

Jim Gill

"Why?"

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Isaiah 55:1-9 Luke 13:1-9 I Corinthians 10:1-13

I read about an episode from a British movie entitled, "Whistle in the Wind." A group of kids had experienced the death of their pet kitten. They had prayed fervently that the cat would get well, but instead it died. They couldn't understand this. So, they went in search of the local pastor. They found him in a teashop, taking a morning break, enjoying his tea and newspaper. They asked him, "Why did God let our cat die?" The good pastor was not delighted to be interrupted with the matter of a deceased cat. But out of duty he laid aside his paper and launched into a long, complex, theological response to this question. The children stood and listened intently. When he finished he wished them well and went back to his newspaper. The children walked away somewhat bewildered. One little boy, holding his older sister's hand, looked up at her and said, "He doesn't know, does he?"

Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor assigned to oversee this volatile territory of Rome. It was a time of tremendous unrest. It was a powder keg ready to explode. It was in this context that Pilate sought to send a political and religious message by deliberately ordering the killing of a group of men who were offering sacrifices to God. Pilate not only had them killed, but he had their blood mixed with a sacrifice to the pagan gods. The fact that the men who were killed were from Galilee where Jesus grew up and began his ministry made their massacre even more terrible to Jesus.

Why is a story of a vicious calculated massacre in the Bible? It is there because it happened. It is there because the question came to Jesus and because his answer helps us deal with the questions we have as we continue to see people being massacred today. It is there to help us deal with what happens when our towers and airplanes fall-when airplanes crash into towers-and when floods rise and flames roar.

From time to time you may have heard someone try to offer comfort in a time of trial with the statement "Everything happens for a reason." That's the answer that the people who came to Jesus with this breaking news story wanted Jesus to embrace. Was this God's judgment because of their immoral living? Jesus gives a very simple answer: No!

Jesus then goes on to say, "You must repent or you will likewise perish." In other words, everyone will die of something. One day you are here and the next you're not -- whether it's at the hands of some tyrant or some terrorist or at the wrong end of the latest storm or the victim of an illness to which you finally succumb. Jesus then adds to the conversation the report of a tower that fell in Siloam that killed 18 people. This was not the result of an evil calculated order by a tyrant or a terrorist act, but by what we might describe as a natural disaster or maybe a construction accident or the result of faulty engineering. To that Jesus also adds

a resounding “No.” It had nothing to do with the sins of those lost. It was a tragedy.

When it comes to hurricanes and floods and earthquakes, those things happen without respect to the moral climate or condition of the people who happen to be living in a particular region when disaster strikes. As Jesus also said, ‘The rain falls upon the just and the unjust.’”

My wife and I were lucky. Even though our Houston house is in Meyerland where significant flooding took place and our Baytown house was surrounded by folks who were flooded, we did not incur any flooding with Harvey. When people tried to suggest that it was because I was a pastor and had special favor in the eyes of the Lord I emphatically said, “No.” I was lucky. Because to say that I was protected because I was a pastor is to say that those who didn’t escape were NOT protected by the Lord. I’m sure some of you were affected by Hurricane Harvey. I know all of you in this church were affected by not being able to worship in this sanctuary until last Christmas.

For all that nature has done to wreak havoc upon the earth we humans have done so much more. It’s because of our sinfulness, our neglect that levees don’t hold. It’s because of our sinfulness that resources are not made available in time to prevent further suffering. It’s because of our sinfulness that speed limits are not observed. It’s because of our sinfulness that people are killed by others who drive drunk or who drive and text on their cell phones. Two of my dearest friends were killed instantly when a drunk driver hit them head on. He was a pastor and my mentor and his wife was an early role model for my Anne.

We live in a fallen sinful world. There is chaos unleashed in this world by nature, by humans, and by the forces of darkness. In the case of humans, the chaos is because of our own free will- the freedom to choose to do good or evil. Because of that freedom, some like Herod and Pontius Pilate and the shooter in ChristChurch and in Santa Fe and in and the massacres of Christians in Nigeria take lives.

In 1981 a book was published that created quite a stir. It made a lot of people start asking the question that people were asking Jesus, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" This book was written by Rabbi Harold S. Kushner. He wrote his book in reaction to a personal tragedy when his son Aaron died early in life due a rare disease which causes premature aging. In his crises of faith he wrote the book for people "who have been hurt by life."

The title of his book is When Bad Things Happen to Good People. Kushner's title is not a question. He was not asking “Why do bad things happen? He was offering a solution, an action plan. When bad things happen in your life this is how to think about them and how to respond to them. To question "Why" is a trap and can lead to so much pain if we stay there. To say, "When bad things happen

I might be grieved but I am going to respond constructively," is a whole 'nother thing.

