

Bad Things – Good People... Why?  
Genesis 3:16-21, Luke 13:1-9

It's the question easier asked than answered. Why do bad things happen to good people? Or we could even answer, why do good things happen to bad people? It's an eternal, searching, difficult, important, and perhaps impossible to answer question. But in a world of accident and war and illness, it's a question we cannot help but ask.

Let me offer first this observation: the question is really asked only by people who believe in God, for if we do not believe in God, then good and evil alike are just accidents; it just happens without rhyme or reason... sometimes you are the windshield,

sometimes you are the bug and the best we can do is to survive until some illness or calamity claims us and it doesn't matter anyway.

Or, if we believe in a God who has power, but is more concerned with himself than with us, then we need not ask the question, either. The Babylonians believed that way. They believed that floods or drought were caused by armies of gods fighting against each other; humanity was just sort of caught in the crossfire.

But we are Christian people. We believe in a God who loves us, who wants what is best for us. We believe that God's ultimate nature is Love. So then,

when a little child is felled by cancer, when a friend drives off the road and does not survive the accident, when a college rejects us, it is we, who are Christian people, who ask, "Why?" This is the question I will wrestle with this morning. I do not promise to answer the question, but I do promise to tussle with it.

And let's face it, we also want to know: has God singled me out for this calamity, and if so, why? I don't think He has. God's relationship with us is always one of grace.

First, let me share some answers which have been tried and sometimes rejected through the centuries. For the longest time, the Hebrew people believed

that good people were rewarded and bad people punished. In the book of Judges we read passages similar to this many times:

*2:11 Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and worshiped the Baals; 12 and they abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, . . . So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers who plundered them, and he sold them into the power of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies.*

And such a faith works pretty well in most situations.

We know that when we are good, usually good things happen to us. And, if we do bad stuff, we get punished, if not by school or parents, then by life. But not always. Sometimes good things happen to bad people and bad things to good people. The Book of Job in the Old Testament acknowledges this

problem. Job simply does not deserve the suffering he goes through.

And, sometimes, people of faith will simply blame God, and impart to him trivial and almost insulting reasons why something bad happens. If a little child dies, they say, "Well, God only plucks the most beautiful flowers." As if, were the child uglier, or not so nice, he would still be alive. Or the cruelest of them all, to say to a child when a parent dies, "Well, God needed her more than you did." So the child is left believing, "If only I had loved her more, needed her more... then she would still be here."

Or: God doesn't put on you more than you can handle. As if we only had less ability to handle things, then the bad stuff wouldn't have happened. Not logical.

Or, some will consider a tragedy and say, "Well, God wanted to teach a lesson." Recently a family of five perished when a heater put out too much carbon monoxide. But do we really believe God willed their death so we would be more careful? Or some other comparatively trivial lesson? I will not believe in such a God. Now, of course if we do learn a lesson in a circumstance, wonderful. And God can use any circumstance to show us his love and his grace.

But could it be that God is not the cause of every calamity that befalls us? The Lord's Prayer implies this might be the case. We pray that God's will be done on earth, just as God's will is done in heaven. The implication is that in fact, God's will is not always done on earth, else why would we have to pray for it. In fact, the part of the prayer which states, "Thy kingdom come" is a prayer for the Kingdom of God to come so completely that his will is done all the time here, just as it is already done in heaven.

Our Responsive Reading, [From Revelation 21 and 22] reminds us that we do live in this God-graced, yet challenging and fallen world that yet awaits final

fulfillment in the time yet to come, a time even Jesus refused to name.

Could it be that the sorrow of our existence is that indeed the will of God is not done in every circumstance. God loves, God cares, but we live in a world that is not yet perfectly conformed to God's will. Spiritual truth of Garden of Eden: no longer all good, but a mixture. You know that story. At the beginning, perfect harmony. But then, humanity chooses to listen to other voices than the voice of God. We go our own way. We sin. As a result, Adam and Eve, that's you and me, are cast out of the Garden, where they are protected from all that could go wrong, and

sent out into the sometimes harsh and sometimes unfair world... the world in which we live even today.

