

Why Did This Happen ?

February 20, 2005

Stan Abell

One of the great, perplexing questions of life is how do we interact with God and how does God interact with us. Did God create the world and step away...and things just carry on? Or, does God have a cosmic hand in everything that happens...There is a true story about a church pastor that gets right to the heart of this question.

The pastor had a kitten that climbed up a tree in his backyard and then was afraid to come down. The pastor coaxed, offered warm milk, etc.

The kitty would not come down. The tree was not sturdy enough to climb, so the pastor decided that if he tied a rope to his car and drove away so that the tree bent down, he could then reach up and get the kitten.

That's what he did, all the while checking his progress in the rearview mirror. He then figured if he went just a little bit further, the tree would be bent sufficiently for him to reach the kitten. But as he moved the car a little further forward, the rope broke. The tree went "boing!" And the kitten instantly sailed through the air-out of sight.

The pastor felt terrible. He walked all over the neighborhood asking people if they'd seen a little kitten. No. Nobody had seen a stray kitten. So he prayed, "Lord, I just commit this kitten to your keeping," and went on about his business.

A few days later he was at the grocery store, and met one of his church members. He happened to look into her shopping cart and was amazed to see cat food. This woman was a cat hater and everyone knew it, so he asked her, "Why are you buying cat food when you hate cats so much?"

She replied, "You won't believe this," and then told him how her little girl had been begging her for a cat, but she kept refusing. Then a few days before, the child had begged again, so the Mom finally told her little girl, "Well, if God gives you a cat, I'll let you keep it."

She told the pastor, "I watched my child go out in the yard, get on her knees, and ask God for a cat. And really, Pastor, you won't believe this, but I saw it with my own eyes. A kitten suddenly came flying out of the blue sky, with its paws outspread, and landed right in front of her."

I really need this kid to come to my house for March Madness and help me with my NCAA brackets...You know, it's fun to make light of this situation, but the underlying question really is a serious one. Again, what role does God play in the daily goings on of our world? While we struggle to understand this today, the question really is an age-old one.

Recently, a made for television movie was aired about the destruction of the Roman city of Pompeii. The eruption of Mount Vesuvius started on the morning of August 24, 79 AD, and caught the local population completely off-guard. Getting on with business of their daily lives, they were in total ignorance of what was to come.

What came was the total devastation of Pompeii and surrounding towns. First, thick clouds of pumice began to rain down on Pompeii. At about midnight the first fatal waves of hot ash, rock fragments and volcanic gas began to envelop the city...literally burying people alive where they huddled in fear clutching their possessions and bowing to their gods.

Historian Pliny the Younger who was an eyewitness to the event described it this way...You could hear women lamenting, children crying, men shouting. There were some so afraid of death that they prayed for death. Many raised their hands to the gods, and even more believed that there were no gods any longer and that this was one unending night for the world."

Surely the residents of Southeast Asia must have shared this same feeling when the tsunami hit...that the tsunami was one unending night for the world. If you think about it, the parallels between these two tragic events are remarkable. In both cases a sudden wave engulfs populations that were largely caught almost completely off-guard and almost completely devastated.

Much like Pompeii, the town of Calang, Indonesia wasn't just destroyed. It vanished, nearly all of it. Calang sat on a picturesque tropical peninsula. Before Dec. 26, when the tsunami swept in from both sides of the peninsula 7,300 people lived there...On that night, almost 6,000 people were swept away.

Such devastation, then and now, makes us wonder...what role did God play in these tragedies. Recently I saw a news-talk show where the host and the panelist were discussing this very question. The host posed this question:

With some 175,000 people dead and vast stretches of Asia ripped apart, a lot of people are asking, how can a merciful God allow such disaster and suffering? And should we interpret this as a sign from above?

Of the several themes one could pull out of the guest's comments, the one that struck me was the idea that God allowed this to happen. One of the guests said:

What I'm saying is that God does allow natural disasters to happen. He always brings good out of bad. There is sin in this country. There is sin around the world.

And another said:

Why he has allowed it to happen, I don't know. I can't answer that question. But I think one of the things that we need to do when there's a disaster like that is to look up and ask God, "Are you trying to get our attention?"

Clearly, both panelists believe that God allowed this disaster to happen, but something else was going on in the conversation. One of the panelist suggested that God caused the tsunami to punish the Muslims in that area. Hang on here...allow and caused are two different things. So what the panelist are really saying is that God purposely caused the tsunami. God purposely caused the death of 200,000 people.

