

Am I Supposed to Learn Something
Job 23
Romans 8:15-30
January 17, 2010

On Tuesday the country of Haiti was devastated by a 7.0-magnitude earthquake – the strongest earthquake to hit the poor Caribbean nation in more than 200 years. Over half of the nation’s 9 million people have been affected by the destructive power of the quake. On Friday, Reuters news service was estimating the Haitian earthquake death toll between 50,000 – 100,000 people.

In our own North Carolina Annual Conference we are grieving our friend and colleague, Rev. Sam Dixon (Director of UMCOR). Sam was in Haiti on UMCOR business when the quake hit. He was found by a French rescue team underneath the rubble of his hotel 55 hours after it collapsed. Sam died shortly after.

Probably a year doesn’t go by that we don’t hear of some tragedy in the world. Perhaps it’s a tornado or tsunami. Maybe it’s a story of a parent who kills their own child. Sometimes tragedies happen closer to home as we come to know that a friend or family member has been diagnosed with cancer.

Why do bad things seem to happen to innocent, or even good, people? I know of a man who was by all accounts a godly person. He and his wife had 10 kids. He had almost 12,000 head of livestock on his farm –he was, in fact, the richest man in the area.

Then it hit. Within probably a half an hour this man received news that all of his livestock had been stolen or destroyed, and all of his children had been killed when a house they were in collapsed on them. As if that wasn’t bad enough, his own body was stricken with an illness.

If God is such a good God, then why did all this happen? Why has this godly man’s life been destroyed, why do little children suffer at the hands of their own parents, and why are the people of one of the poorest countries in the world suffering so much because of a catastrophic earthquake.

Why?

I want to offer this morning that mankind has turned suffering into an evil. Why have we deemed that none of humanity should suffer. The truth is suffering is not the ill, it is a symptom of the illness – the fallenness of creation.

Rom 8:19-22

For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

All of creation is fallen, so there is death and disease. Disease does not discern who it strikes – it is no respecter of persons. The ungodly and the godly are equal candidates. It is futile to ask why one person is stricken and another is not. I am reading a book about Mother Teresa right now. As far as I can tell she never asked why God allowed the people to whom she ministered to be so poor and diseased.

The Even the free will of humanity is warped. We make choices that are fallen in nature and then their natural consequences follow.

In the case of the Haitian tragedy and others like it – they are in the category of natural law. God created the world with weather, and declared it good. There is nothing inherently evil about two tectonic plates shifting. We only perceive it as evil when such an event results in human suffering. But it is suffering nonetheless!

So, again, why does a good God allow suffering?!

First, we must remember that God knows what we experience when we suffer. God Himself is involved in the suffering of man, for out of His love He gave His own Son to die for us, and allowed him to suffer, too. Jesus was wholly innocent, untainted by sin of any kind, yet he voluntarily laid down his life, suffering injustice and cruelty for the sake of you and me.

If, then, God suffered as He gave His Son, and if, in obedience to the Father, Christ suffered even to death, the whole problem of man's suffering is raised to a new level. Without faith in God, suffering is an evil to be endured. With faith, and the example of the Son of God, suffering may purify and ennoble, and be a means by which God brings the sufferer nearer to Himself. At the beginning of the message I talked about a man who lost his wealth, his family and his health. You may have already guessed, he is the biblical character Job.

As Job experienced the pain and suffering that came upon him, he reacted as many of us would. He became angry and judgmental toward God. But in the end, he realized that God's understanding was higher than his – he accepted that he was indeed part of God's creation, not God's equal who was entitled to answers.

I want to give you a word of hope today. In the face of all that you witness and experience in the world that may fall into the category of evil, suffering or pain, be assured that:

God walks with those who experience such things. He even helps us to pray when we are troubled. *And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words.* (Rom 8:26-27)

Also, be assured that one day all of the imperfections of this world will be resolved. *The creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay.* (Rom 8:21-22)

We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us. (Rom 8:23-24)

Until that day comes, I believe that the command given to us by our Lord to love one another even as He loved us will stand us in good stead against the suffering of the world. In a recent television interview about Helen Little, a member of Horne Memorial UMC in Clayton who has been to Haiti about 47 times in 25 years, my friend Rev Allen Schwartz said, some people say the earthquake was an act of God. That's not true. The act of God is in the outpouring of supplies and money...it is in the people who are asking when they can go and help...it is in the prayers of Christians all over the world who hurt because others are hurting.

I agree...those are the acts of God. So what are we supposed to learn in the face of evil and suffering in the world? It is that God is present in the suffering of the world. And he calls us closer to himself through the sacramental and redemptive acts we perform in his name in the face of whatever suffering we encounter.