The cruel evil visited on Jesus when he was brutally, senselessly tortured and killed on a cross was ordered by the same man named Pontius Pilate who ordered those who were making sacrifices in the temple to be killed. Throughout that evil cruelty God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. God was in Christ speaking from his cross saying, "Father, forgiven them. They know not what they do."

Where was God when the first deacon Stephen was stoned to death? Where was God when Jesus' disciples were brutally martyred? Where was God when countless numbers of Jesus followers were persecuted, imprisoned and killed just for following him? God was with them as they sacrificed their lives for their faith. God was in the same place when his only begotten Son was dying on the cross. God was weeping with those who lost their loved ones. God was welcoming those who were killed into everlasting life.

God had a purpose in sending his Son Jesus into the world to redeem us from sin, to save us from separation from God and to walk with us through our times of tragedy and sorrow.

Where is God? God is here. God is here because AFTER Jesus' sacrificed his life to become the Lamb of God who took away and takes away the sins of the world, he became the Lion of Judah who burst forth from the tomb, RISEN making sense of his, up to that moment seemingly senseless death, to redeem every victim of every tragedy and every survivor of every tragedy.

Where is God? God is in us when we intentionally choose to serve God and serve our neighbor, especially those who have fallen. We should mourn, yes, but we should also repent, turn to God, and live as those who are ready to die. We are called to live as those who stand ready to give an account of the hope that is within us...that even mad men might come to know the hope we have and not be driven to desperate acts...

Jesus was telling his questioners that life is fragile. At any moment a tower could fall like it did in the ancient city of Siloam, or the modern city of New York. At any moment a despot could order our execution, or a person could come into this room and start shooting. At any moment a car could come in our lane and hit us head on. At any moment a plane could crash. At any moment an Oil Tank could catch fire. The question is as long as you continue to live what will you do with the gift of life that God has given you? Will you turn to God? Will you repent? Will you be ready to go when your death comes?

I saw an article in the New York Times "Death, the Prosperity Gospel and Me" by Kate Bowler. Kate is a professor at Duke who researched and wrote about the

prosperity gospel, the belief that if you have strong enough faith you will be healthy, wealthy and wise. Kate wrestles with how that theology of the righteous being blessed impacts her understanding of being diagnosed with stage IV cancer at age 35. She writes:

Put simply, the prosperity gospel is the belief that God grants health and wealth to those with the right kind of faith... Tragedies are simply tests of character.

She writes, "It is the reason a neighbor knocked on our door to tell my husband that everything happens for a reason." "I'd love to hear it," my husband said. "Pardon?" she said, startled. "I'd love to hear the reason my wife is dying," he said, in that sweet and sour way he has."

My neighbor wasn't trying to sell him a spiritual guarantee. But there was a reason she wanted to fill that silence around why some people die young and others grow old and fussy about their lawns. She wanted some kind of order behind this chaos. Because the opposite of #blessed is leaving a husband and a toddler behind, and people can't quite let themselves say it: "Wow. That's awful." There has to be a reason, because without one we are left as helpless and possibly as unlucky as everyone else.

Kate continues: CANCER has kicked down the walls of my life. I cannot be certain I will walk my son to his elementary school someday or subject his love interests to cheerful scrutiny. I struggle to buy books for academic projects I fear I can't finish for a perfect job I may be unable to keep. I have surrendered my favorite manifestoes about having it all, managing work-life balance and maximizing my potential...Cancer requires that I stumble around in the debris of dreams I thought I was entitled to and plans I didn't realize I had made.

But cancer has also ushered in new ways of being alive. Even when I am this distant from Canadian family and friends, everything feels as if it is painted in bright colors. In my vulnerability, I am seeing my world without the Instagrammed filter of breezy certainties and perfectible moments. I can't help noticing the brittleness of the walls that keep most people fed, sheltered and whole. I find myself returning to the same thoughts again and again: Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.¹

Jesus follows his answers to those who came to him asking about the tragedy in of the execution style killings of Galileans and the falling of a tower with a parable about a fig tree that hasn't borne fruit for 3 years. The owner of the land demands that gardener cut the tree down because it was taking up valuable space that could be used by something that would produce fruit. But the gardener asked for leniency. The gardener asked for one more year. The gardener promised to care for it and fertilize it in hopes that it would produce fruit. That parable has a message for us. There is work to do. There is another year to work... to work whether or not we will even or ever know... why.