

Exodus 3:1-15
Psalm 63:1-8
1 Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

Lent 3C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
March 24, 2019
The Rev. Karen Haig

The Unspeakable Mercy of God

I presided at a funeral yesterday for a young woman who died much too soon. Her name was Samantha and she was beloved of all who knew her. Full of love and life, Sam was one of those people who was nearly always joyful, able to find the best in any situation. There are so many people who will miss her, especially her mother and father. Such things are hard to take in. It seems so wrong for a child to die before her parents do, and yet it happens. It doesn't happen because God's will is that children die before their parents do, it doesn't happen because anyone necessarily did anything wrong, it doesn't happen because God needs another angel in the heavenly choir.

So why does it happen? Why is it that some people are visited by such horrible circumstances and sadnesses that they seem nearly unbearable? Where is God in all of it? These are difficult questions, aren't they? They are natural questions too. We work hard to make sense out of the myriad senseless things that happen all around us and we work especially hard to do that when the senseless things come close. We want an answer, we want a formula, we want a reason. After all, didn't Jesus say everything happens for a reason? Actually, he did not. And that's because everything does NOT happen for a reason. Sometimes stuff just happens. And that is very, very hard for us to accept.

I think the reason so many people respond to profoundly difficult situations with the statement that everything happens for a reason, is because we somehow need for there to be a reason when the hard things happen. We need a reason when our world crumbles around us. We need a reason when the world as we've known it is no longer. We need a reason for the terrible and hard things because if there isn't a reason, it could all happen again and for NO good reason and that is just too hard for us to face. So we search for explanations, attempt to put things in boxes, try to create order. And the more difficult the situation, the harder we try to do those things. We look for answers and order in the face of the profound chaos of a terrifying diagnosis, the sudden loss of a spouse, the end of a career, the death of a child. We clamor after order in the face of tragedy because we feel like the world is coming undone. And it is. In those situations, the world IS coming undone and while we work so very hard to try to make sense of things, we cannot, because in such situations, nothing – absolutely nothing - is going to make sense. And that is very, very hard to bear.

And so we ask questions like "Why did she have to die?" or "Why do I have cancer" or "Why am I so sad?" or "Why is God letting this happen?" We ask those questions because they are the ones we know how to ask and because we are trying to make sense of our suffering. We are

trying to put order back into a world that is utterly disordered. And while asking “Why?” seems perfectly reasonable when everything is coming undone, it isn’t actually helpful. After all, what would a plausible answer be? *He died because his heart wore out. She died because her body was riddled with cancer.* Those may be accurate statements, but they are little comfort in the face of devastating tragedy. Pleading with God or with your priest or with anyone else for an answer to why such a terrible thing can happen is, I think, the best we can do even though somewhere deep inside us we know there is no answer to such a question. I think the real question we are asking in such situations is “How will I go on?” And that is a hard shift to make. It’s actually much easier to frantically flail around in search a rational explanation for what just happened, than it is to let our hearts crack open and come completely undone.

When I was a chaplain in the emergency room, I once sat with a pregnant woman whose baby had died before she was born. I was perfectly equipped with prayers and theologies, with hours and hours of pastoral role-playing and months of clinical pastoral education. But you know, when you’re sitting with a mom whose child has died, even all those things put together aren’t enough. When you listen to a heartbroken person wonder about the many things she might have done to cause this tragedy – anything from bumping into the steering wheel of the car to having behaved badly as a teenager and so now being punished by God... when I listen to those desperate efforts to explain the horror of what is happening, trying to help people see the futility of asking “Why?” is futile itself. Because sometimes it’s easier to believe in a punishing God than it is to wonder if you’re willing to keep breathing in a world where there is not necessarily any connection between suffering and wrongdoing.

