

After Easter: What's Next ~ Where?

This is the fourth in a series about keeping the Easter Buzz going. When we consider Easter—Resurrection—Hope—New Life—how can we not keep on being excited about Who God Is, and What God Does, and When we prepare our hearts and our lives by seeking that divine presence that “always makes all things new?”

Soon after WWII a Jewish rabbi was being interviewed on radio. The subject was the holocaust, and his interviewer was a well-known atheist—somewhat crude in his approach. At one point the interviewer asked, “Where was God when Hitler was gassing six million Jews?”

The rabbi, without taking a breath, replied, “God was there in the ovens with His people.”

There is among Western people, a conundrum about God. It's more prevalent among those who are not involved, or at best, marginally involved in any organized faith community. It's called a Theodicy, and it goes something like this: “If God is a loving God, how can God permit human suffering?”

It's not a new thing. It's as old as the story of Job in the Hebrew Scriptures; and most biblical scholarship recognizes Job as the oldest writing contained within the Judeo/Christian Scriptures—older even than the creation narratives.

In the story, one day God called a meeting of the heavenly council, and said, “Have you seen my servant, Job—what a good man he is?”

And Satan—who was one of God's angels who later fell from heaven—Satan replies, “Of course he's a good man! He's got everything: Wealth, trophy wife, kids who are good students and good athletes. I'll bet I can make him curse you to your face!”

So, they make a bet. Right there. You want to justify your trips to Oaklawn. Here it is, right in the Bible! God and Satan make a bet. And Satan sets out to take away Job's wealth, his property, his family and even his health.

And Job, covered with boils and destitute and in grief, sits in sack cloth and ashes, questioning it all. It's not fair! (If you're a parent you hear that a lot!) The story of Job is a challenge to the conventional wisdom of that day—a wisdom that is at the foundation of the Theodicy question. That wisdom says if you're good, you'll be rewarded; if you're bad, you'll be punished. Jesus was clear about that wisdom: “The rain falls upon the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:42).

But Job is whining about the injustice of it all: “I've been good; and look what happened to me! I'm innocent! Why am I suffering while that crook across town is living in the lap of luxury?”

Well, Job's friends come along, and they've got it all figured out. “Job, you

must have sinned somewhere along the line, whether you remember it or not." And the story unfolds as a kind of debate between Job, who maintains his innocence and the injustice of it all, and his friends who insist that he must have sinned inadvertently. "Just repent, and get it done, Job!" But Job is adamant: "I'm innocent."

A couple of lines from Job's friend, Elihu, are especially to the point:

⁹ ***"Because of the multitude of oppressions people cry out;
they call for help because of the arm of the mighty.***

¹⁰ ***But no one says, 'Where is God my Maker,
who gives songs in the night'***

When things are going wrong, people cry out, "Where is God?" But nobody asks, "Where is God?" when there are songs in the night.

Last week I shared Myrna's story about the financial crisis early in Barbara Jones' tenure as Regional minister. The bank balance was critically low; Barb was waiving her salary for the month, and at a staff meeting asked the rest of the staff to do what they could. Before the staff meeting was over, the mail arrived; and in the mail was a check for \$25K! But nobody asks, "Where is God?" when there are songs in the night.

Our nephew, Rick, and his wife, Lori, have a dog named Daisy. Daisy is a trained "Therapy Dog," and following the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida, Daisy was one of fourteen Therapy Dogs that kept the students and staff company. Their presence brought joy and comfort when the school community needed it most. Those fourteen dogs appear in this year's annual yearbook. But nobody asks, "Where is God?" when there are songs in the night.

A church group was participating in a "Habitat for Humanity" project, and on Monday three young children came from a nearby house and watched the workers. Somebody brought sandwich trays for lunch, and after they had eaten, one of the youth took the leftover sandwiches and gave them to the three children. They took the sandwiches and went into their house and, later that afternoon, returned to watch.

That was repeated every day during the week. On Friday morning, a woman showed up at the work site—a social worker from a state agency. She told this story: the parents of those three children were addicts and were basically staying high and letting the children fend for themselves. The court had stepped in and the children had been taken to foster care Thursday evening. She said those sandwiches were the only food those kids had to eat all week. But nobody asks, "Where is God?" when there are songs in the night.

So, what about this Theodicy? Why would a loving God permit suffering?

For me, the only reasonable explanation is not that God permits suffering, but rather that God created "free moral agency"—God has given humans free will—

and God is faithful and will not contradict God's creation. We make choices and we experience the consequences of our choices. And the consequences of some choices impact huge populations. Choices made by Adolf Hitler come to mind.

But, what about natural disasters: tornadoes and earthquakes? Well, most of us have some level of choice as to where you live. Jo Lynn's sister chooses not to live in the Midwest; for one reason, she fears tornadoes; so, she chooses to live in California. We're more afraid of earthquakes than of tornadoes; so we live here.

Well, what about cancer? Heart attacks? Strokes? Alzheimer's Disease? In many cases each of those is a life-style disease—the consequences of choice. But some are genetic; and some are the result of medical error.

Bottom line: all our explanations eventually run short. There simply are limits to our understanding. Are there choices we can make to prevent—or even to cure—cancer? There are those who have said—I don't know; I have no data, but there are those who have said that a cure already is available, but those who control it won't release it until a large enough profit is assured. If that's true, it certainly exceeds the limits of my understanding!

Our human capacity for comprehension grows constantly as we grasp more and more of the secrets of the universe. But our knowledge continues to be incomplete. We still see, with Paul, through a glass darkly (I Corinthians 13:12)—our vision is distorted and incomplete. We know in part; and we likely won't know everything until we are united completely with God. Meanwhile, we walk by faith and not by sight.

Still, we long to know: where is God in times of trouble. My answer—my answer—is God is in the same place as when God is giving us "songs in the night."

God does not exist to fill our requests—to meet our needs—to live up to our concept of what's "fair." Instead (and what is better), God created us—we exist—to share in God's own will—God's own desire for relationship. But God wants us to share God's life because we choose to do so. God invites us to choose to share God's life—where sparrow are fed, where lilies are dressed more splendidly than Solomon in all his glory.

When Jesus was sitting at the table with his disciples on the night he was betrayed, John's gospel reports that Jesus said,

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. (JOHN 14:1-3 NRSV)