Spirituality
Scripture for Life
Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



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March 9, 2024
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Why does God let it happen? We might be talking about the death of a child, an unjust war, the loss of young people to gang life, or even a tornado or flood.

Some people blame God and then decide to give up on believing, concluding that God is either unkind or untrustworthy. Others are convinced that tragedy is a punishment, even if they can't name the offense. Still others defend God with justifying explanations like "We can't understand the divine ways," or "Somehow it's for the best."

Innocent suffering is one of the most serious problems religions have had to face over the eons and across the globe.

Today's first reading seems to say that Israel's exile in Babylon was a punishment for their adding "infidelity to infidelity." We also hear that the compassionate Lord sent messengers to the people, but that those messengers were mocked and their message ignored. As a result, the people were conquered, their city sacked and the survivors made slaves.

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 10, 2024

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23
Psalm 137
Ephesians 2:4-10
John 3:14-21

Did God do that?

In the Gospel, we listen in as Jesus and Nicodemus converse. When Jesus says that the Son of Man will be lifted up so that all who see him will have eternal life, the "lifting up," refers to the cross and resurrection as one event of divine self-revelation.

While that may seem obvious, we shouldn't think the same of the expression "eternal life." It's easy to assume that "eternal life" refers to immortality or heaven, but the New American Bible tells us that the term in John 3:15 stresses quality of life rather than duration."

Spanish Scripture scholar José Antonio Pagola tells us that the eternal life Jesus promises begins in this life and reaches its fullness in our definitive encounter with God. That means that eternal life is nothing less than union with God.

Writing to the Ephesians, Paul falls all over himself in trying to explain his sense of this communion. In this short selection, Paul mentions grace three times, insisting over and again that we are saved through grace, that is, through God's favor rather than any merit of our own.

This grace comes from God, whom Paul describes as rich in mercy, immeasurably giving and great in loving. These teachings about God's grace lead to his conclusion that we are God's own handiwork, created for union with Christ and to continue his work.

How do these ideas help us to reflect on the existence of a good God and a world in which unspeakable evil seems to run rampant?

Before we can respond, we need to examine the question itself. This question assumes that God intervenes directly in the events of history. Is that not one of our many assumptions that has more to do with our theories than with what Jesus revealed about his Father? Yes, Jesus taught that not a sparrow would fall without God's awareness, but that awareness does not prevent the fall of the sparrow.

Jesus told Nicodemus that God has no intention of punishing anyone, rather God looks to saving by drawing people into the communion of eternal life.

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Following that, Jesus' being "lifted up," had nothing to do with condemnation or compensation for human evil. Instead, it exposed God's loving solidarity with all who suffer and revealed that suffering and evil will never have the last word.

Paul ended his description of God and grace by saying that we are created in Christ Jesus to continue his good works. If God could do it all, there would be no need for our good works. But the Incarnation itself revealed that God works through human flesh, here now as the body of Christ throughout the world.

Our first reading tells us that God sends messengers "early and often." We have had the prophets, Jesus, the saints and all who strive to be the body of Christ in our world. What happens to them? Like Jesus, they are often mocked, and scoffed at — even assassinated. What does this teach us?

Jesus said that he was sent into the world so that all who believe could enjoy not a life free of suffering, but communion with God (eternal life). Jesus died in faithfulness to his vocation to embody God's love in the world. He was slain because the love of God threatened the powers such that they tried to eliminate him. In that most evil of circumstances, God did not stop it, but brought life out of death.

God created, not to control us, but to entice us toward communion. If we believe that God works through us, instead of asking "Why does God let it happen?," the prophetic question is, "How can people who believe in God and the power of love let it happen?"

Looking to Jesus, we know where the answer can lead.

Editor's note: This story has been updated with its correct headline.

A version of this story appeared in the **March 1-14, 2024** print issue under the headline: Why does God let it happen?.