

Why Bad Things Happen to Good People

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The Unitarian Church in Summit

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Prayer:

"Prayer for Healing" by Vanessa R. Southern

In the holy quiet of this hour our hearts whisper,
to any that can hear, to all that has the power to heal.

For those who have suffered greatly this past week,
caught in the cross hairs of political upheaval in Haiti,
or the terrorist acts in Spain,
for all who have been struck low by disease, preventable or not,
that compromises body and plagues the spirit with uncertainty.
For all whose relationships of love have rough and eroded places
where pain seeps in and kindness gets bruised,
and for any who think they suffer alone.

Though we cannot free this world of pain,
may we reach out where we can to ease it.
Though we cannot understand how or why it happens,
may we not burden those who suffer
with empty justifications or false hopes.
But let us agree to walk with those who suffer,
work to end that pain and injustice
and disease that is curable with human effort and care.
And may we find such succor for ourselves when the times come,
as inevitably they will,
that we too are laid low by the tragedies and setbacks of this life.

Let us take a moment of quiet to call to our thoughts and prayers
those we know who are in need.
May our love and care for them be palpable,
and may they be healed by whatever force of love and life
moves through this world.
Amen.

Introduction to the Readings:

These readings reflect flip sides of the same theology: a belief that the evil are punished and the good are rewarded by a God who makes all things just. In the first reading, Job, seeing that the evil thrive while he himself suffers, calls out to God to explain this. In the second, Cheryl Wheeler, reflecting on days of domestic bliss, wonders what she has done in this life or another to deserve such joy.

Reading:

Job 21

Then Job answered:

"Listen carefully to my words,
and let this be your consolation.
Bear with me, and I will speak,
and after I have spoken, mock on.
As for me, is my complaint against man?
Why should I be impatient?
Look at me, and be appalled,
and lay your hand upon your mouth.
When I think of it I am dismayed,
and shuddering seizes my flesh.
Why do the wicked live,
reach old age, and grow mighty in power?
Their children are established in their presence,
and their offspring before their eyes.
Their houses are safe from fear,
and no rod of God is upon them.
Their bull breeds without fail;
their cow calves, and does not cast her calf.
They send forth their little ones like a flock,
and their children dance.
They sing to the tambourine and the lyre,
and rejoice to the sound of the pipe.
They spend their days in prosperity,
and in peace they go down to Sheol.
They say to God, 'Depart from us!
We do not desire the knowledge of thy ways.
What is the Almighty, that we should serve him?
And what profit do we get if we pray to him?'
Behold, is not their prosperity in their hand?
The counsel of the wicked is far from me.

"How often is it that the lamp of the wicked is put out?
That their calamity comes upon them?
That God distributes pains in his anger?
That they are like straw before the wind,

and like chaff that the storm carries away?
You say, 'God stores up their iniquity for their sons.'
Let him recompense it to themselves, that they may know it.
Let their own eyes see their destruction,
and let them drink of the wrath of the Almighty.
For what do they care for their houses after them,
when the number of their months is cut off?
Will any teach God knowledge,
seeing that he judges those that are on high?
One dies in full prosperity,
being wholly at ease and secure;
his body full of fat
and the marrow of his bones moist.
Another dies in bitterness of soul,
never having tasted of good.
They lie down alike in the dust,
and the worms cover them.

"Behold, I know your thoughts,
and your schemes to wrong me.
For you say, 'Where is the house of the prince?
Where is the tent in which the wicked dwelt?'
Have you not asked those who travel the roads,
and do you not accept their testimony
that the wicked man is spared in the day of calamity,
that he is rescued in the day of wrath?
Who declares his way to his face,
and who requites him for what he has done?
When he is borne to the grave,
watch is kept over his tomb.
The clods of the valley are sweet to him;
all men follow after him,
and those who go before him are innumerable.
How then will you comfort me with empty nothings?
There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood."

Musical Reading:

"Gandhi/Buddha" by Cheryl Wheeler

Feel this wind blow, scatters all these leaves like paper rain.
Feel these days roll back into our winter lives again.
The tangle at the garden fence is brown and dry.
You call me out and point to your November sky.

I must've been Gandhi or Buddha or someone like that.
I must've saved lives by the hundreds everywhere I went.
I must've brought rest to the restless, fed the hungry too.
I must've done something great to get to have you.

And when the cold comes and you are by your fire and fast asleep,
I'll turn a light on, to watch the snow outside fall soft and deep.
And when the winter morning shines all white and blue,
We'll watch the dogs run through the field like children do.

I must've been Gandhi or Buddha or someone like that.
I must've saved lives by the hundreds everywhere I went.
I must've brought rest to the restless, fed the hungry too.
I must've done something great to get to have you.

Well I suppose stranger things have come to pass.
Many's the forest I can't see.
I was so down and lost and fading fast.
How did you find your way to me?

I must've been Gandhi or Buddha or someone like that.
I must've saved lives by the hundreds everywhere I went.
I must've brought rest to the restless, fed the hungry too.
I must've done something great to get to have you.

