

## How Could God Let That Happen?

God and Evil  
January 30, 2011  
Many scriptures....

How could God let that happen?

“That” being a blank that can be filled every day  
in a million conceivable, and inconceivable, ways,  
just by reading the news.

“That” meaning a suicide bombing in a Russian airport  
that killed 30 with flying bolts and ballbearings.

“That” meaning the stabbing death of a local high school student,  
whom even a guilty verdict can’t bring back.

“That” meaning the flooding that has swamped  
much of northeastern Australia,  
that has killed 35  
and left hundreds of thousands swamped in mud and mold.

How can God let that happen?

This is a difficult, difficult question.

Perhaps the most difficult we have tackled in this series.

Because this is the least hypothetical.

This is the one that strikes home.

How can God let suffering happen?

It would be easier (except for the time constraints of a sermon)  
to make this an academic survey on the question of theodicy  
(theodicy being seminary-speak for “God and Evil”).

I could have toured us lightly through the explanations of  
20 centuries of Christian thought  
and the eons of Judaic faith that underlie them.

I could present a survey of Biblical themes  
from the Psalms and their outcries for God to intervene,  
through the Prophetic raging that we bring it on ourselves,  
to Ecclesiastes’ cynical despair that anything makes any difference.

I could explore the New Testament elements  
that are inclined to see suffering as helpful, redemptive,  
even necessary for the building of the soul.

Together we could explore the history of the great Church Fathers’  
attempts to pin this topic to the mat.

How they attributed suffering to Satan trying to win control,  
making us collateral damage in the battle of angels and demons;

How they argued whether we are living in an *intentionally* inferior world,  
or whether our world is simply *broken*,  
and suffering is the echo of the fall wrought by Adam and Eve,

or even whether evil is simply an illusion we fall prey to.  
 I could lay out all the varieties of ways present day theologians explain evil,  
 and sort them into neat or sloppy boxes,  
 filed alphabetically or thematically on library shelves.

But that is not what is needed.  
 That can't un-burn a house to the ground.  
 It can't reverse a diagnosis.  
 It can't put your child back in your arms.  
 In those cases, my neat little survey course comes across  
 as a lecture on myelin sheathing of neurons  
 to one in a hospital bed,  
 or a literary analysis of David Copperfield  
 to those staying in a homeless shelter.

Thorough analysis is not usually what we are looking for.  
 When it is our grandkid who says,  
 "I'm not going to church anymore.  
 I can't believe in a God who would kill my friends in a car accident,"  
 we don't want to know what Augustine said.  
 We want to know what we can say.

And when we are the ones who've lost job, home and marriage,  
 and someone says to us,  
 "Everything happens for a reason,"  
 we don't want to be able to exegete the book of 1 Corinthians.  
 We want to know how to avoid screaming.

And when we are at the funeral visitation for one who died young,  
 and we overhear the person in front of us say,  
 "It was God's will, dear,"  
 we don't want to understand Calvinist doctrine.  
 We want to know how we can be more comforting to the grieving mother.

We've all been there, haven't we.  
 At the funeral, the particularly hard funeral.  
 Yes, they're all hard, even the one for the 103 year old woman  
 who was healthy and independent till the day she died  
 peacefully in her sleep  
 surrounded by her happy and successful offspring.  
 She'll be greatly missed.

But I'm talking about the really hard ones.  
 The one for the child who died of a genetic illness.  
 The one for the young father killed by a drunk driver.  
 The one for the drunk driver.

We've all been there,  
     up close and personal to someone's raw grief,  
     and wondered what we could say.

I've been there.

I've struggled too.

And there are things I would very definitely *not* say,  
     as well as things I could say with assurance  
     when faced with the question,  
     “How could God let this happen?”

I would not say, *“Well, this is how God made the world –  
     Alcohol impairs judgment. Objects in motion tend to stay in motion.  
     God can't intervene in the laws of nature.”*

I would not say that.

Because while I believe that God did make this world,  
     and set it all in motion,    with its laws of physics and biology,  
 I don't believe God then stepped back and put his hands in his pockets.  
 I believe God is very much involved in our world,  
     and cares too much about each one in it  
     to just gaze at the sealed snow globe of our world  
     and shrug.

God knows when each common sparrow falls,  
     and counts the hairs on our heads.

God is intimately aware of our suffering,  
     and will crawl right into the snow globe with us.

I would not say that God chooses to be hands-off.

But I would not say, *“It's God's will”* or *“This is part of God's plan,”*  
     or even, *“God wanted another angel in his choir.”*

I would not say that.

Yes, I do believe God is an active part of our world.

I do believe God has a plan and a hope and a goal for us,  
     and that the plan will ultimately be for all our good.

But I do not believe that God has any plan for our good  
     that would ever require for its fulfillment  
     the extremes of cruelty and violence  
     that people experience in this world.

