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I didn't know what to expect as I entered the hospital room. I seldom did. Serving as a chaplain in various hospital settings throughout my years of ministry, I often visited with people who faced difficult decisions and asked intense questions. I met with them at the most vulnerable times of life, and I never knew where the conversations would go as I entered each room.

"I don't know why God did this to me," the conversation began. "I've lived a good life. I know I'm not perfect. I've made some mistakes, but hasn't everyone? Why should I get such a disease? What did I do to deserve this?" the patient asked.

She then began to tell me more about her life: Her belief in God. Her faithful participation in church. Her wonderful family. The ups and downs of her health issues, culminating in her recent diagnosis. "Why is God punishing me?" she suddenly asked. "What did I do to deserve this? Why me?"

I reassured her that she didn't do anything wrong, that it wasn't her fault for her illness. I

reminded her that God loves her, that God would never send an illness to punish her, and that God would never abandon her.

But her question remained unanswered: "Why me?"

I imagine all of us have asked that question at one time or another. We try to do the best we can in life, but we all make mistakes here and there. Nothing that deserves the pains of life we experience. When a sudden tragedy enters our lives—an illness, a tragic accident, a force of nature, the betrayal of a loved one—we're left numb and confused. We wonder, "Why me, God?"

Through the years I've heard people blame God for so many disasters: In 2004 after the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, computer chat rooms contained online discussions about why the tsunami happened, with one recent author noting: "because it occurred the day after Christmas, some Christians surmised that the tsunami was retribution for the ungodly behaviors of Western tourists on holiday."

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The same author recalled Hurricane Katrina and referred to a televangelist who suggested that God's power was released due to the behavior of a certain group of people in the U.S.¹

The same question "Why me?" echoes throughout the Bible, with writers wondering why tragic events filled their lives. From the early pages of Deuteronomy, one theology suggested that if you obey God's voice by carefully keeping all the commandments, "all these blessings will come upon you" (28:1). If you don't obey God's voice, "these curses will come upon you and find you" (28:15). In other words, good people prosper; bad people suffer.

The Book of Job questioned this theology in the dramatic story of a man who lived a good life but lost everything. His friends tried to find blame, but in the end, God supported Job and ridiculed the ideas of his friends' understanding of God.

When Jews were carried away into exile by the Babylonians, the prophets wondered how such a

terrible tragedy could come upon them. Yes, they did not always follow God's ways, but nothing deserved such punishment.

Cracks began to form in the theology that God punishes people for their sins, and when Jesus encountered people wondering about the suffering in their lives, he shattered this notion of God sending punishment. In one instance in John's Gospel, the disciples encountered a man who had not been able to see since his birth. They asked, "Who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?" Jesus replied, "Neither he nor his parents" (John 9:1-3).

When bad things happen, when we fall into the pits of life we often wonder why such things happen, and many will offer their explanations, as was the case with

a man who decided to take a shortcut across a field. He fell into a deep pit. He tried his best to get out on his own strength, but he couldn't make it. He began to scream for help, crying out for someone to save him. A pop Psychologist passed

by and said, “I feel your pain. I empathize with what you are going through down in that pit.” A TV talk-show host came by and said, “When you get out—if you get out—you can come and be on my show.” A religious fanatic happened along and said, “Obviously, you have sinned a great sin. Surely you have, because only bad people fall into pits.”

A news reporter rushed out and asked, “Could I have an exclusive story on your experience in the pit?” A lawyer came out and wanted to represent the man in a lawsuit. An IRS agent came out to see if the man had paid his taxes on the pit. A neurotic came along and said, “You think your pit is bad; you should see mine!” An optimist said, “Things could be worse.” A pessimist said, “Things will get worse.”

But then another person came along. He saw the man’s dilemma, and his heart went out to him. He reached down with both hands, and, with strength and grace, he pulled the man up and out

of the pit. The man thanked his rescuer and then ran into town to tell everyone what had happened.

“How did you get out?” they asked him.

“A man reached down and pulled me out,” he said.

“Who was the man?”

“It was Jesus!”

“How do you know that?”

“I know it,” he said, “because he had nail-prints in his hands!”²

Throughout the stories in the Gospel, we hear how Jesus was present with people in the most difficult times of life. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to hear one of their stories come to life, as in today’s story about a group of people wondering about why a tower had fallen and killed innocent people. What did they do to deserve such tragedy? Why them?

I was in the crowd when Jesus spoke about some of our people killed by Pilate, innocent worshipers offering sacrifices at the temple according to our customs. While they were worshiping, Pilate had them killed, and their blood poured on the ground, mixing with the blood of their animal sacrifices. Pilate was a cruel leader, and whenever our people

would protest, he would kill some to show that he was in charge. It was his way of keeping us in line, though our resentment of him continued to grow. When Jesus spoke about this situation, I thought he would announce his plan to rebel against them, but he asked, "Do you think those killed were worst sinners than others?"

As I was pondering his question, he suddenly asked another question, one connected to my family. He spoke about the 18 people killed when the tower of Siloam fell, and again he asked, "Do you think they were guiltier of wrongdoing than others living in the city?"

How could Jesus suggest such a thing!? My family had gathered at the pool of Siloam, a place where we believed we could find healing when entering the waters. Those gathered there were not committing any sins when the tower fell. They did nothing to provoke such tragedy. I thought about speaking out against Jesus when he replied, "No, they did nothing to bring this upon themselves, but you must change your hearts and lives in order that you do not perish."

In my day many believed that if one lived a good life, then God would bless us. Those who lived an evil life would suffer. But many of us know this was not true, for we had seen good people suffer and evil people prosper. Jesus reminded us that good

people could suffer at the hands of terrible rulers and could even suffer the pains of natural consequences, but it wasn't our fault. He suggested, however, that we change our lives and live worthy lives. Even in the midst of tragedy, he encouraged us to live good lives.

And then he told a parable about a fig tree that had not produced any fruit for three years, so the owner wanted to cut it down. The gardener suggested waiting another year, giving it more time to produce fruit. I wonder if Jesus was telling us to have patience, to wait a little longer. Even though we may not see our lives bearing any fruit, God waits patiently for us. Sometimes I get so impatient, like when I wanted to know why that tower fell on my family. I wanted answers right NOW.

Have you ever felt that way, wanting something immediately? I think Jesus would remind us to wait patiently for answers to the difficult questions of life, and while we're waiting, to live our lives the best way we can. (Extinguish candle)

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As we continue our journey through Lent, when tragedy or struggles enter our lives, may we trust that God walks with us, helping us patiently wait, offering us hope along the journey.

of Public Life, 756. <https://books.google.com/books?id=ivnWCQAAQBAJ&pg=PA756&lpg#v=onepage&q&f=false>

¹ Evan Berry, "Nature" in Richard D. Hecht, Vincent F. Biondo, eds., *Religion & Everyday Life and Culture: Vol. 3, Religion in the Practice*

² Thanks to Fred Craddock in *Homiletics*, July-Sept. 1994, p. 13 as quoted in *Some Folks Feel the Rain: Other Just Get Wet* by James W. Moore, p. 69-70.