Sermon:

There are lots of words that get thrown around in the study of religion -- things with which you are supposed to grapple if you are to have a fully explored faith. There's soteriology, epistemology and theodicy. Theodicy is the work of explaining the origins and purposes of evil. Just so you know, evil, as traditionally understood by religious scholars and theologians, isn't just diabolical cruelty but death, disease or tragedy. At some point in your own faith journey or the study of any religion, you have to grapple with the question of evil, and it can be one of the hardest challenges to a faith to answer that question. Where it gets hardest is in the circumstances when horribly bad things happen to perfectly wonderful people. This is when you see how your faith stands up.

I faced the challenge of theodicy early in my ministry, when I was training to be a chaplain at a local hospital during the first year of my seminary studies. One day I was asked to visit a young man in the surgery ward who was no stranger to the hospital. He'd been there more times than anyone could count. The story I was told about him was that years before, while driving with his fiancée, his truck had been hit from the side while he was driving through an intersection. Due to a design flaw in his truck, the gas tank was fairly unprotected and close to the driver's door, so when the truck was hit from that side, the gas tank exploded. This man was burned over his entire body before passers-by could

put out the flames. His fiancée miraculously managed to escape with much less severe injuries.

The man survived, though there can be no doubt that the pain he suffered in recovery was immense. As soon as he could take it, the surgeons began the work of reconstructing his body. Many surgeries created a face for him -- eyelids, ears, a nose. There were skin grafts to remove scar tissue so he could use his hands and bend his legs, and a host of other painstaking work to make his life livable again. Somewhere in the process of his recuperation, the story had it that his fiancée decided that this was more than she could handle and she broke off the engagement.

I never spoke to this man about his religious beliefs, or about whether he managed to maintain a faith in God or even an enduring faith in life and its goodness through all this. To be honest, I could tell from the moment I entered the room that this would not be a heart-to-heart talk about life and faith. I could tell that from the look in his eyes. Though this man's face was scarred and unable to be very expressive, his eyes told volumes. What they said was that this man was not going to open up to me. The distrust in his eyes made it clear that life had forced him to protect what little vulnerability he had left. So we kept our exchange simple.

In retrospect, I think it is better that this young man and I didn't have a more searching conversation that day. The fact is, it was early in my training for ministry, and had this young man asked me what my faith had to say to him and his circumstances and how it might offer him hope, I'm not sure what I would have said.

The natural urge that I and many of us would have had is to try to find meaning in what he had endured. We do that with ourselves all the time. And in retrospect, much of the ordinary suffering we endure can be tied to things like strengths we found in ourselves that we didn't know existed. Setbacks often force compassion and humanity upon us. Thwarted plans take us on twists and turns in life that oftentimes take us to unexpected but wonderful places. So we can and often do find meaning in suffering.

Religion isn't immune from this human desire to make meaning of suffering. In fact, many religions work overtime to justify the belief that all things happen for a purpose. Some will tell us suffering happens to teach us a lesson. Others say that suffering is a price paid for sins that we or previous generations of our family have committed. Others still will tell us that sometimes our suffering is visited upon us so that greater good might be brought into the world -- like the change in truck design that was the ultimate result of the accidents involving the young man and others like him.

But honestly, you couldn't look at this man's face, and particularly into his eyes, and think that any of those justifications held water. No lesson justified the suffering he went through. No sin committed in his young life deserved that kind of punishment. And no good came into the world by his incineration that lesser suffering couldn't also have brought about. Such theology could only offer comfort to those who were able to walk

away from the true magnitude of his suffering. Moreover, to offer such theology to him would have been a cruel gift -- bad theology dumped on top of horribly bad luck.

So what could I have said to this man, and what can we all say to others like him if we are asked to answer for why bad things happen to perfectly good people? Where in their circumstances is evidence of God or even of the inherent goodness of life in which many of us believe? Most important, what theological tools does our faith give us that allow us to respond with compassion and comfort to those in the throes of such pain?

Well, you cannot talk about theodicy or the whole question of why bad things happen to good people without referring at least once to the classic examination in the Book of Job. Job asks and finds an answer to this same question. I'm sure you recall the general outline of the story: Job, we are told, is the most righteous man in the world, but loses everything (his family, his health), and is offered bad theology from his friends that tries to justify his suffering. However, like a good Unitarian, Job refuses to accept their lame explanations. Instead, Job calls out to God himself to explain why he is being punished and why at the same time the evil seem to thrive. The response Job gets out of the whirlwind is this:

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements -- surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?"

And on it goes, a diatribe that reminds Job of God's power and genius and cows the man who dared challenge such a God. In the end, remembering his place in the order of things, Job apologizes and repents in dust and ashes. In the end, Job chooses to submit to the mystery of things and trust God's wisdom.

Mystery is certainly one explanation we could offer and accept for situations of great tragedy and seeming injustice. There is certainly a degree of unknowing that is part of the human condition, and sometimes our demand for answers can create its own suffering, so why not let it go? So perhaps sometimes we simply hang on to our faith in life and its inherent goodness or God's wisdom despite not understanding why things happened as they did. We might even call upon the story of Job to remind us of what people for centuries have known -- that sometimes bad things do happen to good people, and this is not a judgment on those people.

