

Imagine for a moment that Jesus is watching television with his twelve disciples. They're taking a little break from teaching and healing, taking it easy in the living room of Peter's mother-in-law, doing a little mindless channel surfing. Maybe they catch a little of a game.

But eventually the evening news comes on and they listen intently to the day's tragedies. One disciple says, "Hey, Jesus, that horrible bombing over on the West Bank where that guy drove a bus into a crowd of people. Do you think that because these Palestinians suffered in this way they were worse sinners than the rest?" It was a popular question in Jesus' day. Still is. If something bad happened, it must have been for a reason. Jesus replies. "No, they didn't die because of anything they did. It was a purely random thing. But let me tell you something. Unless you guys clean up your acts, you'll die just as tragically."

There is a low murmur in the room. The disciples look at each other; one of them nudges Peter. "Maybe you should offer him a Snickers Bar – he might just be little cranky because he's hungry. As a couple more begin to leave to find a bathroom, the newscaster reports another catastrophe, this one halfway across the world. Jesus pipes up this time. "Hey, guys," he says, "those people over in El Salvador. What about them? The earthquake that hit there killed hundreds of people. Does that mean that these Salvadorans were worse sinners than their neighbors in Guatemala?" Jesus waits for his question to sink in. "No," he continues, "the tragedy had nothing to do with their morals. Those people just got in the way." The disciples breathe a sigh of relief, gladdened to know that God doesn't work that way.

But then Jesus looks at them all. "Let me tell you something, though. Unless you people start going in the right direction, it will seem like a building falling on your head to crush the life out of you." Somebody got up and changed the channel after that.

In 1981 a book was published that created quite a stir. It made a lot of people start asking the age old question again, "*Why do bad things happen to good people?*" This book was written by a Harold Kushner, who is a Rabbi. He posed this question and penned the book in reaction to a personal tragedy--his son Aaron died early in life due a rare disease which causes premature aging. In his crises of faith he wrote the book, he says, for people "who have been hurt by life."

Listen to the title of the book and then see if you can pick up on the subtle but profoundly significant difference that Kushner brought to the debate. Here is the title: **When Bad Things Happen to Good People**. Did you catch it? Kushner's title is not a question. He was not asking why do bad things happen. He was offering a solution, an action plan. When bad things happen in your life this is how to think about them and how to respond to them. To question "Why" is a trap and can lead to even more pain if we stay there. To say, "When bad things happen I might be grieved but I am going to respond constructively," is a whole other thing.

This is the trap that is set for Jesus in the gospel. It was common then, just as it is today, to believe that accidents are not accidents--that things happen for a reason. So while in Judea teaching the crowd a group of people brought up a current event.

Apparently Pilate had ordered his soldiers to go into the temple and kill some visiting Galilean Jews. Pilate may have had his reasons for doing this but that didn't matter to these folks. They felt that these Galileans must be guilty of some grave sin so God judged them at the tip of Pilate's sword. Jesus' answer must have caught them off guard. His answer is, "No!" This is one of the few places in the Gospels where Jesus directly answers a question and for that reason we need to pay close attention. Jesus said these people did not die because they had sinned. But after answering their question Jesus poses them a question. He also brings up a current event: Apparently, during the construction of a building on the south side of Jerusalem, something went terribly wrong killing eighteen construction workers. Jesus asked, "Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?" Again Jesus says, "No!"

Yet like that crowd we persist in believing that bad things happen for a reason. Kushner says, "It is tempting at one level to believe that bad things happen to people (**especially other people**) because God is a righteous judge who gives them what they deserve. By believing that, we keep the world orderly and understandable." It is hard, let us say for example, to live with multiple sclerosis, but it is even harder to live with the idea that such things happen to people for no reason."

Has God has lost touch with the world? Is there no one in the driver's seat?" Is everything just out of control? That is scary! So we try to salvage our view of God and His orderly world. Kushner lists 7 ways we try to explain misfortune. Misfortune occurs because:

1. Someone made a mistake, or failed in the observance of some religious duty.
2. God has a hidden purpose, or is making use of knowledge we don't have.
3. Suffering itself will turn out to be good for us.
4. God's purpose is in the grand design of the Universe (which is good and beautiful), not in the life of the individual.
5. Suffering teaches something, either to us or to those who see us suffer.
6. Suffering is a test.
7. Death leads us and our loved ones to a better place.

Now Kushner rejects all of these explanations. "All those responses to tragedy" he says, "have at least one thing in common. **They all assume that God is the cause of our suffering, and they try to understand why God would want us to suffer.**

Kushner says there may be another approach. Maybe God does not cause our suffering. Maybe it happens for some reason other than the will of God. Suffering is random, circumstantial, being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Maybe suffering is simply caused by the workings of natural law. Often suffering is caused by the actions of evil people. Or we cause it ourselves by the way we handle things or the priorities we had adopted.

The scariest thing in life may be that there is no good reason why bad things happen and the worst thing we can do when we can't find a reason is to blame it on God. God didn't direct a maniac to Sandy Hook elementary; he didn't require people to live in the path of a hurricane, he didn't encourage the terrorists in San Bernadino.

Parents bring a child into the world and sustain him by providing for his needs but they don't plan on him breaking an arm, they don't want him to fall in with a bad crowd of friends, they hate to see him suffer when his girlfriend dumps him. But they allow those things because it would be worse, impossible really, to control every moment of the kid's life. What they can do is be there to help their child deal with and move past all those things.

Is there a good reason for everything that happens? No. But you can be the reason that, when bad things do happen, good things can come from it. More important than what happens to you is how you decide to live your life.

Here are a couple insights that might help us cope with tragedy and to look beyond it: "The first is that, although God is not responsible for causing tragedy, he is not a detached observer of our suffering. On the contrary, he is immersed in it with us, sharing to the full our particular grief and pain. This is the fundamental significance of the cross."

Second, although we naturally ask, "Why did it happen?" the more important question is "What are we going to make of it?" "Every tragedy contains within it the seeds of resurrection." This is, after all, the whole point of our pilgrimage through Lent, to Good Friday, and Easter morning.