

Sermon January 2, 2005
Does The Darkness Really Not Overcome?

Let us pray.

More than 120,000 people have died in the tsunami disaster in South Asia that struck on Christmas day -- that's more than double the number that died in Viet Nam during more than a decade of war, more than twice the number that died at the battle of Gettysburg, 12 times the number who died in the invasion of Normandy and 120 times more than have died in Iraq. My first thought when I heard the initial reports of the staggering death toll was simply "my God". I suspect many of you had similar reactions and perhaps for some there was worry about family, friends or acquaintances living in that region. I suspect that for many of us the second thing we did was to say a silent prayer.

Some historians were asked on PBS last week to put this tragedy in perspective. After a very long pause one of the historians said simply it is a "tragedy of Biblical proportions." Whether it is premature to attempt to place this event in historical context, as I think it is, that answer does remind us that there are serious religious questions lurking below the surface as we think about this almost incomprehensible event. When I said to myself "my God," what was on my mind (but unstated) was how could this happen -- indeed how could God let this happen?

As you noticed I choose a smorgasbord of scriptural texts today, in my view they frame one of the issues that often arises when any of us face directly or indirectly suffering in our world such as that described in our newspaper headlines and graphically depicted in the nightly news shows this past week. The passage from the gospel according to Mark suggests what many of us accept that “all things are possible” for God. God is all powerful. The passage from first John succinctly states what can be found frequently in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament -- the proposition that most fundamentally and essentially God is Love. That what animates God’s actions towards creation is love. So for many of us when we think about God we are likely to start with a sense that God is all powerful and all loving.

But then the reality of suffering in our world slaps us in the face. Whether it be a friend, a family member, a fellow member of our faith community like our departed brother Brian Strawbridge, most of us have experienced someone struck down too early in life with a fatal illness or a life sapping disease or disability. And we have read about a senseless killing or of a ship and crew lost at sea. Having lived in the post World War II era, we also bear to some degree or another the mark of the Holocaust and more recent acts of genocide in places such as Bosnia and Rwanda. Elie Wiesel the Holocaust Survivor and a writer of conscience for his generation

has summed up the religious issue raised by such suffering when he wrote of the Holocaust:

He is almighty, isn't He? He could use His
might to save the victims but He doesn't!
So – on whose side is He? Could the killer
kill without his blessing—without His
Complicity?¹

David Hume, the Scottish philosopher has framed this religious conundrum that Wiesel broached this way:

Is [God] willing to prevent evil [and suffering]
but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he
able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.
Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?²

Theology has a big word to describe this question of God's co-existence with evil and suffering and that is the word "theodicy." It comes from two Greek words: one means God or deity and the other justice. Over the years many have proposed answers to this question. Plato wrote in the *Apology* "that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death"³ suggesting that we get only what we deserve. While St. Augustine in *The City of God*

¹ Elie Wiesel, *The Trial Of God*, quoted in Stephen Davis, ed, *Encountering Evil – Live Options in Theodicy* (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1981) p. 7

² David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, quoted in Davis, *Encountering Evil*, p. 3

³ Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo*, Trans. B. Jowett, (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1988) p. 52

suggested that justice might not be in the here and now but in the hereafter.⁴ I will confess it has been an issue that has haunted my theological musing for some time. It was brought home to me last summer, while taking a course on Clinical Pastoral Education. As part of that course, I spent several months working as a chaplain intern in a local area hospital. On occasion I visited with patients who had just received a fatal diagnosis or with families and friends who had just lost a loved one to illness or sudden inexplicable death. Sometimes directly stated but more often expressed in the body language and eyes of these people and their families was the question, why did this happen or perhaps how could God let this happen, or even that there just can't be a God after this. Whether stated as a question or a statement, as the "God person" present, I was often expected to have an answer or comforting response. The recent Tsunami tragedy both in its unfathomable human suffering and its initiation on the very day we celebrate Jesus' birth brought me back to this question and specifically what would I say to those suffering.