But did you listen closely to the end of the story as it was read this morning? Following a long description of life the way it is... notice, not totally evil, but one that is a combination... yes, the joy of children, but so too the pain of childbirth; yes, the wonder of the harvest, but not without pain and sweat and toil... before God sends us to live in this sort of world, the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them. In other words, God does not take away all the pain and turmoil and challenge of life, but neither does he abandon us completely to the difficulties of life. He made them

garments. He offered them the tools so that they could live in a difficult world.

That's the grace I referred to earlier, grace, the unearned, freely given love of God to us.

Now what about the notion that illness and accident are always God's punishment for sin? It is this notion Jesus rejects in our New Testament Lesson this morning. Some believers, making their sacrifice at the Temple, had been killed upon orders by Pilate. A horrible occurrence. The folks thought, those people must have done something really wrong.

Then Jesus brings up another matter. A tower had fallen, in Siloam, in the southeast corner of Jerusalem. Why did they die? Because they were bad sinners? Jesus absolutely rejects such thinking. They died not because God wanted them to, but because the tower fell. . It just happened. That's the sometimes sorrow of life. Sinful workers? Perhaps. Ignorant architect? Could be. Strong gust of wind. Maybe. Jesus doesn't tell us why. Just reports that it happened. Bad things do happen; it doesn't mean God caused them, nor does it mean that God just doesn't care. It does mean we live in a world that is not yet perfect, a world in which God's kingdom is not yet perfectly come.

But now let me say this. Make a few more points.

1) The Christian faith teaches us that God loves us, even when we do suffer. After all, his own son suffered. When something bad happens, trust that God is still on your side. To believe in a God who would cause a tower to fall or would send a tsunami or would send a virus epidemic upon sinners is to go against the vast majority of what Jesus taught about God's character of mercy and forgiveness.

2) God will find a way. God will find a way to make it better. God is there in the midst of all that is wrong, to bring new life and new hope. Amidst the pain and suffering of life, there is joy and there is beauty. This is

sort of what the image of God making garments for Adam and Eve symbolizes. So often, when I work with people who are ill, I notice that though the illness might not be taken away, people's souls are strengthened in a mighty way. Sometimes families grow closer together. Sometimes a person realizes for the first time just how much she or he is loved. And, for people of faith, even the facing of death leads not ultimately to fear, but to anticipation, of the eternal joy and fulfillment of eternal life. Spiritual garments, if you will, to offer warmth and comfort against the sometimes cold reality of life. Though God does not cause every circumstance, it is God's will that his grace be available to us in every circumstance.

No, God does not stop every accident and every illness. But God reaches out to those who suffer. To those who die, he offers the promise of eternal life; to those who live, he offers those gifts of love, mercy, forgiveness, and peace, so that despite all the bad that happens, we still are offered the promise and the way of living joyous lives.

3) But we have to choose to accept the grace and victory God offers. Jesus calls us to repent. Which is not even so much in this context confessing our sins, but rather rearranging our perspective, to see God, to wait for God, to expect God in every circumstance.

Why do bad things happen to good people? I wish I knew for sure. But there again, even if I knew, would it really change anything? So I just hold on to what I believe. To be sure, bad things do happen to good people. The will of God is not done perfectly in every situation. It will be in heaven, but not here on earth. Not yet. Yet, I believe in a God who loves me during all times of my life, both good and bad. I believe in a God who reaches out to me in the depth of my despair and doubt, and offers his guidance, and mercy and love, and courage. I believe in Jesus Christ, who came to show that the life of love is the true life. I believe he died for my sins; I believe on the third day he rose from the dead. I believe that the power of God's love and the promise of eternal life are sufficient to give my life hope, and meaning, despite the bad things, until God's will has its ultimate triumph in the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen.