

Change Your Heart or We're Doomed! Where's God in All of This? Part Two.

By Steve Ramer, Pastor
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Scripture

Luke 13:1 Some who were there at the time told him about the Galileans, about how Pilate had mixed their blood with their sacrifices. 2 He answered them, "Do you suppose that those Galileans were the worst sinners in Galilee, because they suffered in this way? 3 Hardly. However, let me tell you, if you do not have a change of heart, you will all meet your doom in the same way. 4 Or how about those eighteen in Siloam, who were killed when the tower of fell on them—do you suppose that they were any guiltier than anyone else living in Jerusalem? 5 Hardly. However, let me tell you, if you do not have a change of heart, all of you will meet your doom just as they did."

6 Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard; he came looking for fruit on it but didn't find any. 7 So he said to the gardener, "See here, for three years in a row I have come looking for fruit on this tree, and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should we continue to let it suck the nutrients out of the soil?" 8 In response he says to him, "Let it stand, sir, for one more year, until I get a chance to dig around it and work in some manure around it. 9 Maybe it will produce fruit next year; but if it doesn't, then we can go ahead and cut it down."

Sermon

Last week I struggled with you a bit on the question,
"Where is God in all of this?"

My message this morning is a continuation of that reflection,
or I guess you could call it, "Where Is God..., Part 2."

And even though I did give you an answer last Sunday,
I think you would agree that a question such as this
deserves more than just one sermon,
because, well... it's a very big question!

Secondly, questions such as this are not merely "deep and wide,"
but they are questions that go to the very heart of our faith.
They are universal and for most of us, never really ending.

And lastly, I wanted to cover it again because, well...
I had so much material left over from part one
and I so hate to let any of my efforts go to waste!

Now there are times when I do actually discover an answer that satisfies.
But more often than not, I also find more than just one answer.
With time and experience, (I guess this is called age?)
I also manage to gain new perspectives, and with new perspectives
my previous understanding begins to evolve.

As I said last Sunday hard questions and even doubts should not be avoided
but even encouraged since they often make our faith stronger.
I also encouraged us to find hope and comfort in our central story

as Christian - which is the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus.

That the act, our participation in communion, is the proclamation of an audacious conviction that what was destroyed can be rebuilt, and that which seems dead can come back to life!
And that regardless of our present circumstance, God is there with us and that God will never, ever, abandon us!

I also challenged you last Sunday that difficult questions do not just go in one direction critiquing only God's behavior but that we too must be subject to our own inquisition; "Where is God?" must also include, "Where are we?"

The specific events to which Jesus' was referencing in this morning's passage are not at all clear. None of the other gospels include them and nothing in the non-biblical literature of the day seems to fit either.

No matter, like us, those folks confronting Jesus were understandably concerned and also like us, trying to make sense out of current tragic events.

But Jesus' response, was quite similar to that of Job as he responded to some of his friends as they sought to comfort him in his suffering. Both Job and Jesus are saying that folks were asking the wrong questions. In his response to the deaths of those construction workers and of those religiously observant Galilean Jews,

Jesus was negating four assumptions that those folks (and even us today) often made:

- 1) Suffering is proportional to sinfulness.
- 2) Tragedy is a sure sign of God's judgment.
- 3) Bad things happen only to bad people.
- 4) We have the right to make such judgments.

Did God do it? Was it on purpose?

No! Says Jesus, clearly refuting those often sadly popular theories. A resounding no, none of those folks deserved what they got!

Those Galileans, were killed by Pilate, who was a faithful servant of the occupying Roman Empire. It was he who sent his troops to ruthlessly keep those religious dissenters in line. Some scholars believe the construction site might have been some form of public works project intended to bring fresh water into the city.

Did those workers deserve to die for being part of such a hideous effort? Of course not! They were the victims and sometimes accidents just happen.

But we also know that innocent workers often die when bosses cut corners, or safety is ignored or when government officials are bribed and look the other way. And though we know that bad folks do suffer, it seems as if in the end it's the good folks who actually are suffering disproportionately.

