

McCabe United Methodist Church

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“Tragedy! Why-O-Why?”

Psalm 69:13-16

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Television, Internet, newspapers, and magazines have brought the nightmare of the earthquake in Haiti right smack into our lives. Graphic pictures show the horrors of that unimaginable tragedy, haunting and mind boggling images of destruction, despair, devastation, and death. Our response can't help but be - Why-O-why? Yes, there will be stories of heroism and other powerful stories that will come from this tragedy. But that does not take away the fact that most of the stories will not have happy endings. The reports tell us that there are over 200,000 deaths to this point, and the death toll is expected to continue to rise. In addition all the others who are injured or separated from loved ones who are unaccounted for or dead. It is anything but a good picture.

When tragedies like this strike, the question that seems to scream inside of us is, Why.”

-Why do horrible things happen?

-Why does God permit such things?

-Why do the innocent suffer?

I certainly would not presume to know the full answer to the problem of human suffering. It is without doubt one of life's great mysteries, and the wisest person in the world cannot answer it completely. And yet, as we try to make sense of tragedy, we feel that we ought to try. So, out of my struggle with this perplexing question, let me list some thoughts that I have found helpful.

First, Sometimes we suffer because of the misuse of free will.

Free will, the freedom we have to choose our own way, can be our greatest blessing or our greatest problem. And it has two dimensions. Sometimes we suffer because we choose badly, and sometimes we suffer because other people make bad choices.

When God made us, he did not make us as helpless puppets dangling from a string. God made us free. God gave us free will, that is the freedom to make choices, and the truth of the matter is that sometimes we make wrong choices, and we bring suffering on ourselves and on other people.

-A man decides that he can beat a train to a crossing, and he misses by only one second—but he misses.

-A teenager on a dare decides to try drugs and over time becomes a drug addict, and as a result he suffers, and his family and friends suffer, and our world suffers.

-A group of men become jealous and resentful toward a teacher from Nazareth; they determine that he is a threat to their way of life, so they decide to nail Jesus to a cross.

Free will—the freedom to choose; it's our highest privilege and our scariest responsibility.

A couple chose to go to Southeast Asia for a vacation at a beach resort. One day as they sat down together to think about where they wanted to go, they had a choice to make. The wife wanted to go to the mountains. The husband wanted to go to the beach. The wife relented, and

they went to the beach.

The couple had been there for awhile, and they had another choice to make: Should we continue to sunbathe, or should we go shopping? They chose to go shopping. They parked their rental car in front of a shop and went in.

Suddenly they heard a young girl running down the street as fast as she could. She was screaming at the top of her lungs. What was she saying? “Run! Run! The sea is coming! The sea is coming!”

The couple had another choice to make. Should we take her seriously, or should we keep on shopping? Fortunately for them, they chose to take her seriously. They ran to their car. Fortunately for them the car started right up on the first try, and because it did—and only because it did—they were able to outrun the wall of water that was washing frighteningly close behind them like a dramatic scene from an *Indiana Jones* movie—only this was real! (Story from James W. Moore, St. Luke’s UMC Houston, TX)

Choices, choices. How and what we choose is so important. And the honest truth is that much of the suffering in the world comes from bad choosing, from misuse of our free will, from bad choices we make and bad choices others make.

This is the first thought: we sometimes suffer because of free will. And yet, we wouldn’t want it any other way, would we? Yes, free will—the freedom to choose—is one of God’s greatest gifts to us, but it carries with it the element of risk and peril and danger and awesome responsibility.

The second thought, Sometimes we suffer because of what we do not yet know.

It has been said, “Ignorance is bliss,” but it is not bliss; ignorance is the perfect setup for disaster. Like this, we live in a world racked with growing pains. We don’t know everything yet, and what we don’t know can hurt us. The truth is that we are doing things right now in our world, to ourselves and to our earth, that are harmful to us, things that are causing suffering, and we don’t even know it. Let me share an example that touches my life because of the choice my father made.

Watch one of those movies from the 1940s, and what do you notice? Everybody’s smoking cigarettes! In the 1940s, most people didn’t know how dangerous and how harmful smoking is to your health, and the addiction they couldn’t overcome. Just think of it: the millions of people who have lost their lives—those who will lose their life yet—or suffer effects of their smoking, or those around them who didn’t smoke. Through not knowing, through lack of knowledge, through what we don’t know, through what we have not yet learned about living in this world.

