

Let's Go Deeper...

Wednesday, February 24, 2016

On Sunday we passed Milepost 2 on our 40-day Lenten Road to Renewal: Repentance. Our focus was a peculiar passage from Luke's gospel (13:1-9) that worship leaders Rod and Olivia Brewer broke neatly in half. Rod read verses 1-5 in which people approached Jesus and, in light of two recent tragedies in the headlines, asked him the age-old question: *Why?*

Let's go deeper with that question. I began Sunday's sermon:

In the aftermath of tragedy, a one-word question squeezes through constricted throats: *Why?* Luke tells us some people approached Jesus and told him about Pilate murdering some Galileans who were worshipping in the Temple, mingling their blood with the blood of their sacrifices. Murdered while worshipping? Echoes of Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston. *Why?* Also in the news were eighteen who were killed when the Tower of Siloam fell on them.

Those were people's grandparents, spouses, and children. They left home that morning and didn't come home that night. *Why?*



Jesus heard in the people's query of *Why?* the intimation that those who died must have somehow deserved what happened to them. The reason for the *Why?* was a *What*: they had somehow sinned. They did it. God noticed it. So they got it. That's why.

To which Jesus said, "**I tell you, No.**" Jesus unequivocally denies a direct cause-and-effect relationship between sin and suffering.

I quoted Fred Craddock:

"For Christians, the fatal blow to the idea that suffering and death are the lot of the guilty came at Golgotha. The One without sin suffered and died on the cross... Jesus' disciples are forever freed from the ancient notion that prosperity and good health are evidence of divine favor while poverty and suffering are clear signs of divine wrath."

We ask, "*Why?* What did I do to deserve this?" Says Jesus, "**I tell you, No.**"

We're dealing with the thorny issue of *theodicy*, defined as "defense of God's goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil." In sum, if God is omnipotent (all-powerful), then God must be able to control what happens. And if God is good, then God must allow bad things to happen for good reason. That reason must be to... punish bad people for their sins... or teach good people a

lesson... or God must have something good in mind that we can't understand right now, but "in the sweet by and by" we will. So, in the meantime—and it is a *mean* time-- just trust God that what seems awful is somehow all right because God is good and God allowed it.

To such reasoning, Jesus says, **"I tell you, No."**

What can we say then in the face of such as Pilate's murderous rampage and towers falling on innocent victims?

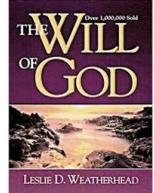
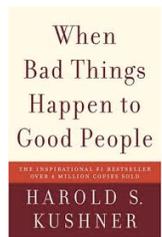
Don't read on in the hopes I'll be proffering an answer. I will, however, suggest three books that have aided my grappling with the soul-wrenching issue of theodicy.

Rabbi Harold Kushner's **When Bad Things Happen to Good People** bears the authority of a man of profound faith who asked *Why?* in the most anguished of contexts: the death of his 14-year-old son to the aging disease *progeria*.



I also commend to you Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff's **Lament for a Son**. Professor Wolterstorff, like Kushner, is a man of deep faith and intellectual honesty whose 25-year-old son died in a mountain climbing accident.

I'd add Leslie Weatherhead's classic **The Will of God**. Troubled by attempts at explaining tragedy with the phrase, "It must be God's will," Weatherhead (1893-1976), a British clergyman, wrote the slim volume (a mere 60 pages) that is immensely helpful to me.



None of the above, individually or cumulatively, answers *Why?* Beware the person who speaks as if he or she knows. All I know as we proceed through Lent is that this holy season culminates in an unspeakably horrible death. And after three days, a resurrection. All I know is that I have cast my lot with those who, in life and at death, stand before cross and empty tomb, sensing that the answer to our *Why?* is not an explanation, but a *Presence*.

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 8:38-39)

**"That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake"**

--Pastor David