

Read lesson: Luke 13:1-9 (This is the word of the Lord... thanks be to God!)

Let us pray: O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our risen redeemer. Amen.

It was the second year of my first call.

She made an appointment to see me.

“I only need twenty minutes,” she said. “I want to ask you two questions.” She was smart, successful, had a great job; she loved to travel, had lots of friends. On the day of the appointment, she arrived promptly, sat down, took a Kleenex from her purse, and told me that the malignancy she had battled so courageously and so successfully had returned. This time it didn’t look good at all. “I’m here to ask two questions. And I want answers. Why is this happening to me, and what did I do wrong?” “It’s just not fair,” she said, “and I wish I had some answers. It’s why we pay you, I think. You’re supposed to have answers, aren’t you?”

So we talked. And we talked many times over the next year. We talked about the oldest questions in human history: Why do people suffer, and does God have anything to do with it?

Barbara Brown Taylor remembers a story a friend of hers told about her son, Jeff, when he was a toddler. I like this story because little Jeff adored his grandfather. It was back in the days, before seat belts, when believe it or not it was not uncommon for kids to stand on the front seat with their arms around their dad’s neck. I can’t believe we actually did that, but we did, and I still remember the feel of my arm around the back of my dad’s neck as one of life’s more pleasant experiences. In fact, because of that, there was an odd behavior that my dad, and people his age, exhibited when it was necessary to slam on the brakes. They automatically, put their right arms out to protect and steady the three-year-old who used to stand there.

And that’s what happened to Jeff. A dog ran in front of the car. His grandfather slammed on the brakes. Jeff fell into the dashboard and bumped his head, not seriously, but painfully. He cried and cried and through his tears asked his grandpa, “Paw-Paw, what did I do wrong?” (*God in Pain*, p. 57).

Taylor says that it makes her want to sit down for a little cry of her own, she writes; “that child’s loss of innocence is something we all have to suffer. We get through ten or twenty years in our lives believing in a universe that rewards good and punishes evil, until one day life slams on the brakes and we learn the truth: you can do everything right and still get hurt. Goodness is no protection from pain.” Earthquakes destroy one country after another, a drunken driver hits a car, a bullet rips through a window, a sled flips over and an Olympian is killed.

We all know about this, don’t we? Innocent suffering is one of the greatest challenges to our faith. When it happens—and it does to all of us, sooner or later—it feels like the sun has stopped shining. We feel empty and alone. We try to pray and can’t. All we can do is ask, “Why?”

Throughout history, philosophers and theologians have struggled with the question of evil and the fact of innocent suffering. If God is good and loving and powerful, why do innocent people suffer? (see *Friday, Saturday, Sunday: Literary Meditations on Suffering, Death, and New Life*, p. 82).

French philosopher Voltaire, pondering the tragic Lisbon earthquake back in the eighteenth century:

Was there more vice in Lisbon found  
Than Paris, where voluptuous joys abound?  
 (“Poem on the Lisbon Disaster,” 1756)

Modern American poet Billy Collins, pondering the granite statue of a long-dead Civil War general:

And there was I . . .  
down on my knees, eyes lifted,  
praying to the passing clouds,  
forever begging for one more day.  
 (*The Trouble with Poetry and Other Poems*, p. 12)

The Bible wrestles with the question too.

It came up one time in Luke’s Gospel when two terrible tragedies occurred during the life of Jesus. People talked about them with Jesus, their rabbi, asking him questions.

A group of faithful Jews from Galilee, Jesus' home as well, traveled to Jerusalem to make sacrifices in the temple, a religious obligation. For some reason, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, maybe to teach a lesson in Roman power, maybe because he was brutally violent, or maybe just for his own amusement, ordered his guards to kill them—at worship no less, so that their own blood would mix with the blood from their sacrificial animals. It was a terrible, meaningless tragedy.

And some folks wondered whether they had been punished “because they had sinned, done something wrong?” And then, on top of that, another tragedy happened: the tower of Siloam, on the city wall, collapsed. Eighteen people died there, when the scaffolding collapsed.

And some folks wondered whether it was because they were worse sinners than everyone else in Jerusalem?

Jesus said: No, these two tragic incidents did not happen because of anything the victims had done. People at this time in history were inclined to believe that tragedy was the result of God's judgment. Suffering was God's punishment for sin.

That's what the old testament story of Job is about. Job wrestles with the question of suffering. Job's friends tell him his suffering is the result of something he has done. Job, doesn't buy it.

Jesus is out of the Job school of understanding suffering and he contradicted conventional wisdom. These tragedies, he said, were not the will or work of God.

But it's the way of our world... we need to find out “why”?

Some folks are still trying to attribute suffering to God's judgment on human sin. AIDS, some preachers insist, is God's punishment. Hurricane Katrina was God's wrath inflicted on the people of New Orleans for their sinful lifestyle. 9/11 happened, the televangelists confidently announced, because God lifted the veil of protection around our nation in anger at Roe v. Wade, abortion, homosexuality, and feminism. The Haiti earthquake was the punishment of God for Voodoo practiced in the forest.

