

The Shared Ministry of St. Mark's and Holy Spirit

II Lent 28 February 2016

Governments seldom admit to their responsibilities in tragedies. And that's true of our government as well as governments around the world. In another country, not the United States, a group of radicals staged a kind of protest, but the government was ready for them. And in the end, a number of people were killed, all of them protesters, whom the government labeled as criminals.

In a not too different situation, there were calls for an explanation of a construction accident just outside the capital that took the lives of eighteen people. An aqueduct collapsed on the workman, and no one is sure who was at fault. Surely there will be an investigation as to the construction contracts and the materials used. Perhaps there was graft involved, but that doesn't change the facts. Eighteen people are dead, and someone is to blame.

Those two incidents could have been taken from last week's newspapers, but they weren't. They form the context for the gospel lesson we just heard and took place sometime near the year 29 or 30 A.D. Pilate, the Roman governor, in a characteristic act of ruthless repression, ordered the massacre of some malcontents who were stirring up the crowd, and their own blood was mingled with that of the animals there were sacrificing at the temple. But Jesus is asked, "Did those radicals deserve what happened to them?" Jesus compares their death to the victims of the construction accident, asking "*We're these victims any worse sinners than all the other people living in Jerusalem at that moment?*"

There was a time reflected in earlier portions of the Hebrew Bible, when any suffering was reckoned to be God's punishment for sin. Several of the prophets had tried to refute that, explaining that suffering doesn't come to us by the will of God. Jesus makes no further comment here other than challenging the connection between sin and misfortune, but he does seem to use the occasion to offer precautionary advice urging his listeners to get right with God while there is time. He uses the brief parable of the non-producing fig tree that is spared for one more year as a reminder of God's grace and mercy, but the parable also suggests a time limit. We are all accountable for what we do in life, and, like the fig tree, should use any opportunity for a new beginning. But how do we respond to apparently undeserved suffering?

All of us I imagine, from time to time, have wanted to ask God "why?" Why did this happen to me? Why do people we know and love have to endure so much? If God is such a loving creator, why is there needless illness and unwarranted pain in life? Those are not easily answered questions, and Jesus does not explain suffering beyond indicating that God is not its cause.

I once read a little book by Philip Yancey titled "Disappointment with God." The author was looking for someone whose life story was similar to the biblical character of Job, when he came upon a man whose wife had developed a painful cancer, which later spread to her lungs. The woman then committed suicide. Not long after the widower was in an automobile accident in which his daughter was severely injured and he lost an eye. The author asked the man to share his feelings of disappointment with God. He was silent for a time, and then he replied, "I haven't found any disappointment with God."

The author was incredulous, but the man went on, "I learned a long time ago and through my tragedies not to confuse God with life. Yes, I got an unfair series of events in my life, but I think God feels about these things the way I do. I think God is grieving and hurt, and maybe even angry." I learned a long time ago not to confuse God with life.

Last Sunday I quoted Garrison Keillor about life in Lake Wobegon, and I'm reminded of his facetious statement that "sometimes you have to look reality in the eye – and deny it." Well, Lent is a time when we are called to look at the reality of darkness and evil and pain and not deny them. Lent is the season when we prepare to come to grips with our Lord's willingness to face the darkness and the reality of evil and pain on our behalf. And our task is neither to try to really understand that darkness, nor to lay blame for all the evil and pain in this life, but to go through life with the confidence that we are not alone.

I once saw a cartoon that showed two characters discussing the question of why. And one says to the other, "Sometimes I'd like to ask God why he allows poverty, famine and injustice when he could do something about it." And the other replies, "What's stopping you?" To which he responds, "Because I'm afraid God might ask me the same question."

In the portion of today's epistle from Paul's letter to the Corinthian church, the Apostle reminds his readers of God's miraculous mercy and grace during the times of trial experienced by the Israelites in the Exodus. But he goes on to point out that people would be held accountable for their actions. Nevertheless, he says, "*No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and (he) will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing (he) will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.*"

I think that's true, but I'm sure that there are moments when that does not seem clear or obvious to us. Yet, I believe that ours is a God who cares for us, who comes to us, and who will be with us through any suffering or pain, no matter whether that suffering might be justified or not.

