

"Bad Things"
Grove Presbyterian Church
15 November, 2009

One that constantly plagues my older brother. Why do bad things happen to good people?

In our theology circles, this is a Question of Theodicy: the question of the justice of God. Given little girls with 35 epileptic seizures a day, given Fort Hood killings, given friends buried too young, too soon, after years of fighting cancer, is God just?

It is the ancient question. Ageless. Eternal. It is the question of fire and ice, terrible and wonderful all together. Dreadful, awful, and tremendous. It is the reason we have religion. And the reason we renounce religion.

An Emergency Department medical resident asked me the same question one evening as we were lacing up our boots for a soccer match: how do you answer someone who feels God is punishing them? Scratch us and we are superstitious. Druids, Wiccans, Horoscopes, Tarot cards, and believing in ghosts. For what is the occult but trying to manipulate the world to serve your personal ends and desires?

The flippant and facile answer is that there is no good answer. This is rather how God responds to a petulant and impetuous Job, much as a parent scolds a child: "you mind your business, and I'll mind mine." God's ways are hidden and incomprehensible. Ours is but a provisional grasp on this side of the impassable gulf, the impenetrable veil - like a water bug trying to imagine what it is like to be a dragonfly.

***...moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their
minds,
yet they cannot find out what God has done from the
beginning to the end.***

But it's also a bit of a cowardly dodge. Give me a hand-up please; do not shrug me off.

Equally blithe is to shrug it off on the devil.

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Listening to someone talk about their suffering always is best because there are few satisfactory answers anyway, especially if they don't really want answers --- just comfort -- and usually they won't hear answers anyway.

The best seminary lesson I ever learnt was "hold the other person's hand as tightly as they hold yours," which means to match them, mirror them as their needs, hurts, worries work themselves through what will be.

Psychologists and clergy types tend to navigate the troubled waters of reality with non-confrontational questions to help the person listen to himself or herself, drawing them out so they can begin to see where the anger or fear really is coming from and why. Remember: depression is anger turned inward. 9 times out of 10 they feel they are being punished for something they did or didn't do, which is why most folk really want absolution more than answers. They mistake nature's unfairness or even the consequences of human behavior for God's judgment. Make me clean. People want to be loved more than instructed.

Personal "I" statements serve well, instead of you trying to identify with the suffering person which you can't; their suffering is unique to them; it is not yours, neither can your belief in God be theirs, they have to own their own. So if the person is truly indicating that they will listen to a view or an explanation, I simply attest to what I believe, what I have experienced.

For example, I say that long ago -- after burying my first church-child-member who was 12 years old -- I gave up the vain attempt to get an answer for why things happen and now simply ask for help to cope, to get by today. I've given up asking 'why.' It is enough for me to ask 'how.' How to cope with today's troubles?

Or again, as a faith statement (as well as a way of refusing to fall into the nihilistic view that all this rubbish of life is chance, happenstance, the view that a Sovereign God is but a cheat and fraud, that life is bloody meaningless, purposeless, futile), I say how I believe that since God, God-ness, Ground of being, Holy Other, Holy One (however you wish to speak of the Absolute Sacred) is that which is all good, nothing bad can come from God who is all love and grace and mercy and hope. If that which is the eternal divineness is all perfect, all beauty, all loving, then that

which is evil cannot possibly come from God. Can darkness come from light?<sup>1</sup>

Still again, I could say how I believe that our human suffering, however wrought, may bring us closer to Christ's own suffering, we join him on the cross; thus his suffering becomes a promise of resurrection for you in the midst of your pain and suffering.

A sidebar: please note how all this so far talks about dealing with the consequence of suffering and evil. I avoid addressing evil's cause.

Last, I may end with the harsher word that nudges toward the origin and cause of our suffering. For, frankly, pain and suffering, death and disease is the norm. Yes, it is sad when young people, by death of parent or death of friend, are forced to accept this -- as all but Peter Pan must in time -- for this is when kids lose their innocence. Would that we could protect them from growing up. Maybe.

Suffering is the norm for you and I. The price.

***The race does not always run to the swift...  
The rain falls equally upon the just and the unjust...  
There is a time for every matter under heaven...***

If this is the case, why would you expect anything different? Harder questions arise.

Why do you think you deserve any better because you are good?

Why should it be any different for those who are bad?

What makes you think you are good?

Who here could stand if we received our just desserts?

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<sup>1</sup> *There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory, most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal most just and terrible in his judgments; hating all sin; and who will by no means clear the guilty. – Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter II*

Who are you to choose between good and bad?

Good thing you're not God.

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Now we begin stepping into the deep. We descend into the impassable gulf. It cannot be leapt, only descended into. That is how we penetrate the veil. With bare feet, we tread on shards of broken glass of truth.

The bitterest truth is that there can be a why -- when you press the issue the way you must press a wound to staunch the bleeding. There is a reason for our troubles, and very often it stems from our decisions or the decisions of others. We are subject to the world of probabilities. If someone is killed in a car accident, does it really qualify as an accident? Is it an accident if someone ran the red light or fell asleep or was using their cell phone?

Disease can be trickier because the cause is more elusive. Sometimes it is attributable to bad habits or your genetic make-up instructing one small cell in your body to step back and stop fighting the cancer.

But then, getting to this point right away doesn't help. It can only drive them away until they are ready to grasp this for themselves and accept it.

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Where does evil come from? If God is good why is there suffering?

It can be summed up by the Suffering Map.