This point of view, that God—for whatever reason—purposely caused this or any other tragedy is quite problematic for me. In essence, this point of view paints God out to be like some great cosmic puppeteer and we here on earth are God's marionettes to be played with and manipulated at God's pleasure.

If one believes God caused the tsunami, then logically one must also believe that God, the cosmic puppeteer, pulls strings at will and creates tornadoes, hurricanes and mudslides.

This is a view that makes God all-powerful. God the all-powerful is the absolute cause of everything that happens. Many of us might take comfort in this view...that God is all-powerful. However, in thinking of God in this way, it really makes it difficult to reconcile why suffering and tragedy befalls the completely innocent, especially children. At some point then, we must ask this all-powerful God...God, why do you let these things happen to good people?

The book, When Bad Things Happen To Good People was written in an attempt to deal with this question. At a crisis point in his life of faith, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote the book in response to the death of his young son who had died from a premature aging disease He wrote the book, as he says, for people, "who have been hurt by life."

When tragedy and uncertainty occur, every one of us tries to reconcile our view of God in the face of what has happened. Often times we try to explain misfortune in one of the following ways:

Someone made a mistake, or failed in the observance of some religious duty.

God has a hidden purpose, or is making use of knowledge we don't have.

Suffering itself will turn out to be good for us.

God's purpose is in the grand design of the Universe (which is good and beautiful), not in the life of the individual.

Suffering teaches something, either to us or to those who see us suffer.

Suffering is a test.

Death leads us and our loved ones to a better place.

As with the tsunami, mudslide and hurricanes, the underlying assumption in all of these statements is that God is the cause of the suffering and that God actually wants us to suffer for some reason. I don't believe this to be so—this simply isn't consistent with the God revealed to us through Jesus Christ. God did not create people only to see them be destroyed.

Even if we look to the story of Noah's Ark in the Bible where there is clearly destruction and devastation, love is still at the core. In fact, the ultimate point of the story is often overlooked. The point of the story of Noah's Ark is not about a vengeful, capricious God...ultimately, the story is about a loving, redeeming God. In spite of all else, God says, "I'm going to establish a covenant with you." I think this one simple sentence in the story is often overlooked, and this is the covenant that establishes the relationship God wants to have with us.

Theologian Clark Williamson said, "God is the 'living God' who cares passionately about God's creatures." In 1 John 4 we read "God is love." And that is the essence of the covenant God established with Noah and us...a covenant of love. Ultimately, for Noah, the dove returned with an olive leaf in her mouth...after the flood all the colors came out again.

The truth is that God grieves with us in tragedy. The covenant of love means that God reaches out to us and we reach out to God. In John 3:16 we hear, "This is how much God

loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed." God sent Jesus to alleviate suffering, not create it.

The Rev. Amos Brown of Third Baptist Church in San Francisco said the tsunami is not an expression of God any more than famine or war or street violence. But we find ourselves questioning God in this tragedy because so many people died at once. So we ask...Where is God in tragedy?"

I think it's a misguided question to ask where is God. What we should be asking in the wake of any tragedy isn't "Where is God?" but "Where are we?"

The answer to where are we is an amazingly hopeful one. We are everywhere that help is needed, we have opened our wallets sending money and supplies in unprecedented numbers, but more importantly, we have opened our hearts, and that is exactly what God wants of us.

On the show *The West Wing*, the fictional President Josiah Bartlett had at one time considered becoming a priest. The show often explores issues through the president's faith. One show titled "disaster relief" deals with the president visiting a small Oklahoma town devastated by a tornado.

The president rolls up his sleeves and is helping in the clean up. A Red Cross volunteer he is working with breaks down and begins to sob. She collects herself and says to the President "I'm sorry. I lost four kids on my route yesterday. At first, you're just glad it's not your kids. But you gotta wonder, what kind of God would do such a terrible thing? We go to church every Sunday. We try to do the right thing. What kind of plan could this possibly be?"

The president does not answer—he simply pats the woman on the shoulder and continues to help her in her work. The president's answer was not in his words, but in his action...it was in his hand reaching out.

CLOSING:

It is not for the good, it is not for the bad. It just is.

It is not a blessing, it is not a curse, it just is.

A tectonic plate shifted, and a vast wave spread across the ocean, and took with it many lives.

And now another wave is spreading, and it is also vast, and it spreads through the hearts of those who let themselves feel it.

The disaster is. It happened to a "dear one," someone's "dear one," many dear ones. I open my heart and feel it. The place it touches in me, touches God.

Have a great Sunday, go in peace. AMEN