Look at this. We are living today in the age of knowledge and communication, and, yet, what will future generations say about us and the things we didn’t know, or the things we are doing now unwittingly that bring suffering to ourselves and to others?

First, we sometimes suffer because of the misuse of free will; second, we sometimes suffer because of what we do not yet know.

Next, sometimes we suffer because we live in a world that has dependable natural laws.

It was Jesus who said that the rain falls on the just and on the unjust. Which is to say, the natural laws of the universe are dependable and unbending. They operate the same for all

people, all day, everyday. They are no respecters for persons.

Look at the law of gravity. If Oprah Winfrey, Conan and I climbed to the top of the Capital building this afternoon and jumped off, goodness or morality would not be a factor. The fact that they have done more good things than I have, the fact that they are more valuable to the world than I am, would not enter into or affect the outcome. All three of us would crash to the concrete below and be killed because we had violated this dependable, unbending law of gravity.

Cause and effect, bound together in a dependable, unbending succession. Thus, much of our suffering comes from our running head-on into the dependable laws of the universe.

A couple of weeks ago now, certain conditions came together to cause an earthquake in Haiti. Consequently, good, innocent people have and will suffer. But because these conditions and causes and effects are dependable, then someday, bright minds may very well figure it out and thus be able to warn those in harm's way. Allowing them to escape or helping keep them from building in places vulnerable to earthquakes.

These dependable natural laws are essential because they give order to creation. They make medicine possible. They make engineering possible. They make farming possible. They make learning and scientific advances possible. Yes, they make all human progress possible. BUT they also can bring suffering and heartache and damage when we run head-on into these dependable laws of the universe.

This is not just something that happens in our day. Jesus spoke of this in reference to the tower of Siloam when it fell, killing eighteen people. They asked Jesus, "Why?" Whose fault was it? Who is to blame? Jesus, in effect, said, "It's nobody's fault. These people just happened to be standing in the wrong place when the tower fell."^(Lk13:4-5)

In a sense, that's what happens to us. Sometimes we suffer because we happen to be standing in the wrong place when the law of the universe "falls on us." Unfortunately, it has to be that way. We have to have dependable laws or we couldn't live.

Consider the alternative: If the laws of nature suddenly or randomly were repealed:

- This pulpit might fly up to the ceiling.(Don't start cheering!)
- You might fall down, unable to get up.
- You couldn't count on anything to be the same.

Despite the agony that our world's natural laws might bring upon us, we would dare not wish them away.

So, when bad things happen to us, let me suggest the bottom line is that we have three choices: (1) We can break down in self-pity; (2) we can break out with resentment; or (3) we can break through with trust in God, and that, of course, is the response of faith.

In the best-selling book, *When Gad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Kushner tells of his own personal grief experience in the loss of his young son Aaron to a rapid-aging disease. He felt a deep, aching sense of unfairness, and he wondered: "How could [God] do this to me?" Then came and even more haunting question: Why would God do this to Aaron? Why does this innocent, happy, outgoing little boy have to suffer so? As Rabbi Kushner lived through this, he struggled with his own faith, studied various responses to tragedy, and came to this significant theological breakthrough: "Maybe God does not cause our suffering." Maybe our suffering,

after all is NOT God's will for us.

Kushner like many other people grew up with the idea that we get what we deserve, that God blesses us when we are good and punishes us when we get out of line. Then came this experience with his son's undeserved illness, Then the discovery—he could not blame that on God. **God does not do cruel things to innocent children!** In all of this Kushner knew that God loved him and was suffering with him. Remembering the Psalms - it does not say, "My pain comes from the Lord" or "My tragedy comes from the Lord." Rather, the psalmist said, "My HELP comes from the Lord." Therefore, the question for us to ask is, "God, see what's happening to me; can you help me?"

Rabbi Kushner chose not to break down in self-pity. He chose not to break out with resentment. But instead, he chose to break through with trust in God! Just as Moses, and Ruth, and Job, and Jesus, AND SO CAN WE. Because, nothing can separate us from God and God's love for us. In every circumstance of this life(with all of it's suffering or joy), and indeed—beyond this life. NOTHING:

- not tragedies,
- not earthquakes,
- not illness,
- not even death,

Nothing can separate us from God's great love in Christ Jesus our Lord!

And everyone said: "AMEN!"