

When I was a hospital chaplain, most of time what was called for is what I would call the ministry of presence – just showing up, listening with a compassionate heart. On some occasions however, I was called to challenge people's theology, or understanding of God. There were occasions when people would say, *"It's all my fault. God couldn't get my attention any other way, so he made my baby sick."* *"God is punishing me."* Now mind you, I'm a firm believer in consequences following certain behaviors, but there are times when I step in and say, *"I don't believe in a God like that. The God I know wouldn't do something like that."* Except that it messes with people's worldview of how they think God works. However miserable, some people prefer a punishing God. At the my best moments, I may be able to reconcile a loving God with sickness and catastrophe, but when you are in the midst of that catastrophe, then there has to be a reason. Some people are even willing to *be* the reason. It would make sense in some twisted way.

Turn on the television news in any given week and you will find a report on some catastrophic tragedy somewhere. Only the locations change. Tornadoes, floods, earthquakes and tsunamis--all of them wreaking havoc and altering lives. And unreported, are somehow less visible, dramatic tragedies, like children who die of hunger, malaria, or lack of clean water. In every death, families or loved ones grieved. And at some level, every one of those grieving people probably asked the same question: "Why?" It just doesn't seem fair. What had any of those folks done to deserve such tragic deaths? When there are big natural disasters such as earthquakes or hurricanes or tsunamis, people will attempt to know the will and mind of God. Do you remember what happened after the devastation of 9/11? Jerry Falwell & Pat Robertson came out to blame the terrorist attack on gays, feminists, abortions and the ACLU. And when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, Robertson suggested that God was angry over abortion. This is the same Pat Robertson who just recently blamed the earthquake and devastation of Haiti on its people. He said Haiti is "cursed" because its founders made a "pact with the devil" some 200 years ago. Apparently, he means that Haiti is cursed by God, and that curse resulted in this horrific disaster and tremendous loss of life. The people need, the preacher says, a "massive turning to God." Blame the victims is what this kind of thinking is. It is the same mentality that says women who get raped must have acted provocatively! It is a shocking line of argument but it feeds off the need to always explain what cannot usually be explained. Jesus challenges this theology. Jewish leaders taught that when disaster struck, it was a sign the people had sinned grievously against the Law. The assumption is that they must have done something wrong to deserve that. In Jesus day, the certainty principle stated that bad things happened to bad people and good people only received blessing upon blessing. So tragic accidents, and any other suffering had to have a cause that lay in the people who suffered in the event. They must have drawn it to themselves! There was no question about fairness. The assumption was that disease, suffering, and death bore a direct correlation with human sinfulness: the greater the sin, the more likely the misfortune. And to some degree, like it or not, we still think this way. Calamity strikes and we wonder what we did wrong. We hunt for some cause to explain the effect, in hopes that we can change what we are doing and so *stop* whatever has gone wrong. What had those people done to deserve their fate? Might those tragedies have been prevented?

If calamity strikes because of personal sin, it frees the establishment of any blame for the disaster or of assuming any responsibility. This passage challenges prevailing Jewish ideas about the connection between sin, death and suffering. The questioners ask about the Galileans who died. Were those people worse sinners than all other Galileans? In response, Jesus referred to another local incident

where 18 people were killed when a tower fell on them. The implication is that those who died deserved what they got. Jesus challenges, "*Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?*" They are no worse than anybody else. It was just a horrible thing that happened.

The Bible raises the question over and over of why bad things sometimes happen, from the book of Job to the gospels. And it never gives us an answer. If the scriptures don't answer this question, then why do we think we can?

But Jesus takes it another step. "Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." No, Jesus says, there is no connection between the suffering and the sin. Whew. But unless you repent... It is not a bad thing for them or for us to feel the full fragility of our lives. It is not a bad thing for them to count their breaths in the dark -- not if it makes them turn toward the light. It is that turning he wants for them, which is why he tweaks their fear.

Jesus does not really argue with the popular equation of sin and death. What he seems to want to emphasize is that death is always close and not necessary controllable or explicable. Death happens, he says. It can happen when you're praying. It can happen when you're standing under a wall. It can catch you by surprise. We are all alike, *all* vulnerable. And though you might *intend* to repent of sin at the end of your life, what's to say you'll have the time to do so? Jesus sounds less compassionate than we expect he would be. Jesus is not aiming to comfort the crowd; he wants to challenge them. *Jesus touches the panic they have inside of them about all the awful things that are happening around them. They are terrified by those things--for good reason. They have searched their hearts for any bait that might bring disaster sniffing their way. They have lain awake at night making lists of their mistakes. While Jesus does not honor their illusion that they can protect themselves in this way, he does seem to honor the vulnerability that their fright has opened up in them. It is not a bad thing for them to feel the full fragility of their lives. It is not a bad thing for them to count their breaths in the dark--not if it makes them turn toward the light. It is that turning he wants for them [-- that repentance --] which is why he tweaks their fear. Don't worry about Pilate and all the other things that can come crashing down on your heads, he tells them. Terrible things happen, and you are not always to blame. But don't let that stop you from doing what you are doing. That torn place your fear has opened up inside of you is a holy place. Look around while you are there. Pay attention to what you feel. It may hurt you to stay there and it may hurt you to see, but it is not the kind of hurt that leads to death. It is the kind that leads to life.* (Barbara Brown Taylor)

Jesus says to all, "*I tell you; but unless you repent.*" It is a call to change direction. It is a call to change the way people are thinking about disasters and accidents. I would paraphrase Jesus as saying, "*Change the way you are over-simplifying these complex matters. You can not blame the victims. They didn't deserve what happened. Re-orient/repent your thinking.* The rain falls, as Jesus teaches elsewhere, on the just and the unjust.

Isaiah reminds us, God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are God's ways our ways (55:8). During Lent we follow this One who reveals the face of God, who calls us to repentance--the dominant theme, perhaps, of the passage from Luke. Repentance--*metanoia*--is not about feeling a little bit bad and hoping to do a little bit better tomorrow. Repentance is a radical reorientation of the self; literally a "turning around" of the intellect or will--a change of heart, a change in direction.

The troubling part of this scripture is "*You will perish just as they did.*" This "dying" seems to be the consequence of not re-orienting their thinking. Signs in Grand Canyon National Park, "Stop! Drink water. You are thirsty, whether you realize it or not." We may have settled so comfortably into a routine and worldview that keep us busy and distracted that we've lost touch with our deepest selves, made in the image of God, and our spirits may be thirsty, starving, and homesick, even if we can't name those feelings on our own. Isaiah is doing the same thing. We may not be immediately aware of how we have wandered away from God. Isaiah is telling us that "God is trying to tell us something." God promises the things that we most yearn for, deep down in our hearts, the very basics of life: homecoming when we're lost or far away, a rich feast when we're hungry, flowing fresh water to satisfy our thirst, and a community of hope when we long for meaning in our lives – something greater than ourselves, in which we might be a blessing to the whole world. We are invited to the feast.