Allow me then to paraphrase from the article, "*And where is God in all this...?*" by Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff,

"In the face of... [recent] events with millions of victims, especially poor and innocent, - many of us - ask themselves in anguish, "And where is God in all this...?" "Is not God omnipotent and good, as religions say?" If God is omnipotent, then God can do anything. If God can do anything, why didn't God prevent...? And if God did not prevent it, it is a sign that God is not omnipotent or good. This contradiction has been an open wound ever since human beings discovered God's presence in the universe. In this heartrending situation, I think we can nourish three attitudes: revolt, resignation or hope against all the absurd.

Revolt is expressed through denial. Many say:... "I will forever refuse to accept a God who allows the suffering of innocent children." This response is understandable and logical, but it does not eliminate evil. Evil continues. As critics, we can ask: "Is reason everything?" Or can God be that which we cannot fully understand.

If revolt does not give an answer, perhaps resignation can? Resignation shows that reality is made of good and evil. It is then an illusion to seek to overcome evil since good and evil always go together, like light and shadow. The wise then seek an equilibrium and to learn to live without any final hope. This is a noble attitude, that modifies the person but does not seek to change the brutal reality. The third attitude is to wait in spite of everything. It begins by clearly recognizing that evil is an impenetrable mystery. Evil is not to be understood, but to be faced. This is why a theory will not give meaning to evil, but only thoughtful action. That is where hope is born, "in all of this" and there can be meaning beyond the outrage of reason. It is manifested, for example, in a miraculous rescue or from the solidarity that can arise in a world that is filled with the victims.

Solidarity however does not eliminate suffering, but it can create a sibling relationship between all those who suffer that can address both loneliness and despair. Christians, and other religions believe that "God is not indifferent to suffering but that God suffers with those who suffer." The passion of God in the passion for what has been created makes us believe that hope has a more power than the brutality of the facts. Meanwhile, mystery continues being mystery, And oh how it hurts sometimes!

But I also think it's just too easy to just blame God for all the bad stuff that happens?

Were those who were murdered at Bethel AME in South Carolina, or at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, getting what they deserved? Blaming God for those tragedies I think is just lazy! Did God pull the triggers? Of course not.

Limiting guns in our society could have made a difference but that takes a whole lot more effort! But if we look closer, Jesus didn't actually give the crowd an answer, but responded with a questions and a stern warning!

His response seems almost flippant if not at least provocative,
“Yah, they are dead and you will be too if you don’t change your ways!”
“If you do not have a change of heart,
all of you will meet your doom...”

Will we, as Boff encourages, seek true solidarity with the victims,
and thus find a true source of hope and joy?

I purposely did not stop the scripture reading this morning
on Jesus’ happy notes of gloom and doom
because I think Jesus’ little parable that follows must be connected
since it is a lesson on how to respond to tragedy with action.

I think that we can safely assume that the vineyard owner is God
and that the gardener is Jesus - you know, the one who goes
out of his way, bending over backwards (by getting crucified),
in order to save the fig tree (God’s true followers
or maybe you and me, or perhaps all of humanity?).

Or maybe, like in another story, we are working alongside of Jesus,
doing some of the same things he’s doing; digging
and pruning and shoveling a lot of wonderful horse manure.
Simultaneously being lovingly attended to, as well as,
working alongside the most competent gardener in the world.

Now supposedly, there is a quote by St. Augustine from his “Confessions”
that goes something like this: "humans do learn much from suffering,
but they learn far much more from love."
(I tried and tried to find it but Google kept giving me lots
of his other great quotes)

So, let’s get busy in the work of God in our suffering world.
Let’s get our hands dirty and smelly
as we work that aromatic fertilizer into the soil.

Let’s find ways to change our hearts,
and through our shared suffering and the amazing love of God,
may we help this old world produce the sweetest most juicy figs imaginable!

Steve Ramer

Pastor Fort Collins Mennonite Fellowship
300 E. Oak St.
Ft. Collins, CO 80524
(970) 412-7510