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Baltimore Washington Conference

SERMON: RESPONDING TO TRAGEDY

An "Occasional" Sermon, rather than Lectionary based

Last week our focus was forests, and I concluded the sermon by offering...

It seems to me, out of these Biblical and theological considerations, there are some things we ought to seek to become better at doing. Here are a few that come to mind for me:

a) Doing our part to avoid damaging and to restore as we can our environment. The best time to plant a tree was 40 years ago. The next best time is right now. Are we seeking God in our environment where we are placed?

b) Life giving relationships means advocating for national policies that protect our environment. This includes creation of green spaces, and setting aside protected areas, like Bears Ears for example, in Utah, and the Grand Canyon protection act.

c) Building Shalom means Advocating for economic policies that shift a greater portion of the benefit of capitalist enterprise to those who are currently the most burdened. This does not mean keeping coal mines and other petrochemical industries going to support their present employees. I have a cousin for whom the oil industry has provided a very good life. He and I disagree on the role oil should have in our national future. I think that what is needed is making sure that new economic opportunities are made available especially to those whose health has been harmed and lives have been shortened by work in those industries, and who do need livelihoods as we transition into a greener energy economy.

What would you add to this limited list? Make it a conversation.

This week our focus is the earth, soil, land. It seems to me the same basics remain pertinent - relevant. And it would be good to dive into the focus (Land) with some specific intentionality.

I have chosen instead to allow our liturgy to carry that focus for us today. I am doing so because of what I have experienced this week. I do not know if you need to hear what I am going to offer today, but I need to be speaking it... I need, perhaps, to discover what I really think by trying to put it into words and verbalize it.

What I have experienced is not even one tenth of what those involved have experienced. As a pastor I have been made aware of several difficult situations, several very painful circumstances, several human tragedies. And those involved feel the impact far more acutely than I will ever comprehend.

And I am convinced that I, and WE, need to be careful in how we respond verbally to these situations. We may have the best intentions; we may simply be repeating things we have heard said to us... but I believe there are some things we must stop saying.

So let me begin by verbalizing the things that have happened to the extent I have liberty to do so.

- a. I am aware of not one but two different families with young children for whom the fathers have died.
- b. I am aware of a situation where, near term, a pregnancy ended with the death of the baby, "in utero".
- c. I have been made aware of yet another cancer diagnosis.

And those are just the tip of the iceberg. As I said, I believe there are some things we must stop saying. We must stop saying them because in one way or another they make God the author of evil. Permit me to explain.

Sometimes when a tragedy happens, you might hear a well intentioned Christian say something like “everything happens for a reason.” I can agree with what the statement “says”, but not with what it implies.

And – I affirm – this statement is not what the scripture says.

What it says is that “every effect has a cause”. I am enough of a scientist still that I must accept this as true. Things do not happen without cause...

Well, mostly... quantum physics is learning that sub atomic particles may spring into existence in the middle of a vacuum. An effect without an apparent cause. We may not understand how or why, but the evidence seems to be there. And, it could further be argued that there IS a cause... fluctuations and interactions in the underlying “fields” of the universe, including the Higgs field. That is all interesting, and ... a rabbit trail.

When we find a house swept away by a flood, we know the cause was the flood, whether from unusual rains, or a broken dam, or a tsunami, etc. The house did not grow legs, walk to the water’s edge and go for a swim. Effects have causes.

Cancers have causes. We do not understand all of them.

But some causes we do understand... genetic mistakes, and toxic chemicals, and radiation, ... these are among the big causes. Cancers happen for a reason, to be sure. And, they are not the way the body is supposed to work.

But finding a reason does not mean there was a purpose. Please do not tell people “everything happens for a reason”, because what they will hear is that “there was some higher purpose behind it”.

Another rabbit trail would be a discussion of various types of causes suggested by Greek philosophers. What I have mentioned so far would be those generally referred to as “efficient cause” – (or agent, or in the terms above, the “reason” it happened) and “final cause” (the purpose behind what happens). That does not even touch on “the unmoved mover”, another philosophical idea and theological problem.

And sometimes that is what the well-intentioned Christian actually meant; eg “Maybe the tragedy happened to prevent something worse from happening.” That is a game of speculation which is not evidence based, and it is small comfort to the person reeling from the tragedy.

