



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE WHYS BEHIND THE CRIES”

Scripture Lessons: Luke 13:1-5; selected verses from Lamentations 1, 2 & 3

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, January 31, 2010.

Every few years it seems we are brought face to face, perhaps as no other generation before us, with disasters of monstrous proportions which bring untold suffering and misery in their wake. Mudslides, avalanches, volcanic eruptions bury entire villages and their inhabitants. Tsunamis and floods and hurricanes wash away people and properties. Tornadoes and wild fires sweep away towns and communities claiming loved ones and livelihoods in the process. And, as was the case on January 12, a massive earthquake rocks the earth beneath Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, and in the process all but destroys a fragile nation and it's already suffering peoples. As we worship today the toll of those dead or missing continues to mount and some project that there may be some 200,000 fatalities. And there are even larger numbers of victims whose lives have been shattered.

The suffering, the misery, the weeping, the grief, the desperation of the Haitians is incalculable and beyond human description. Because of satellite communications and high definition television live images enter our homes with digital clarity on 24 hour news channels chronicling stories of death, depravity and, on occasion, exemplary dignity.

One of the most compelling images appeared in the newspaper a few days ago, showing a man kneeling before a huge cross standing in the rubble of what was formerly the Cathedral of Port-au-Prince. It was this image I had in mind when our neighborhood clergy met earlier this week to discuss our Lenten Luncheon Series. Looking for a theme for this year as we had last year, I suggested “Finding God amid the Rubble.” We decided to go with that theme since the rubble in our lives takes many different shapes.

Few if any of us get through life without having to deal with death, destruction, the loss of people and things that we deeply cherish. And even if we make personally escape these trials, we are conscious on a daily basis of the tribulations and suffering of others.

When we add to the natural disasters the devastation wrought by human hands and human decisions --- warfare, greed, terrorism, addiction, physical and mental abuse, desertion, murder, etc. etc. etc. --- who among us escapes suffering in some way, shape or form? Hearts are broken, lives are lost, dreams are shattered, hopes are crushed, and the suffering is real --- not imagined and the pain is palpable.

Not surprisingly, like the man kneeling in the rubble before the cross, people turn to God and among the first questions they ask is “Why? Why me? Why us? Why them? Why now ?

People with no God or no faith ask questions, sometimes accusingly, of believers --- where is your God now?” And even those of us who believe often ask the same question and with equal fervor. What then can we say, or perhaps even better, what should we say when we hear all of the whys behind the cries of human suffering and loss?

Let me begin by saying what we should never say. No defender or practitioner of the Christian faith should ever say in the midst of some horrendous tragedy “God did this to you.” Nor should we say that “This is God’s punishment for some sin in your past.” The truth of the matter is, as the scriptures remind us, “God makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain upon the just and the unjust.” (Matt 5:45)

And yet, some ministers, especially those who have celebrity status, seem to delight in attributing the suffering and catastrophes of life to God’s will or to God’s retribution. So Pat Robertson explains the Haitian quake as God’s wrath against a nation who formed a pact with the devil. Similarly, Jerry Falwell attributed the 9/11 devastation to New York’s toleration of gays and lesbians. Others have seen a connection between Hurricane Katrina and loose living in the “Big Easy”. These pronouncements remind us of Job’s friends who had easy answers to his suffering and could only conclude that he was suffering from sins unacknowledged or unconfessed. But they were dead wrong as the scriptures revealed.

In our passage from Luke this morning Jesus repudiates this kind of naïve, irresponsible and flawed logic. He rejects the notion, which must have been a common perception at the time among his listeners, that the 18 people killed by the fall of the tower in Salome are worse sinners than others living in Jerusalem at the time.

And so, if all one has to say in the face of suffering is that God did it, or especially that God did it as punishment for sin, then he would be well advised to remain silent and thus conceal his ignorance and his arrogance. God’s ways are not so glibly or so easily explained. The truth is that God’s ways are unfathomable and as Isaiah tells us God’s thoughts and purposes are often foreign, even counter to the thoughts and purposes of man. But while God’s ways may be inscrutable, remaining silent in the face of suffering is not our only option.

And so, while it may be tempting to say nothing in response to human suffering it would also be wrong to suggest that God is removed from the calamities about us or absent from those forces that result in suffering and heartache. And this is quite different from saying God intends the catastrophes or sends the suffering upon us. God may not be behind the calamities and the suffering but God is in them. Let me try to explain.

We live in the midst of an intricate system of laws and orders in the universe which God has fashioned. There are actions and reactions, causes and effects written into the very fabric of life. Often we are the beneficiaries of this orderly network and occasionally we are its victims. The same gravity that allows a fall from a ladder to inflict injury also makes possible an irrigation system that waters arid fields to produce food for the hungry. The freezing temperatures that kill harmful pests and make the fields more fertile can also ice the highways that lead to fatal accidents. These natural laws can be a curse or a blessing, given the circumstances. They can also be abused or employed responsibly by man.

And yes, I suppose God could suspend these natural laws or intervene to achieve particular ends, but ordinarily God works through and not around this intricate system of laws and orders. And to be quite candid, it cannot be denied that there are occasions when the suffering we experience is the result of our failure to recognize or respect the laws and orders God has established --- morally, physiologically, or materially. When buildings collapse, dams burst, levees don’t hold, and bridges give way, it may be due not to the will of God but rather to the failure of engineers and artisans to adequately assess structural tolerances. They may even have decided to favor profit over human safety.

