

**St. John's Episcopal Church**  
Jackson, Wyoming  
Sermon for February 28, 2016 ~ Lent 3C  
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Thirty-five years ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner's book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, was a best seller. In the book, the rabbi addresses the question that has haunted humanity since its origins, the question having to do with the correlation between sin and suffering, the question between righteousness and rewards. Rabbi Kushner says it all has to do with luck. There is good luck and there is bad luck - neither of which is dependent upon a person's goodness or badness. There is a kind of randomness to life.

Rabbi Jesus dealt with the question in an entirely different way. Some people came to him with serious questions about some Galileans whom Pilate's soldiers murdered while they were trying to offer their sacrifices at the Temple and some Jerusalemites who were minding their own business when there was an earthquake and the tower at Siloam fell on them. Why did they deserve such a fate?

And, Jesus wasn't very easy on them. He didn't take Rabbi Kushner's approach. He just said, "Do you think those Galileans or those Jerusalemites were any better or any worse than others? I tell you unless you repent you will all likewise perish." In today's climate, Jesus wouldn't win any awards in the pastoral care department. Today, we want explanations, answers that make sense to us and reassure us that we are okay. Thousands perish by famine in Africa, people perish in avalanches, floodwaters destroy people's homes, terrorists gun down innocent people in the streets and in schools. How can God be good and still allow bad things like these to inflict good people like us?

Jesus' own disciples asked him questions like that. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus didn't deal with that question to my satisfaction either. He said, "Neither. This man was born blind so that the glory of God might be revealed." Consistently, Jesus denies any direct correlation between the kind of person you are and what happens to you. God sends the sunshine and the rain on both the good and the bad.

Yet, the idea persists: There is a direct relation between the sort of person I am and the bad or good things that come my way in life. When I suffer, there must be some explanation. What did I do wrong to deserve this? Likewise, when things go right, I must find a way to take credit, mustn't I? This all reminds me of Thornton Wilder's novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. That story tells of a village in South America. Each day the villagers made their way across a bridge to the fields. One day, without warning, the bridge snapped. Six persons fell to their deaths. There was a priest in the village who said, "Aha! I will do research into these people's lives and show why those six people were on the bridge when it fell. I will prove beyond a doubt that if you do bad things, bad things will happen to you and if you do good things, good will be done to you." He studied every aspect of their lives and came to a conclusion: Those six people were no worse, nor no better than anyone in the village.

People sometimes think preachers don't understand the tragedies and the suffering others go through. They think we are oblivious to the feelings of injustice which well up in others when someone who has done his job well is passed over for a promotion, or when one who is innocent is killed in a random act of violence, or when disease strikes one down who always led such a good life, or when people have put in years of service decide they have earned some kind of rank in the congregation. Well, we're not immune. We know better than you think. We know what it is like to have good, loving, Christian parents die from the ravages of cancer. We know what it is like to have a child born only to discover that child is autistic and mentally retarded. We know what it is like to give everything we've got to helping people build a church, only to see those efforts thwarted through the undermining influence of a handful of antagonistic people. We know

what it is like to feel that we deserve better than we are getting in the scheme of things.

But we also know that Jesus knows our questions about things like this deter us from THE question. THE question is not about fairness or deserving. THE question Jesus asks us is not about justice. THE question is the cruciform one - how do we stand before God?

*When Bad Things Happen to Good People* was a best seller not only because it is written well, but because it flatters so well a self-pitying, narcissistic age. For us, any suffering is patently unfair and undeserved, any confusion, any unknowing or tragedy is unjust, because so long ago we stopped trusting a God whose presence makes suffering, confusion, unknowing, and tragedy bearable. They asked Jesus about life's fairness; but he wouldn't answer. He forced them to examine their own relationship with God. That's the crux of it, isn't it?

We don't want God, we want answers. And God's answers had better not be too confusing or frightening or we'll look for answers elsewhere. Somewhere, we can find a god who demands less than repentance.

Why did this happen to me? Probably, for no good reason. Bad things happen to the good and the bad all the time. The notion that only good things happen to good people was put to rest when they hung Jesus on the cross. Now, this same Jesus takes our question and makes it cruciform: can you trust God - in joy or in pain - to be your God? Can you love God without linking your love to the cards life deals you?

God's love carries no promises about good or bad save the promise that God will not allow anything to worse to happen to you than happened to his own Son.

Saint Augustine mused over the great suffering that occurred when the barbarians sacked Rome. He noted in his *City of God* that when the barbarians raped and pillaged, Christians suffered just as much as non-Christians. Faith in Christ did not make them immune to pain and tragedy. Augustine wrote, "Christians differ from Pagans, not in the ills which befall them but in what they **do** with the ills that befall them." The Christian faith does not give us a way around tragedy. It gives us a way through it!

At last week's annual convention of the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes, we heard theologian Mioslav Volf. He reminded us of the scripture passage quoted by Jesus when he was tempted to make loaves of bread out of stones, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt. 4:4). And then he told us that the desire to live by bread alone is the mother of all temptations. That is because only God is reliable in every circumstance of our lives in this life and in the next.

There is Jesus, standing before us with his non-answer to our question: "I tell you, unless you repent you will all likewise perish." Our goodness is not supposed to earn points with God that protect us and guarantee an incident-free life. Our goodness is supposed to be in response to God's eternal presence and power in our lives. So, on Sunday we come to the Lord's Table, and we are given, not answers, but bread and wine, which are for us nothing less than his broken body and spilled blood. This is the way God responds to our questions - not with answers that flatter us, or make the world simpler than it really is, but with his life given for us, that we might more fully give our lives to him. Are you holding out on God?