Don’t blame God for having a purpose in inflicting the tragedies we experience in life. Cancers happen, for a variety of “efficient causes”. (see note above) People die from a variety of efficient causes, but God needing another angel is not a purpose behind it.

I said that “everything happens for a reason” is not what scripture says. You may want to point to Romans 8:28 to support everything happening for a reason, but that is not what that verse says, in any of its most ancient forms.

One form of the verse found in ancient manuscripts can be translated “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

Another version of the verse found in ancient manuscripts is... “God makes all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

The other version is “in all things God works for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

In any of these cases, the clear Biblical meaning is that though bad things happen, God is not limited by them. God is able to bring good into our lives despite those circumstances. It most certainly is not that God caused the bad things to happen.

I believe that God is good... all the time.

All the time... God is good.

I believe that Good is achieved in this world through means that are holy, and just, and pure. You cannot achieve good through evil means. And God is not the author of evil... ever.

James affirms that God cannot be tempted by evil

and that God does not tempt anyone.

1 John affirms that God is light,

and in him there is no darkness at all.

1 Corinthians 14 affirms that God is not the author of confusion.

When bad things enter our lives there may be several sources, but God is not one of them.

a) The bad things that happen in our lives may be the natural consequences of our own choices. If one gets behind the wheel of a motor vehicle while under the influence, one cannot blame God for not taking care of them when they get into an accident and do not arrive at their intended destination.

b) The bad things that happen in our lives may be the natural consequence of someone done by others. Toxic chemical spills may be traced to their origin, and the illnesses that result properly are blamed on the polluter. War may provide the worst example of consequences inflicted by the actions of others.

c) Sometimes bad things just happen. Lightning strikes. Rocks fall from the sky (asteroids, meteors, and even rocks from “strombolian” volcanic eruptions). Tornado winds tear up homes, businesses, and lives. Flood from storms wash away entire communities (witness Libya this week). The earth moves, houses are ruined, and lives lost (witness Morocco this week). There are laws of nature at work here... these things are simply the way the universe works.

Our reading from Genesis today, both the short portion read during worship, and the longer passage (presented on the video) including the consequences of disobedience in Eden, place the blame for natural evil, creation groaning under a curse, on the disobedience of the first humans.

It is natural for us to seek causes. We may try to blame God. We may try to blame ourselves. Eventually, we find that blame game is neither credible, nor helpful. Not really. While some of our actions definitely do damage the soil and make things harder for us and for the future, does it help us to believe that our crab grass today, (and Canadian thistles, etc.) is all the fault of Adam for listening to his wife? Be careful how you answer that one!

Again, as someone who was raised believing in science as well as the Bible, I have needed to find ways to harmonize them. The ways that work for me may not work for you. I would be interested in how you do it.

What I cannot accept is that God caused our friend’s cancer.

I think it is likely the unfortunate result of environmental factors meeting a genetic weakness or predisposition.

What I cannot accept is that God would kill any baby in utero. Sometimes a fetus is not viable and the mothers body will naturally miscarry. That is not what happened here. Neither can I blame the mother. Sometimes accidents just happen, and it is tragic. And it does not mean that God did it. Nor does it mean that God doesn’t care.

What I cannot accept is that God took these two daddies out of this world... for any reason. At present, we have no report on how or why the fathers have died. And when the reports come they may be inconclusive. But these deaths are not God’s fault, & may also not be the fault of the person who died.

But even if it were somehow the fault of the deceased, does it help the child or mother who was left behind to hear this blaming? Mom, child, and family still are left with asking “where was God”!

Our Thursday group is wrestling with some of the stuff of “unblaming God”. Maybe we need to unlearn some of our biblical interpretations. Maybe we need to work on creating better theologies; better in terms of being internally coherent, and in terms of honoring the God about whom we are trying to speak.

So, how DO we respond to the tragedy when it happens?

1. Remember that grief is normal and necessary. Allow it.
2. Remember that speaking is much less important than really listening, and that what they need most is someone who in some measure can feel their pain.
3. Do a lot of praying, even while you are listening, and do not be afraid of crying with them, or of saying “I don’t know”, when the unanswerable questions are asked.
4. Don’t be afraid to offer to pray with them right then and there. Don’t just promise to pray after you have left them. Pray with them on the spot.
5. Assure them that God is good all the time, and loving, and present to lend strength in the midst of this need, and in all their coming days.