For my own part, this answer is not sufficient. I want something more than a simple surrender to mystery, and I find more solace in a theology that is different from Job's.

Job seemed to need to maintain a belief in a God who was all-powerful and all-good. I don't have that same need. The world that I see, one that is described best for me by

modern process theologians who were deeply influenced by science, is one that sees that we are all part of a universe that is subject to the laws of nature. It asserts that there is a God, or Force of Life, at the heart of creation that is not all-loving, not all-powerful. This God does not suspend natural laws to save lives, but uses its powers of persuasion to convince the actors in this world to use their free will and energies for good.

It feels more honest and accurate to me to talk about a Force of Life or a Divinity that doesn't control our destinies or hand out rewards or curses for good or bad behavior. This God does not stop accidents from happening or save the just from falling objects or intervene to prevent brutal car crashes. What this Force of Life does do is suffer with us when we suffer. He or She does help us find solace and strength when we need it. It does offer the power of renewal when we need such power to be made present to us and helps us reconstitute our lives.

Process theology also acknowledges what evolution itself does -- that this is an imperfect world, but that it is moving, we hope, toward perfection. However, rather than leave the perfection of this world to some unseen force, it asserts that the remaining bits of this journey toward perfection are in our hands. So, if there is to be justice in the world, we must make it so. If there is to be healing, we have to be agents of it. If there is to be an elimination of all suffering that is avoidable -- such as poverty, political oppression, untreated disease -- then we must be the agents of that elimination of suffering. Yes, God or the Force of Goodness at the heart of life is with us in this work, persuading us to it, inspiring us in it, but ultimately it happens only through our hands.

I met with the second great challenge of theodicy during my first year in Washington, D.C., as an associate minister, in one of my first months in that parish. By then, however, I had this new theological grounding at my fingertips.

Barely unpacked in D.C., I met a couple in the congregation expecting their second child. The baby was overdue, so the mother went to the hospital to be induced, and in a fluke development, her uterus collapsed. The baby was deprived of oxygen for a full 30 minutes until an emergency C-section could take place. A beautiful baby girl was born, pink and cherubic, with 10 toes and 10 fingers, but a brain that had all but been destroyed.

The child, Frances, lived for three months. Her parents took her home to nurse her there. She had to be fed with a feeding tube. She had to be constantly monitored for asphyxiation because she had no swallowing response. She responded, but to be honest, in subtle ways that only her most intimate caretakers could detect. Then, one day, as the doctors had predicted, she stopped breathing.

This mother and father found meaning in their daughter's brief life. They had a relationship with her, loved her. We buried her on a rainy day in a small grave, and had a memorial service with songs and readings about the life that was still very much in its bud, and with a letter from her mother that talked about how much this child had meant to her.

However, although we made meaning in the face of such senseless loss, there was a difference. This family and I never pretended there was a reason for such suffering. Instead we talked about a world in which accidents happen, and tragedy befalls us without reason or warning. And we also talked about how we can call upon and find goodness or God in the world that helps us through. Sometimes we find that force in the dark and quiet of the night when we lie awake crying. Sometimes it comes in the form of a friend who knows just how to be there for us. Mind you, that experience of love or comfort or Presence isn't why tragedy is sent to us, but it is what we find amid the rubble. Moreover, ultimately, it is that mysterious force of goodness or God that, if we find it, we discover can help us reconstitute our desire to go on and live and hope and love again.

I would like to think the evil suffer for their deeds. Maybe it is as simple as the fact that they are doomed to live in tainted relationships, or with a hollow sense of self, or mired in the despair about which Kierkegaard wrote. And I would like to think that the good are rewarded in a similar way -- perhaps by a love for life and for others that is returned in spades, or by the seeds of kindness and courage they sow that come back to them one way or another, or maybe just with the peace of a life well lived.

But there is also evidence that in other ways, the evil can prosper without apparent retribution, and the good can suffer for no apparent reason. So it seems we are better off casting away any remnants of a belief system that linger in our minds that tell us that something out there always makes sure justice is done. It doesn't. Cheryl Wheeler didn't find the love of her life because she, in this or any previous life, was Gandhi or Buddha. She was just incredibly lucky. And Job is wasting his breath railing against those who do evil but nonetheless seem to thrive. I don't think either of these realities speaks even a word about the will of the Divine.

Instead, in this life, there is luck and tragedy, and we will get our share of each. Moreover, it has come to be my belief that there is, at the heart of it all, a Force of Life and Love, what I call God, that works through all of life, suffering with us when tragedy befalls us, urging us to comfort others and work for justice, helping us to find the urge to believe in life and to love again.

It is this theology I think I would be willing to talk about with that young man I met years ago. It is this theology that makes sense, for me, of a world in which bad things happen to very good people, and that sense I have of a healing presence that is somehow there for us through it all.

Amen.