So while we should avoid saying too much or too little when catastrophes occur and human misery results, and while we dare not glibly assign all tragedies to God or even suggest that God is wholly

removed from seemingly random events of life, there are things we can say with confidence that are helpful and encouraging.

To begin with, we can say with full assurance that God is with us in our suffering and that God understands our pain, our tears, even our sense of abandonment and despair. In his incarnate son God has come among us and stands with us. Jesus knew better than most of us what undeserved suffering was all about and how in our moment of deepest hurt God can seem far away. “My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?” he cried from the cross. The cross of Jesus, his passion and his death, assure us that God is with us and even that he suffers with us. As one of our hymns this morning would put it: “Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure, by the cross are sanctified.”

The book of Lamentations was written by an eye witness when the Kingdom of Judah and the city of Jerusalem were reduced to ruin and rubble, its people slain or carried away into exile in Babylon. In the Hebrew Bible Lamentations is called *Eka* which translates “How” “How God could you have allowed this tragedy to occur and where is your mercy and where are your covenant promises to your people? How can our suffering be eliminated and how can we recover or find hope for the future?”

Lamentations speaks to these questions in five lyrical poems which are a collection of the outpouring of God’s suffering people, who are kneeling amid the rubble of their own lives asking why and how.

The cries are plaintive and poignant. Listen and see if you can hear familiar cries in these ancient cries:

11 All her people groan
as they search for bread;
they barter their treasures for food
to keep themselves alive.
“Look, O Lord, and consider,
for I am despised.”

12 “Is it nothing too you, all you who
pass by?
Look around and see.
Is any suffering like my suffering
that was inflicted on me,
that the Lord brought on me
in the day of his fierce anger? (1:11-12)

(Some of you may recognize these words which John Stainer placed on the lips of Jesus as he hung upon the cross in his powerful passion cantata entitled “The Crucifixion”)

Or again from Chapter 2:

10 The elders of the Daughter of Zion
sit on the ground in silence;
they have sprinkled dust on their
heads
and put on sackcloth.
The young women of Jerusalem
have bowed their heads to the ground.

11 My eyes fail from weeping,
I am in torment within,
my heart is poured out on the
ground
because my people are destroyed,
because children and infants faint
in the streets of the city.

12 They say to their mothers,
“Where is bread and wine?”
as they faint like wounded men
in the streets of the city,
as their lives ebb away
in their mothers’ arms. (2:10-12)

Still again from Chapter 3:

16 he has broken my teeth with
gravel;
he has trampled me in the dust.
I have been deprived of peace;
I have forgotten what prosperity
is.

18 So I say, “my splendor is gone
and all that I had hoped from the
Lord.”

19 I remember my affliction and my
wandering,
the bitterness and the gall.

20 I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within
me. (3:16-20)

But now listen as the writer turns from despair to hope and finds even in the midst of destruction the mercy and goodness of the Lord:

21 Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:

22 Because of the Lord’s great love we
are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.

23 They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

24 I say to myself, “The Lord is my
portion;
therefore I will wait for him;

25 The Lord is good to those whose
hope is in him,
to the one who seeks him;

26 it is good to wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord. (3:21-26)

And then the writer, be it Jeremiah or some other eye witness of these events, a few verses later articulates the mercies and purposes of God. Now keep in mind here, that unlike natural catastrophes, the destruction and devastation of Jerusalem and its inhabitants was the result of the people's willful and sinful rebellion against God. Despite the warnings of the prophets they chose to rely upon themselves and their foreign oppressors. They had bowed before idols. Jeremiah and others warned them repeatedly and called them to repent and be spared the misery they would encounter if they continued on their same path, but they refused to do so. God took no delight in the suffering his people had brought upon themselves.

31 For men are not cast off
by the Lord forever.
32 Though he brings grief, he will show
compassion,
so great is his unfailing love.
33 For he does not willingly bring
affliction
or grief to the children of men.

34 To crush underfoot
all prisoners in the land,
35 to deny a man his rights
before the Most High,
36 to deprive a man of justice –
would not the Lord see such
things? (3:31-36)

Life's catastrophes, whether the result of laws and orders set in place by divine providence or whether the result of the failings, the foibles and follies of man, do not negate the goodness of God, nor do they call into question his justice or his compassion. Nor do these catastrophes prevent God from accomplishing his divine will, even using the suffering of his people to bring about redemption. As Paul would later write "In all things, God works together for good."

In the wake of life's calamities and sufferings there is a good piece of advice that we might all consider, whether the suffering we know results from inexplicable or obvious causes. Verses 40-41 of Lamentations 3 says: "Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven."

Whether we are the innocent victims or in some way the human purveyors of suffering and heartache, examining our own lives and turning to God for aid, for direction, for forgiveness when appropriate, is always in order.

Called the "Book of Weeping" Lamentations reminded God's suffering peoples that God wept with them and for them, that his faithfulness would never fail even though his people were faithless and that in turning to him they would find the courage and the faith and the hope to move beyond the rubble of their lives to the joys that God has in store for his people. That message we too can share even in the worst of life calamities & trials.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.