

How to Make Sense of Bad Things Happening to Good People

March 24, 2019

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Please read silently these texts:

Isaiah 55:

- [6] "Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;
[7] let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
[8] For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
[9] For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Luke 13:

- [1] There were some present at that very time who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.
[2] And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus?
[3] I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.
[4] Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem?
[5] I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."
[6] And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit on it and found none.
[7] And he said to the vinedresser, 'Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?'
[8] And he answered him, 'Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. [9] And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

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Grace be unto you, and peace, from God Our Father and Our Lord and Savior Jesus The Christ!

On a day off recently I watched a movie called "Monster". Charlize Theron won the Academy Award in 2003 for best actress in this movie for her astounding performance portraying the true life story of Aileen Wuornos, a Daytona Beach prostitute who became a serial killer. It is not a movie I would recommend. The only reason I watched it is because I have to conduct a wedding for someone connected to the movie. And at the wedding, if it comes up, I don't want to sound like an idiot. The movie is a deep dive into the dark side of life. The movie ends with the Monster's execution in Florida in 2002. One of the men she killed was not a John, but rather a compassionate Christian grandfather who saw her hitchhiking and stopped to offer a ride to where she could get lodging, food and a bath.

Why (can you tell?) sometimes do bad things happen to good people and good things sometimes happen to bad people?

When I went to get the movie, "Monster," at Best Buy, I saw that "The Passion of The Christ" is still out in Blue-ray. How many of you saw that movie when it first came out? This movie focuses on what, for Christians, is the darkest side of life ever revealed, the slaying of Our Lord. The movie offers only a glimmer of hope, and that only after your senses are mercilessly assaulted with scenes beyond the imagination.

Now, whether you have seen either of these movies or not, you have doubtlessly asked yourself at some point: Why do bad things sometimes happen to good people? And why do good things sometimes happen to bad people? Is there no justice?

Each of us knows a good person, a very good person perhaps, who gets cancer, suffers, and dies. Why did this have to happen? Did the person do something to cause it? Maybe they were sinning in secret, and the cancer was the punishment for it. In other words, some people believe that when something bad happens to a good person, it is God's punishment for some bad thing the person has done.

This is an age-old problem, and it is one Jesus speaks directly about in today's Gospel:

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[2] And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus?"

[3] I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.

Jesus makes it very plain: when bad things happen to people - even people who we might think deserve to have bad things happen to them - it is not because they have sinned. God just doesn't work that

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way.

But that leaves us with the question: Why do things like this happen? Why did all those people in New Zealand – about 50 of them – have to die such a horrendous death? And why did those teenagers at Parkland High School have to be gunned down like that? And why did that highly-educated Army Psychiatrist in Texas murder all his fellow soldiers? And why, for God’s sake, did those twenty first-graders have to be mowed down in Connecticut? And why did this loved one, that loved one – all those grave stones in all those cemeteries – why did they have to die – at childbirth, at age 14, at age 30, at age 43, at age 52 – with cancer, by car accident, by aneurysm, by heart attack. Why? Was it some sin they committed? Was it something they said? Was it something I did which I shouldn’t have? Was God trying to tell me something? Is God trying to tell us something?

No. Jesus tells us God doesn't work that way. And Isaiah told the faithful of old the same thing:

“... For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
[9] For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

So, then, where are we to find any hope? How are we to make any sense of why a five-year-old child dies of a brain tumor? A five-year-old, for Christ’s sake!

Listen to me. We hunt for a cause to explain the effect so we can find a way to stop it from happening. As the Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “What this tells us is that we are less interested in truth than consequences. What we crave, above all, is control over the chaos of our lives.”¹

The desire for control. It’s a human thing. We want rewards for people who do good things and punishments for people who do bad things. It's a normal human reaction. The only problem with it is, that ain't the way things work! And - deep down - we know it. There is no connection between the suffering and the sin.

Then, just as we breathe a sigh of relief, Jesus says, “... but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Why did Jesus have to say *that*? Those aren’t words of hope or comfort.

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way:

“While Jesus does not honor [his listeners'] illusion that they can protect themselves ... he does

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, 1999, Cowley Publications, p. 70.

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seem to honor the vulnerability that their fright has opened up in them. It is not a bad thing for them to feel the full fragility of their lives. It is not a bad thing for them to count their breaths in the dark, not if it makes them turn toward the light.”

“It is that turning he wants for them, which is why he tweaks their fear. Don’t worry about Pilate and all the other things that can come crashing down on your heads, he tells them. Terrible things happen, and you are not always to blame. But don’t let that stop you from doing what you are doing. That torn place your fear has opened up inside of you is a holy place. It may hurt you to stay there and it may hurt you to see, but it is not the kind of hurt that leads to death. It is the kind that leads to life.”²

Now, hold on to what we’ve just heard and look at the second part of today’s Gospel - the parable of the fig tree. For three years a man who owns a vineyard comes looking for fruit from one of his fig trees. It never bears any, and so he wants to cut it down. The gardener begs him to be allowed to dig around it and fertilize it and let it grown for one more year. Then, if it doesn’t bear fruit, he says, cut it down.

I think Luke places this parable where he does because it gives us what we need to hear the Good News in relation to the world’s injustices.

In Biblical times, fig trees that were barren for four years were cut down. The plea of the vinedresser (Jesus) for another year for the tree was unheard of. It is therefore an extraordinary plea for mercy. The emphasis of the parable is on the mercy of the vineyard owner (God).

Christ’s death and resurrection is the extra year of digging and fertilizing we are granted. God does not go around chopping down trees. God does not give anyone cancer or cause children to be run over by cars.

The point of the fig tree parable is that God is for us! It is God’s nature to give us many extra chances. God is easily persuaded to have mercy on us. God assumes we will bear fruit.

While that is happening, the only way we can cope with bad things happening to good people, Jesus says, is to repent. We are called to receive into our hearts the gift of faith. Faith that in Our Lord’s death and resurrection we and our world have the offer and assurance of salvation.

Let me close with a story. It was told to me many years ago by Pastor John Loberg, a member of my parish in Colorado. As I tell it I’m going to use unbelievable pictures. The ones in your souls’ imagination. A family is out for a drive on a Sunday afternoon. Suddenly the two children began to

² Ibid, pp. 71-72.

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beat their father in the back: "Daddy, daddy, stop the car! There's a kitten back there on the side of the road!" The father says, "So what?"

Finally the mother joins in and insists they turn around and get the kitten. So the father pulls over, turns around, and drives back.

He goes to pick up the kitten. The poor creature is just skin and bones, sore-eyed, and full of fleas; but when he reaches down to pick it up, with its last bit of energy the kitten bristles, baring tooth and claw. Ssssst! He picks it up by the loose skin at the neck and brings it back to the car.

When they get to the house the children give the kitten several baths and about a gallon of milk. Several weeks pass. One day the father feels something rub against his leg, looks down, and there is a clean, plump, healthy cat. He reaches to pet it. When the cat sees his hand, it does not bare its claws and hiss; instead it arches its back to receive a caress.

The cat wasn't the same creature as that frightened, hurt, hissing kitten on the side of the road. We know what made the difference.

2,000 years ago God reached out his hand to caress us. We bristled and bared tooth and claw. We hissed! Before it was over, his hand was mauled and mangled. But he continued to reach out.

Such is the Hand of Love, extended to you and me, for you and me, and our salvation.

This is the faith to help us when bad things happen to good people.

AMEN.

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