Our journey begins where the outer world in all its wrath and groaning brings itself to bear upon my inner world.

Nature is where suffering begins, the devil's playground, for we belong to nature and every second remain subject to all of nature's demands: entropy, the second law of thermodynamics, gravity.

Note: natural suffering is morally neutral. A tsunami drowning hundreds of children is evil, yes. Tragic, yes. But can we use the word 'bad' to describe it? Is it morally bad if a cat chokes and chews on a baby bunny?

The next cause for our suffering is morally laden, for it is what we call Moral and Historical evil. Killing 13 souls at Fort Hood is not tragic, it is criminal. Horrific. This evil of history, this suffering, is done either deliberately or out of ignorance.

It afflicts us in two ways.

First, suffering comes from the Choices of Others. Others chose to contaminate groundwater from industrial waste. Other chose to produce and market thalidomide, this wonder drug" for insomnia, coughs, morning sickness. It also turned fetuses into armless and legless babies.

Suffering caused by others. Then comes suffering caused by ourselves, by our choices. Stressing out over things I cannot control weakens the chambers of my heart or burns holes in my stomach. My alcoholism or use of heroin slowly murders me. My charging recklessly on my credit card in the illusion that things will make me happy burden me and mine. Irresponsible sex infects me with syphilis or brings into the world premature, puny infants.

Which explains why God never needs to punish - we do quite a splendid enough job of that ourselves. The old adage holds true: sin punishes sin.

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Given this world of suffering, how then shall we respond? What are the consequences caused by the evil of our days?

We come to the crossroad daily and must choose between two choices. We may decide to let nature and sin determine our path and define suffering's significance and consequence, letting nature's outer norm determine us and our identity. This is when we choose denial, fear, despair, apathy, anger, bitter blame, withdrawal and isolation, hatred, revenge.

Or we may be led up by angels unseen along the 13 steps of the Spiritual Path, where my inner world brings itself to bear on the outer world. We cannot change the reality of the world's suffering but it can transform its significance, consequence, and power.

Too often folks are encouraged (or they expect) to jump fantastically from brokenness instantly to hope. The Pollyanna leap. Wiser, we take incremental steps, small steps, each step inspiring the next. That is enough.

1. Rather than deny our suffering, we name it. We experience it for what it is: abandonment, brokenness, helplessness. It hurts. I'm scared. I'm in pain.
2. Which brings to us an awareness of our weakness and vulnerability.
3. Which leads us to confess our lack of control. The freeing moment.
4. Thoughts on disease drive you to look for the justice of God. We become alert to God's justice in contrast to nature's. The unfairness of the natural world awakens us to appreciate God's Eternal Goodness. We then acknowledge our need, because not as the world gives does God give to us. Help me, help me.
5. So we endure. We persevere. We win the first battle, the battle of the soul. We learn to pretend.
6. We show courage to others. Their admiration helps us become even braver.
7. Soon we repent our proud humanity, driven by a conviction that God is no "absentee landlord," for God is at work, against all odds, all reason. Our incredible God doesn't work outside of nature to redeem us but from within nature (which helps explain the incarnation of Christ). Love is active and true, from the inside out.
8. Allowing us to accept what must be accepted. No resignation this, but an affirmation.
9. An affirmation inspiring a daily reliance on grace. Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing...
10. Such faith creates meaning, even to where mortality can be viewed as a gift, even death a friend rather than a terror. My dying may not be friendly, but death can be. Even if I fear death and dying. Fear can be a good. More than the Great Leveler, death becomes the Great Motivator.

When I write my columns, I have 750 words to get it right. If unlimited? Verbal diarrhea, as with most blogs. Because I must restrict it to 750 words, my message must be as taut as a tightrope-walkers wire. Columns, sonnets, essays: better because they are limited. compacted.

Or imagine it as a soccer match. When you see the clock counting down, you've only so much time left to play your best. Either way, the buzzer is going to blow. 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1. You can sit on the bench or play your hardest and darndest. The buzzer blows regardless.

Yes, fear can immobilize you or invigorate you. I have heard many times persons with cancer say they became a better man because of it. Sure, they still didn't want it. Who would? But having it, it made them alert to the minutes left them.

Or consider the little girl lying now in at the Hospital her 14th coma, for a cure eludes all. How because of her illness, as her mother says through trickling tears, so many lives have been touched, so many lives enriched. Her illness has birthed love.

***We know that all things work together
for good for those who love God...***

Romans 8: 28

Ashes fill my mouth, and pins lodge in my throat for me to say that little Amber laying now in her 14th coma is a good. Her disease is no good. But our coursing faith creates fountains of meaning, creates a good, just as God creates a good from the very hell of Jesus' crucifixion. An amazing, stunning, gift from the womb-like fertility of the Spirit, the bold and defiant creativity of Holy Spirit. We become God-like, turning this reality, this world into an arena for the audacious and undefeated power of God to be made manifest.

11. Thus we have responsibility, a duty, to witness to Christ's faith in the midst of our affliction, to proclaim God's goodness even amidst our suffering. How will my children and my children's children see God and remember God in my sickness, in my adversity, in my disease, even in my dying?

This will give you occasion to testify...

12. Now trust. A trust earned. We refuse to let nature be in charge and dictate who and what we are.

13. When trust, there is hope. Yes, the suffering remains. We have not dismissed it, but we have altered it. Now even it is transformed, redeemed; for we by

efficacious Spirit have altered its power, purpose, and path.

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.*

Hebrews 11: 1