Let's start with a disclaimer. Perhaps uncharacteristic for a preacher let me state right upfront there is no right answer, indeed there isn't even an orthodox or majority answer to the theodicy question. How one ultimately approaches and responds to this

⁴ See discussion of Augustine's position in Ralph Potter, *War and Moral Discourse* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1969-70) pp. 73- 78

question depends greatly on where one starts. As John Hick, a contemporary theologian who has written on theodicy, rightly reminds us much depends on where one chooses to start.⁵ That is -- do we start with the reality of evil and suffering or with the reality of a God with certain attributes, for example as expressed in the biblical texts for today -- that is an all powerful and loving God. Reflective of the effects of one's starting point are the views of the so-called "protest theologians." Starting from the crushing reality of the suffering of genocide, especially the Holocaust, these thinkers, many of who are Jewish, give up on God's all loving characteristic, finding an all powerful God either at times hurtful or perhaps simply indifferent to humanity's plight. They do not give up on God altogether however, but instead "protest to God" seeking God's reengagement in our world. Other modern theologians give up God's omnipotence -- that is his complete power -- seeing a loving God who desires the best for creation but simply lacks the power to assure a good outcome. Thus, each of these approaches answers Hume's paradox by giving up an attribute of God, either God's pervasive love or power

I am persuaded by our texts that God is both all powerful and all loving and so I am challenged to try and maintain such a God in the face of suffering and evil. We should be clear the challenge is

⁵ Davis, ed., p. 66

to understand God's existence in the face of suffering not simply caused by moral evil, such as that of the Holocaust or the wiping out of an employee's pension benefits through the fraud of senior management, but also caused by natural evil -- that is for example the Indian Ocean tsunami last week, the Florida hurricanes of last summer or the eruption of some years ago of Mt St. Helens.

For me the answer to the paradox rests in the gift of freedom that has been given to creation by an all powerful God. As the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg has said "all creatures are an expression of the love of the creator who willed that his creation should be free and independent."⁶ Why the gift of freedom when freedom includes the risk that creation will make bad choices? Why would God run that risk? Couldn't God have created a world where there is no evil? The answer for me is yes. So again I return to the question why not do that? I have a friend who is an ice cream lover. Now I don't mean an ordinary ice cream lover. I mean he has never found a flavor he didn't like or a size of container that he could not finish in one sitting. Now when ever he arrives in a new city, he will find the best ice cream shop there and sample their wares. He has tasted by his admission some of the world's best ice cream. Yet he confessed the best ice cream he has ever tasted is the ice cream he helped to make with an old

⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994) p. 16

fashioned hand crank ice cream maker. In this some what silly confession, I think, rests the answer why we have the gift of freedom of choice in our lives. There is, indeed, something greater about the good done by each of us consciously and with an awareness of the enticing alternatives -- that only comes through choice. So a loving and all powerful God rightly could have given us freedom rather than simply program us to do good. The essence of faith is summed in the great commandment. It is about loving God and one's neighbor -- about communion with God and neighbor. The point is that this commandment reaches its highest and most complete fulfillment when those communions are freely entered into.

So should we understand that some how we are toughened morally by confronting suffering and that is what God desires? I reject those who see suffering as pedagogic. Nonsense! Suffering is not good. What is the point of the baby born with HIV; he or she did nothing to deserve that illness and it would be perverse to see it as a learning experience for anyone. Pannenberg said it well when he wrote:

the Creator accepts the risk of sin and evil
[and of suffering emanating there from] as a
condition of realizing the goal of free fellowship
of the creature with Himself. God did not will
wickedness and evil as such. ... Nevertheless

they are the accompanying phenomena.⁷

So it seems to me that God is the all loving, all powerful Creator who seeks the good for creation -- the acts of creation are not however God's. Genocide is humanity's ultimate inhumanity to itself; God does not desire this but weeps with us over it.

What of natural evil -- of those devastating hurricanes, volcanoes, earthquakes and of that recent tidal wave? Where is God in all this? In my view there are no easy answers here. Some have suggested that the existence of natural evil is a kind of crucible that tests us and makes us better. We gain courage in responding to such disasters and we learn to pull together in the aftermath of a disaster such as we now face in those nations fronting on to the Indian Ocean. Certainly, in some ways disasters bring out the best in many but it is hard to fathom a loving God devising a scheme to provide us with such opportunities. Rather I think the best we can understand is that the divinely created world is purposefully dynamic. Why because there is greater potential for growth and good through change. That the dynamics of our world inevitably follows certain embedded principles that are in some sense inherent. The speed of light can be no faster than a particular speed; one can not square a circle. But perhaps more importantly what happened off Indonesia is the product itself of the

⁷ Pannenberg, vol. 2, pp. 166-167

very processes -- that is plate tectonics -- that makes this -- our earthly home -- the dynamic and creative place that it is. The British philosopher, W.D. Ross, in talking about human conduct noted the following:

[i]t is obvious that any of the acts that we do has countless effects, directly or indirectly, on countless people, and the probability is that any, however right it be, will have adverse effects... on some innocent person.⁸

The same is true for natural phenomena. Indeed, a natural world that is dynamic is more creative and has greater potential for good, albeit with the inevitable increased possibility of adverse effects. Natural causes of disaster and suffering are not the result of malevolence but of the inevitable interplay and dynamism of those forces (working according to the embedded rules of creation) that also lead to the over-all goodness of creation. Natural disasters thus are not inconsistent with a loving and powerful God but are nonetheless tragic.

While I believe answering the theodicy question is important, there is an even more important aspect of any theologically and pastorally thoughtful response to the suffering. It is not sufficient to offer an explanation for the co-existence of a loving, powerful

⁸ W. D. Ross, *The Right And The Good*, ed. P. Stratton-Lake (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) p. 41

God and suffering in the world. There is more that must be said and it is found in today's passage from the gospel of John. This passage -- the famous prologue of John -- is about creation and about God's direct entry into creation through Jesus. It affirms the overall goodness of Creation and more importantly affirms for all of us, especially for those suffering, that we are never alone or abandoned by God. As Elie Wiesel asked for all of us confronted by suffering, why does God not intervene when the suffering is potentially so great? Some have responded by posing the question of how would God decide when to intervene? Which suffering is intolerable -- when in fact all of it is -- whether it be the 4 year old suffering from leukemia or the thousands killed or orphaned by last week's disaster. How can suffering be prioritized? Of course as the writer of John tells us and as we celebrated roughly a week ago -- God has intervened -- the word -- the son of God became flesh and lived and lives among us. And the message of -- indeed the essence of -- that intervention that started in Bethlehem is that "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." To aid us in exercising that freedom we have been given -- the light that illumines the way even in the darkest moments of tragedy and suffering and provides grace that gives us new beginnings. We who suffer are never in the dark. A woman having lost her husband in a natural disaster once wrote:

Through losing my dearest treasure I have become aware of how transient are all those things we treasure and depend on. Health and appearance can be ravaged by accident and disease; any of the children can fail to come home because of a careless driver; financial security can be wiped out by fire or inflation; even character and reputation can be lost by mistakes in judgment or pressure of circumstances. Even my faith may fail me. Only God is sure. Knowing God is certain makes it possible to enjoy what does remain without a frantic fear of losing it.⁹

So it seems to me that there is something much more important to say to those suffering beyond an answer to the theodicy question. It is that they do not walk in suffering alone. Have you ever been at a camp ground or perhaps in a cabin cold and unsure whether you can start a fire? Often it looks like there is no fire but just a bunch of ashes and a few charred pieces of wood at the camp site or in the fireplace. But a gentle breath on those ashes miraculously produces a red glow and before you know it a fire. The lesson of John's prologue is that in suffering none of us are abandoned -- God's love is with us. The light -- the glow of the Christ child born in Bethlehem -- is never out; it is not overcome by the darkness -- it's there with us. The breath that kindles that fire comes from many sources as the aid pouring into the

⁹ Letter quoted in Robert E. Luccock, *On Becoming The Best We Can Be* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1991) p. 184

devastated regions around the Indian Ocean show, but in the end it reflects God's abiding love for us which is in turn reflected in our love for each other when we exercise that God given freedom in ways that confirms that the light is not overcome by the darkness. The poet Edward Arlington Robinson gave voice to this when he wrote:

I cannot find my way: there is no star
In all the shrouded heavens anywhere;
And there is not a whisper in the air
Of any living voice but one so far
That I can hear it only as a bar
Of lost, imperial music, played when fair
And angel fingers wove, and unaware,
Dead leaves to garlands where no roses are.

No, there is not glimmer, nor a call,
For one that welcomes, welcomes when he fears
The black and awful chaos of the night;
For through it all – above—beyond it all –
I know the far-sent message of the years,
I feel the coming glory of the Light.¹⁰

The Gospel of John tells us and especially to those who suffer and linger in the darkness. You are not alone the light is with you and is not overcome by the darkness no matter how dark it seems.

That's what I plan to say. Amen

¹⁰ *Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, Macmillan, 1954) p. 4, quoted in *The Cornerstone* (Bethesda, Westmoreland Congregational Church, 1982) p. 12

