

Where is God When Bad Things Happen?

Isaiah 43:1-2

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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1...22...38...161....

This may seem like a random list of numbers. But for those who lived in Joplin, Missouri in May of 2011, these numbers hold painful truths.

1...1 mile - that was the width of the tornado at its widest as it chewed through everything in its path.

22...22 miles - that was the distance it stayed on the ground without retreating.

38...38 minutes - that was how long it took the tornado to grind up buildings and cars, trees and lives, until it finally lifted.

161...161 people - 161 people who died as a result.

And we could talk about other numbers that are much larger. The numbers of homes and schools, churches and businesses destroyed, not to mention so many more damaged. The number of dollars of damage done on one spring afternoon. The number of people who will never be the same.

Numbers tell part of the story. But they don't tell the whole story. Because it is also told in the narratives of people.

The woman whose husband protected her with his own body even though it ended his life.

The teenager, having just graduated from high school that afternoon, who was pulled from his father's car by the strength of the tornado and ended up in a nearby pond, dead.

The many, many people whose houses blew away around them while they walked away with no visible injuries to their bodies but significant scars on their hearts.

The pastor who walked through neighborhoods she used to know, looking for signs of hope at the homes of church members.

The elderly care center resident who was hard to locate because the nearest ICU that could take her was 70 miles away.

The memories, in the form of pictures and letters, wedding dresses and baby booties, trophies and trinkets, that were scattered well beyond the city limits.

The family, separated at the time of the tornado, walking through endless debris on now unmarked streets until finally they could hold each other in their arms.

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The way the sight of the damage just kept taking our breath away.

But what do we do with experiences, with numbers and narratives? How do we think about them? What language do we choose?

Because that is also where we tell the story...in our questions and our declarations about tragic events in our lives...in our questions and declarations about God.

The Jewish people were in exile. Isaiah tells us this story. Their world had been turned on its head, not by a natural disaster, but by the force of an enemy. Their temple had been destroyed, their city and their buildings - if not destroyed then taken for the use of their enemy. Those from their community with power and resources had been hauled off to another land, to live as exiles separated from their home. Those with less were allowed to stay, but staying meant living in a place they no longer recognized, under a power to whom they had no allegiance.

Amidst the debris of their lives, living in places they no longer knew, with everything out of their control, they wondered together, "Where is God?"

It is a question that has arisen as long as people have lived, as long as people have experienced tragedy, as long as people have known pain.

We ask it in the face of death and disease. We ask it in the face of weather and war. We ask it in the face of mishap and mistreatment. We ask it in the face of break ups and breakdowns.

Where is God? How do we think about God? How do we understand God? How do we talk about God?

The Sunday after Joplin's tornado, three congregations including the one I then served worshiped together. We worshiped at First Christian where my friend Fay was the pastor because neither South Joplin where I served or First Community where our friend Craig served were habitable. In that service, our friend, Craig Tally, said this, "So, when these difficult times, these times of lamentations, barge their way into our lives, elbowing up to front and center, how are we to think and talk about God?"

Craig then shared this story, "One evening this week, a good friend of many years showed up at my house. I was home in the yard, gathering the debris deposited by the tornado. He had not received any news of me and was worried. Upon hearing my story, two statements he made caused me to wince: 'Boy, God really blessed you,' and a little later, 'God really took care of you.'

Craig went on saying, "Really now, did God take care of me in that way, or was I one of the many fortunate? If I say that God spared me, would that not imply that God chose not to spare those who died a mile from me? Or if I were to say that God spared the First Christian Church, the First Baptist Church and St. Philip's Episcopal Church from damage, then would that not imply that God only partially protected South Joplin Christian Church and First Community Church from damage? What are the implications

of saying God spared and partially spared these, but did nothing to spare the total destruction of three other churches?

“My friend would never say these things about God, nor would he intend to imply them. He does not believe God acts in such a way. And yet the implications are there” ([Craig Tally: Talking of God in times of woe | Lifestyles | joplinglobe.com](#)).

And so the words we use matter. And too often we use words, intending to offer comfort, that end up creating pain. Too often we want explanations and final answers. Too often we want to be reassured that such difficulty will never come home to us. And so, too often we offer platitudes and easy answers without wondering about the implications.

But the scripture writers just might have something to teach us...they just might have some new words for us.

Isaiah writes, “But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you” (Isaiah 43:1-2a, NRSV).

The Psalmist writes, “...though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4, KJV).

Why do bad things happen? Sometimes we can explain situations based on human choice or scientific evidence. Yet even then, even in the face of understanding the theory behind an event, the questions keep being voiced when the bad thing is happening to us or to those we love.

Friends, even though we wish otherwise, there are really no easy answers to these questions.

But, the words we use matter. And that we have these conversations matters. And that we are talking about this on our *easy days* as well as our difficult ones matters.

Maybe the questions about why things happen won't ever find a satisfactory conclusion. But the scripture writers remind us that, while life can be remarkably difficult, we do not do it alone. Rather, in all things God is with us.

Now, I also have a confession to make. I will admit that, as a person who has lived a pretty charmed life, I often find myself wondering if my theology would hold up to my tragedy. If that were *my* house blown away...if that were *my* child who died too young...if that were *my* body wrecked by disease...if that were *my* life upended by war and exile...what would I say?

I do not know. I cannot claim to know with certainty.

So for now, I just keep saying and hearing, reminding myself and others, that all evidence I see is that God shows up for us no matter what...that God is with us in our joy and our pain...that God never leaves us.

While we may never really understand why there are so many bad things in our world, we are invited to pay attention, to notice where God is in the midst of them.

In Joplin, on May 22, 2011, where was God? God was in each home as people huddled together fearing for their lives. God was wrapped around those who lived and those who died.

In the hours and days that followed, where was God? God was in volunteers who showed up to dig for family photos or listen to stories or rebuild houses. God was in each dollar donated in the hope that some healing could come. God was in each meal and each bottle of water that was shared and in each home that was opened up to house a neighbor. God was there...in the midst of it all.

And God is here...with each one of us...always. Amen.