

WHERE WAS GOD LAST TUESDAY?

Luke 13:1-5

The Third Sunday after Epiphany

My oldest daughter and I were talking on the phone about the earthquake in Haiti. We talked about Haiti being the worst possible place for this kind of tragedy to take place. In our hemisphere no country is any more impoverished than this island nation. She had a question. “Why did God let it happen? Why didn’t He keep it from happening? He could have, couldn’t He?” I took a deep breath and started off with my answer to her question. My answer was kind of a blend of some geological facts and some theological truisms. When I finished, she said, “Sounds kinda lame to me. With all your theology training, I thought you would have done better.”

I could not really argue with her. What I said sounded kinda lame to me as I was saying it. A tragedy like the Tuesday afternoon earthquake brings to center stage questions that always seem to be lurking in the recesses of our minds. Why didn’t God get the drunk driver off the road before he went across the center line killing innocent people? Why did God not prevent the toddler from finding the loaded pistol in the closet? Why did God not keep Katrina from becoming such a powerful and deadly storm? What was God doing when the tsunami hit southeast Asia or the airliners hit the Twin Towers? Anyone who says they have never wondered why God did not step in and stop some of the horror that unfolds before us either does not believe in God, or lives oblivious to the hurts of a broken humanity.

Of course, it is no new issue. The Bible has its flood story, more earthquakes than can be counted, stormy seas, and crimes against humanity. And to complicate matters, God is not always portrayed as One who has clean hands. The text for the day tells us of a time when the folks of that day were struggling with some of our questions. They were trying to make some sense of the murder of the Galileans by Pilate. Thought to be insurrectionists, Pilate had them attacked and killed in the Temple which explains the reference to their blood being mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. When that happening was discussed, Jesus went on to speak of still another tragedy about which so many were talking. A tower near the pool of Siloam in Jerusalem collapsed killing eighteen people. The Galileans killed in the Temple could, perhaps, be explained by saying these men chose violence as way of trying to make changes so their deaths were more likely, more understandable, but those people near the pool of Siloam had done nothing. They just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Of course, Jesus used these two current events to remind folks not to think more highly of themselves than they ought. It would have been for Him an illustration of what He meant when He said,

*... (Your Father) makes His sun rise on the evil
and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous*

and on the unrighteous. (Mt. 5:45)

As we read the text, we hear Jesus making it clear that the Galileans killed in the Temple or the innocent bystanders killed when the tower collapsed were no different than anyone else. They were no worse, they were no better. He makes no attempt to explain it, or to protect God from being blamed. He just uses what happens to remind those who are listening that since life is a very fragile and uncertain thing, it is always a good thing to make sure that life is being lived in a right relationship with the Father in heaven.

So, one of the interesting things to note is that Jesus makes no attempt to help people with their questions. People were surely asking, “Why did God not protect the Galileans?” or “Why did God not at least hold the tower up until no one was standing near it?” Jesus simply chose not to respond to them. What He does do it declare that bad things do happen and that they are not necessarily initiated by humans who are both good and evil or God who is always good.

Actually, the lesson takes us beyond just declaring that these unspeakable tragedies are not necessarily initiated by God who is always good. In this passage Jesus is saying that God did not send these tragedies upon the Galileans or the residents of Jerusalem. These tragedies were not caused by God to punish sinners. Were such the case there would no end to such devastating acts because all of us sinners would need to be punished. Instead of looking toward God when such things happen, what Jesus is saying is that we should be looking toward ourselves. There is a warning here for us. The warning is not to avoid hurricane prone coastlines or the geological faults which cause earthquakes, but to understand that try as we might, none of us can protect ourselves or those we love from every danger, disease, traffic accident, crime, natural disaster, emotional disorder, or random violence. All of these things happen. God does not cause them, but they do happen.

When the horrible things happen and our lives are touched directly or indirectly by them, we are reminded that life is a very fragile thing and that anyone of us might find ourselves before our God without a moment’s notice. Earthquakes upset us because of the loss of human life and because of the suffering, but also because of the way we are caused to face the reality that the control we perceive ourselves having is only an illusion. We simply do not like living under the reality that any moment could be our last and that there is nothing we can do to change it.

What I said to my oldest the other night was lame. Maybe what I have tried to say from the Word of God is lame as well. If such is the case, it is not the fault of the Word of God, but the preacher who can only see dimly now what will be seen more clearly on the other side of this life. These tragedies such as the Haitian earthquake surely raise questions about God. They always will. But, the more important questions are the ones raised about us. The more important questions are the ones about how we are living our lives. Are we living as if tomorrow will always come, or are we living today as if this

might be all there is? Learning the answer to this question about ourselves is far more important than learning answers to the questions we hear being raised about God.

This sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Strickland at the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond Hill, Georgia on January 17, 2010. (Sunday after the earthquake in Haiti.)