In today's reading from the Book of Exodus we heard of Moses' first encounter with God. A bush is caught up in flames, yet somehow it is not consumed. Moses is called by name and warned that this place, at this moment, is different; it is holy; it is to be taken seriously. And who is this God, who speaks, and knows people by name, and calls them to do God's will? It is the same God who called forth Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. But more than that, this is a God who sees and who is present. "*I have seen the affliction of my people...and have heard their cry... I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them.*"

Moses, when called to lead the people out of Egypt, replies "Not me, Lord," and says that people will not believe him as he does not even know God's name. Then God says, "*Tell them Yahweh sent you*" - Yahweh, which is variously translated as "*I am who I am,*" or "*I will be who I will be.*" The significance of the name is that ours is a God who will be there, who cares, a God who is involved, and who seeks us (who are often just as reluctant as Moses), reminding us that we too are called to care and to act. For ours is a God who is present in suffering and calls us to be there too.

Earlier this week, in our Lenten book discussion at noon on Tuesday, I shared with that group some of my background that others may not know. But let me preface that with my acknowledgement that today is something more than the Third Sunday of Lent. Growing up in my household in West Los Angeles, today would be the Feast of the Academy Awards, the celebration of the awarding of Oscars to the best movies and moviemakers of the past year. You see, my father, from the early 1940's to the early 1970's was the Executive Secretary of the Screen Actors Guild, the union that represents movie actors. And while my parents didn't socialize with the members of that union, it was not uncommon for its leaders to visit our home, people like Boris Karloff, Walter Pigeon and Ronald Reagan.

My father was also an Oscar voter, and we saw just about every nominated movie. In fact, when I was first ordained and serving a parish in North Hollywood, one night I even took two members of our youth group to the Academy Awards and sat in the same row with Leslie Caron and just behind Audrey Hepburn.

For many years while I was in Wolfeboro, my sermon for this Sunday would use as its texts, not the lectionary for the day, but rather the themes of the four or five films nominated for best picture. I chose not to do that this morning, but some of this year's films with the most Oscar nominations happen to deal with real world stories might have something to say about unjust suffering and how we respond to it.

Based on a book by Michael Lewis, the movie '**The Big Short**' chronicles how hedge fund managers and other stock traders ended up making fortunes by anticipating the collapse of bonds in the sub-prime mortgage market. The movie, which somehow clear conveys complicated financial information, pointed to the fraudulent and sometimes criminal activities of major banks that were bailed out by the U.S. government, while thousands of ordinary people were losing their homes and suffering the loss of their livelihoods.

A movie which I particularly liked, but found hard to watch, was '**Spotlight**,' which described the investigative reporting of the Boston Globe's Spotlight team covering the sexual abuse scandal of the Roman Catholic Church and particularly the cover up that reached all the way to Cardinal Bernard Law, the Archbishop of Boston.

This retelling of actual events begins with the arrival of Marty Baron, a new editor at the Globe. Unlike almost everyone else working at the Globe, Baron was not from Boston and considered an outsider (which was made all the more evident by his having read up and learn about "the Curse of the Bambino"). Few on the staff agree with him when Baron suggests that they follow up on a previous Globe piece on abuse cases. But the end result is the uncovering of thousands of incidents of clergy sexual abuse of youngsters and the 2002 resignation in disgrace of Archbishop Law.

The movie which most people anticipate will receive both the best picture and best actor Oscars is '**The Revenant**,' the real story of an early American trapper named Hugh Glass. Set in what is present day South Dakota in 1823, a band of trappers loses 17 men to a surprise attack by native Americans. One of the few survivors, Hugh Glass, is then mauled by a bear, only to somehow survive. The other trappers move on, leaving two men to stay with Glass until he dies. Impatient, one of those men named Fitzgerald secretly buries Glass alive, leaving him alone to die.

The rest of the story is essentially about Glass rising from the dead (the word 'revenant' means one that returns after death or after a long absence). It chronicles Glass' amazing struggles across the wilderness and snow covered mountains to finally find Fitzgerald. And perhaps noteworthy for us, the real life Hugh Glass, despite all his suffering and unlike the movie version, ends up forgiving the men who left him for dead.

Each of these three movies are worth our watching as they all speak to various forms of human suffering and our response to them.

We live in a world where there is much suffering, and you and I might be tempted to ask God "why haven't you done something about it?" until, of course, that question might be asked of us. We live in a word where people often let us down and sometimes hurt us deeply. We live in a world in which there are times when we want to cry out with sorrow. But we also live in a world with a

Lord who has known our pain and shared our sorrows, who is also hurt and who grieves with us, who offers us forgiveness even before we ask, and who promises to be with us in all the darkness, helping us not to confuse life with God. *Amen.*