared life has more to teach us about God than our individual life. And life calls us out of the familiar and into the new. Life challenges us, often through our pain, to live by faith that our lives are in God and intimately connected to each other. Such faith is more than a thought process. It involves our trust, attitudes, and commitments.

In conclusion, the essential question is, "where do you place your trust and how will that affect how you live?" Theology is a mirror of our own souls, a reflection of who we are. We tend to shape the God we serve on the basis of our own experience. We need to approach our knowing of who God is with great deference and humility. This *knowing* is not a matter of having a knowledge of ideas or doctrines. God is truth that can only be known in relationship. It is a knowledge that must be lived.

Jesus, like Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Amos, and John the Baptist invites us to a new understanding of God's nature. God's will cannot be known outside the crucible of living. In the Gospel of John,

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

What does this mean? It is a powerful statement of faith. Jesus as *living bread* means far more than nutrition for our bodies. They will eventually die and pass away. Jesus as bread for our souls is the answer to our hunger to know why bad things happen to good people. Why do bad things happen to us? "Why, God? How could you let these things happen?" In Jesus, we discover that God who loves us is asking us the very same questions: "how can you allow the pain and suffering of your fellow man all around you?"

How can we allow the suffering and hunger of so many when there is enough food? Is it for political expediency? Is it for greed or fear of rocking the boat? Surely life is more than this! When will the pain be enough to get us to change how we live?

What is the hope in all this for us? There is opportunity in pain and suffering. There is an opportunity to grow and wake up to the knowledge that God suffers with us, even within us. In the process of that grief, God is available for us to love and to be loved. All creation, eternity itself, experiences the pain we do and groans in the midst of that suffering waiting for the new to emerge in us. In that experience, God calls us to look beyond the immediacy of what feels so bad and see what can be. We need to trust that the loved ones we have lost are never lost to us or God. And we need to accept the challenge to act for the well being of those whose suffering we can meet ourselves.

There is a rather odd question that seems essential to ask at this point: “what’s in all this pain and suffering for God?” God gets relationship with us which is the purpose for which creation happened in the first place. God gets a measure of self-understanding which is the goal of all creative endeavors. Artists create and see themselves more clearly. They create and understand themselves more fully. Finally, God gets union with us – living fully into the oneness that reflects God’s dream of *shalom*.

What’s in this for us? What is the opportunity we have when bad things happen? We can learn. We can grow. We can die and be reborn. And we can find ourselves awakened to life like the spring following winter. We can find God always alive within us. And we can find joy and purpose in living, joy and purpose that, in the community of God and all of us, transcends even our wildest dreams.