And personally, even though we may reject those anecdotes as morally inconsistent with Christian faith, it seems that when bad things happen, we can't help asking: Did we bring this on ourselves? Did we do something wrong? Is my lack of success, my failure, my failed health, indication of some deep flaw in myself?

Jesus said no and added his voice to an old and rigorous dialogue in the Bible.

On the one hand, the beautiful Twenty-Seventh Psalm, which Jesus would have known and which we read this morning, promises that there is nothing to fear; evildoers, adversaries, and foes will stumble and fall. God will shelter us in our day of trouble. It's a strong affirmation of trust in God.

This is not, by the way, a Pollyannaish, superficial promise. The people who wrote and read these psalms were consummate realists. Their own experience was marked by suffering, military defeat, exile, captivity. These are not easy promises but an affirmation of a faith that upholds and strengthens people even in the middle of suffering, a faith for tough times of deadly pestilence and arrows flying and destruction stalking, when God seems to be absent.

And, the other voice in this dialogue—the question of “Why is this happening?”—is also in the Bible, without ambiguity or flinching.

Psalm 77:

“In the day of trouble I sought the Lord,” the psalmist wrote  
—and nothing happened apparently—

“so when I think of God these days,

I moan.

I spend most of my time remembering the good old days when all was well.

Has God's steadfast love ceased?

Has God forgotten to be gracious?”

Here's the thing; Faith dares to ask those questions. Faith is not afraid to ask, “Why is this happening? Where is God in this?” Faith sees in those questions themselves a deep trust. Faith understands and experiences God, God's mercy and love and kindness, even in the experiences of God's silence and absence.

C. S. Lewis said that suffering was God's way of getting our attention, of waking us up to deeper things. He called it his "alarm clock theology." And then he fell in love and married Joy Davidman, and her cancer and death literally undid his neat explanation of suffering. In *Shadowlands*, the play about his marriage, Lewis faces the audience, with his wife in her hospital bed, and confesses that his alarm clock theology was too easy. Nothing can explain or make sense of this pain, he says. There is suffering so deep that it simply will not do to dismiss it as God's teaching us something (Michael Lindvall, *The Geography of God*, p. 114).

Scripture tells us that God has created us to be free. God's power is the power of love, like a parent's—not control, but a love that watches as the child grows and moves out into the dangerous world, full of risks, trouble, and tragedy, a love that shares the child's every experience. A love that allows freedom, but stays close in pain.

And when bad things happen, we certainly can learn something, not because God is causing it to teach us something, but because suffering softens us, makes us more tender and caring, opens us to one another, to each other's hopes and dreams and aspirations and disappointments and failures.

Sometimes religion itself refuses to acknowledge the reality of suffering. In his book, *Thank God It's Friday*, William Willimon complains that the church doesn't "do too well in the dark." He remembers the time when every church had Sunday evening services.

But with the advent of Sunday night television and *Bonanza* the church stopped worshiping at night. "Too bad," Willimon says, "because a lot of important things in the Bible and the life of Jesus happen in the dark."

He's a Methodist pastor and tells about a woman who came to him to complain that her church was a happy church. "Everything is so happy and upbeat. The preacher jumps up on the stage at the beginning of the service, just grinning and giggling. . . . He's so insufferably happy: every other word is 'awesome.' All the music is upbeat and giddy." You know," she said, "it's hell to be going through a tough time in your life and have to worship at a happy church" (pp. 39–40).

There's a difference between joy and refusing to be real about life.

At the center of our faith is the cross, one of the most painful instruments of torture ever invented. Our joy comes in knowing that even at the cross God was there. That, in Jesus' suffering and death, God's love for the world is completely revealed. At the center of our faith is the cross and the amazing affirmation that as Jesus suffered and died, God experienced it all—all of it. At the center of our faith is the assurance that God has experienced the worst that can happen to any of us. In the cross God comes close to your life and mine all of it's most painful suffering, when we are at our most human and precarious and vulnerable.

One last thing: in a very helpful book he wrote about the death of his own son, Yale philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff asks the question many of us ask: "What should you say to someone who is suffering?"

He wrote: "Your words don't have to be wise. The heart that speaks is heard more than the words spoken. And if you can't think of anything to say, just say 'I can't think of anything to say. But I want you to know I am with you in your grief.'"

What I really need in my pain, Wolterstorff said, is to hear that you are with me. . . . "To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench."

That is exactly what Christian faith believes happened in Jesus Christ. God has come to sit beside us—to walk with us, live with us, love with us, suffer with us, and die with us. When a child asks, as every child does sooner or later, why everyone has to die, my experience has been that the best answer is not a lengthy attempt to explain human mortality but a hug.

"We're in this together, God and you and me," Wolterstorff wrote near the end of the book. And we are.

Jesus Christ is God's promise, God's invitation to trust that all, finally, shall be well, that no evil, finally, shall befall us.

"The Lord is my shepherd," another psalmist wrote—words Jesus memorized as a child, words I am sure he remembered on that Friday afternoon when the worst that could happen, happened.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

Amen.

Prayer

Apostles Creed:

I believe in God the Father almighty...