I will not even suggest that a God of love  
     would have as part of his plan  
     the rape and murder of a child,  
     or the drawn out suffering of chronic pain.

I believe God is both too good, and too creative,  
     to need to resort to inflicting horror to achieve his ends.

I would not say that God caused the suffering now being felt,  
     not even believing that God has the best ends in mind.

Therefore I would not say, "*God is punishing you/this family/this nation*"  
 or, "*God is using this to turn you around,*"  
 or even, "*God is sending a message through this.*"

I would not say that.

I do believe that part of the way God has made this world  
 is to give us the ability to act, and to choose.

And I believe those choices have consequences. Painful ones.

But I do not believe that everything that happens in this world  
 fits into a neat moral cause and effect framework.

Not all suffering is a result of our own actions.

Often times the suffering is all out of proportion to our actions.

And far too often, the consequences of our actions  
 fall on people who have nothing to do with our wrong.

If the mother was abusive,  
 the child is not deserving of a lifetime of anxiety.

I do not believe God punishes the innocent for the crimes of the guilty.

I would not say that suffering is punishment,  
 and add guilt to an already unbearable load of pain.

For just that reason,

I would not say, "*God never gives you more than you can handle.*"

I couldn't say that.

I do believe that God is there to support us in our struggles,  
 giving us strength we would not have alone.

But I do not believe God is in the business of pushing us to the limit –

If God is in that business,  
 then it appears God misjudges the weight bearing capacity  
 of those who snap and act out in violence toward others,  
 or to themselves,  
 who lose hope on the way to losing everything else,  
 even their lives.

God has no need to prove how well we were made;

God designed us. God already knows.

I would not say what would only add to the load  
 by implying that the one suffering  
 is also failing to live up to God's expectations.

I would not say, "*It is your cross to bear,*" or  
 "*Suffering builds character.*"

I wouldn't say these things.

Because while I believe that God can use anything we give him,  
 even suffering, for our gain,

I do not believe that God *requires* suffering to shape us,  
 as if God's only tools are sharp ones.

And above all, I do not believe God would ever require

someone *else's* pain for *my* edification.  
 The idea that God might take the life of my loved one  
 so that I could become stronger, or closer to God,  
 makes God into someone I would not want to be close to.  
 And I would rather be weak  
 than be the cause for such pain.  
 I would not say this.

I would not say any of these things  
 at a funeral,  
 or a bedside,  
 or in line for the Personal Needs Closet,  
 or to someone who has sought me out with red eyes.

I might say *these* things though.  
 I might say that God knows and cares what has happened.  
 I might say that God wishes it had not, and aches and weeps with you.  
 Because I believe deeply in a loving God.

I might say that while God does not control the world  
 like puppets on a string,  
 God does possess a power stronger than any evil that befalls us.  
 Because I believe strongly in an Easter God,  
 with the power to take whatever is handed to him  
 and wring some blessing from it,  
 the power to force good even from evil,  
 the power to pull from weakness, strength,  
 from pain, healing,  
 from loss, generosity,  
 from death, new life.  
 I believe in resurrection. I might say that.

Or I might say nothing at all.  
 I might think to myself about Psalm 139, which asks God,  
*Where can I go from your spirit?  
 Or where can I flee from your presence?  
 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
 if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*  
 And I might remember God's reassurance from Isaiah 43,  
*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you...  
 when you walk through the fire...the flame shall not consume you...  
 Do not fear, for I am with you.*  
 And I might contemplate Jesus' invitation,  
*Come to me all who are weary and are heavy-laden  
 and I will give you rest.*  
 And I might inhale deeply of Paul's confident claim,

*I am convinced that neither death, nor life,  
nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come,  
nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation  
will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.*

I might think on these words.

But I might not speak at all.

I might just offer a hug, a held hand, and my full attention.

Because when it comes right down to it,

and it is your best man's wife who is dying of cancer,

when it is your job search that has outlasted your savings,

when it is your husband who has died after years of disability and pain,

when it is your father who has left the family

and turned you into a ping pong ball,

when it is your character that is being assassinated with false accusations,

when is it your body feeling the first round of chemo,

or gone beyond the help of any chemo,

when it is your baby that will never be born,

when it is your child facing a lifetime of mental illness....

When it is *you* who are suffering,

you probably don't want to talk about God,

though you may have plenty you want to say to God.

When it is *you* who are suffering

you don't really want a "how",

you want a "who".

When it is *you* who are suffering,

you don't want systematic theology.

You want someone to yell at,

someone to plead to,

someone to hold you through the worst of it,

and someone to help you rebuild on the other side.

So I might say nothing at all.

Not because I don't have an answer to the question,

"How could God let this happen?"

But because I believe oftentimes God answers best

with no words at all,

especially mine.