That is not to say that when we do wrong we don’t suffer, we do, and so do the ones in our wake. But it is to say that sometimes suffering happens when there has been absolutely no wrongdoing. Suffering isn’t necessarily punishment for sin. We aren’t the first people to make that mistaken connection. It’s the very question the Galileans in this morning’s gospel reading were struggling with. “No,” says Jesus. This is not about God punishing people for their sins, not about who’s the biggest sinner, not about God reaching down and toppling over the Tower of Siloam OR the Twin Towers because people have behaved badly. That isn’t how God works. And that is a pretty great thing to hear... it’s not the first time and it won’t be the last time you’ll hear me say how grateful I am that I don’t actually get what I deserve.

You see, that isn’t how God works. This is really important to understand before we go on. We need to understand very clearly that sin and punishment don’t go together. Which is NOT to say that sin and suffering don’t go together, because they do. People describe sin in all sorts of ways, from naming the crimes in the 10 commandments to saying sin is missing the mark. Sin is, in some very real sense, separation from God. And when we do things or think things or say things that turn us away from God, whether it’s cheating on our spouse, ignoring the suffering people in the world or telling little white lies, we suffer. We suffer because once we’ve turned away from God, we can no longer accept and embrace God’s overflowing love for us. We suffer because we have turned away from the very source of our lives.

So even though Jesus says God cannot be made into a physics equation¹ – for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction - he still calls us to repentance, and repentance right now. One of the best contemporary New Testament scholars I know says that we often get it wrong when we think about repentance.² We know the word roughly translates to “turn around” and we tend to think that has something to do with behavior and guilt, as if Jesus’ primary concern was to reform each individual’s personal morality rather than change the entirety of our thinking and perception. To repent is to wholly change the way we see things, to reorient ourselves completely and utterly toward God.

Will this change your behavior? It probably will. But the change will happen because we see things differently when we turn ourselves toward God. So, Jesus says, stop thinking about better and worse sinners, stop thinking God will strike you dead for your bad behavior, stop wondering if God is punishing you or the people you love because of you. God is God. You are not. God isn’t changing the world around because of the way you behave. And, people, the time is short. Repent, and do it now.

One way to look at this fig tree story is to assume God is tired of the people and trees who aren’t bearing fruit so they are to be cut down and thrown into the fire. But then kindly Jesus, standing in as the gardener, says no, no, let me tend, let me nourish, let me work one more year with this struggling tree and let’s revisit the whole situation in a year. That’s not a good way to see it. There is no vengeful God and gentle, placating Jesus.³ There is only the mercy of God. God as the father who watches night and day for his wayward son to come home and welcomes him with unimaginable lavishness. God crossing all boundaries of race and gender to invite everyone to the table. God as the shepherd who leaves 99 sheep behind, exhausting himself searching the countryside because of the unspeakable joy of finally, finally finding that which had been lost. Ours is a God who loves us, who is always waiting for us, always longing for us. Ours is a God of unspeakable mercy.

God is not going to stop the disasters of our world any more than God is going to find you a parking place. That isn’t who God is. God is not a manipulator or a puppeteer or a distant white-bearded figure who is figuring out the perfect plan for our every waking moment. That is far too small a job for the God who is love, the God who will continue to reach into your heart and my heart and every other open heart that ever is, pouring in love so that we can pour that love out for the life of the world. The Mystery that is our God cannot be quantified or qualified or rationalized or explained - this really is GOD we are talking about.

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Life Giving Fear* in *Home by Another Way*

² Skinner, Matthew. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/luke-13-1-9-how-to-survive-the-sequester-syria-and-other-threatening-headlines_b_2767924

³ Lose, David. <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/02/lent-3-c-suffering-the-cross-and-the-promise-of-love/>

And so we come alongside our sisters and brothers who are suffering. We come without answers or explanations or platitudes or perfect words. Only love. Only love and the promise that while every tragic thing that happens is not God's will, God does promise to redeem everything that happens in the world. God turns suffering into compassion, natural disasters into neighborhoods coming together to care for each other, synagogue, mosque and church shootings into bold and prophetic voices who cry "NO MORE!" and people of all faiths coming together to recognize the Holy in us all. Our God turns death into life and that is the greatest redemption of all. Amen.