

Community Church of Issaquah

January 19, 2025

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

Rev. Vincent Lachina

When I began thinking about and preparing for the sermon today, I realized what a difficult subject this is. Just out of curiosity, I posted on Facebook telling about the subject of the message and asking if anyone had any comments. Let me share some of those with you:

- Welcome to Life.
- Sometimes it's our own bad choices that lead to bad things. Sometimes it's the bad choices of others. God gave everyone free will. Stuff happens. The difference is that we have a loving God that helps us through the bad times.
- Maybe the better question is...Now that this awful thing has happened, what am I going to do about it? Bad things happen to good people constantly, and it's also true that good things happen to good people. Despite our faith and prayers, things can still go wrong. It's not fair, but much of life isn't fair. Sometimes disaster is brought on by our own mistakes, and sometimes it's just part of the course of life. Some misfortune may be caused by bad luck, or bad people, or the inevitable consequences of being human and being mortal. We live in a world of inflexible natural laws. It doesn't make life any less of a miracle or God any less real. It would be impossible

for us to grow and reach our divine potential if God interfered with the consequences of our choices and the various events in our lives. It's how you live that will matter, how you deal with the cards you are dealt--good and bad.

- Good things happen to bad people. Bad things happen to good people. The concepts are not connected. It's not cause and effect.
- Because, hopefully, there are FAR more good people than bad in this world. A matter of the odds.
- Because that's just life and G-d and belief don't change that
- t's not a question of "if" and how to avoid bad things, but rather a question of "when" and how to navigate with grace

One of my clergy colleagues reminded me of a book that I read years ago. t's not a question of "if" and how to avoid bad things, but rather a question of "when" and how to navigate with grace. Harold S. Kushner was a rabbi, with a spiritual perspective that's both simple and enlightening. Still, it's his personal experience of tragedy that makes him a comforting fellow traveler for anyone holding deep hurt. Rabbi Kushner's son was diagnosed at age 3 with progeria, a very rare genetic disorder, that quickly leads a child to age, leading to death by late childhood or early teens. His son died of progeria at 14 years of age. Rabbi Kushner's experience as a rabbi likely meant that he had a deep understanding of theology but he was at a loss in the face of tragedy and struggled a great deal

.

He found himself asking the same existential and universal questions that we all ask when faced with extreme loss. And, like many of us, he also questioned his faith. He wondered that if God existed, and if he was minimally fair, let alone loving and forgiving, how could He let this happen? How can God allow such suffering? Despite Kushner's deep faith, he became painfully aware of 'the unfair distribution of suffering in the world.' This suffering often challenges kindness and even God's existence, as people try to fit tragedy into a sense of an orderly universe.

There are questions that creep into our minds when we think of the reason behind suffering. Perhaps the first question we should answer is this: "What makes a person good? Or bad." Is a good person one who never sins or steps outside the borders of how we measure good behavior? In truth, none of us have led perfect lives in which we never broke the rules of being good. The qualifications of being a good person are massive. And the complexity of that questioning is mind blowing. Try these: Can a good person do bad things? Can a bad person do good things? It's so confusing, isn't it?

Perhaps we need to reframe how we think about suffering. Could it be that God doesn't cause the bad things that happen, and maybe we're just asking the wrong questions? The Book of Job expands this thinking. The Book of Job is the most evocative story about suffering in the Bible. We're told a story of one of the most pious of men, who loses everything that's important to him, including his children, wealth, and health. He then has to explore three possibilities. The first is that God is all-powerful and

controls everything. The other is that God is fair, and people get what they deserve, and the final option is that despite what's been handed to him, he is still a good person.

Kushner's analysis of the story led him to one conclusion. He suggests that we need to change our perception of God. Rather than seeing God as all-powerful and all-knowing, we should acknowledge that He may not be able to control what happens to us. Events are often random, and He cannot keep good people safe. This is a difficult concept to grasp, because it's human nature to look for cause and effect, even when it's non-existent.

If we take the view that God does not send bad things our way, then it's easier for us to take ownership of our emotions. This will help us to manage our anger and devastation, without feeling that we're in conflict with God. We're then able to call on God for support and comfort, rather than feeling judged. If we come to the conclusion that God didn't do anything to harm us, meaning a bad thing, then there is a deeper meaning in the whole concept of being punished by a loving God.

This about this – why did the California fires destroy some homes and leave others untouched? What's more, laws of nature don't discriminate among people. An earthquake is an act of nature, not an act of God. I resist the idea that some insurance companies refer to catastrophes as 'acts of God.' God doesn't have weekly quotas, a list of good people, and a blacklist. Good people are injured, just as often as bad people are. We might have to live with the reality of a

world that unfolds, independent of God's will. What's more, laws of nature don't discriminate among people. An earthquake is an act of nature, not an act of God.

We might have to live with the reality of a world that unfolds, independent of God's will. The fundamental insight that develops from this, is that when something terrible does happen, it angers and saddens God, as much as it does us. And that's an act of God. Acts of God are reflected when communities respond and rebuild after a tragic event. Essentially, how people support each other, irrespective of the event, is what matters.

When people arrive to offer us comfort, they often add to our woes. It's not always easy to provide the right kind of support, so what can we say that doesn't make people think they deserved what has happened to them? How do we lessen their sense of isolation? We often try to defend God or give responses that fit in with our assumptions. Rabbi Kushner recalled when he observed someone saying to their paralyzed friend: 'It's God's way of teaching you a lesson.' He also remembered when a teenager who had just lost his mother to cancer, was told that 'God took your mother because He needed her now more than you did.' And how many times are congregations urged to rejoice because someone they love has 'gone to a happier place.' These platitudes are meant to be helpful, but they only serve to increase guilt and anger towards a God that would do this to them.

Surviving the bad things that happen to us is learning to see tragedy in the context of life, which is balanced more in favor of good than bad. Context helps us to see what has

enriched us, as well as what we have lost. Rabbi Kushner did not believe that God doesn't cause or prevent tragedies - these are random. I agree with him. However, I would say that God provides us with community and strength to find a way through the pain. Could it be that proof of God's existence lies in our moral responses - our anger and resentment at unfairness, and our compassion towards others. Perhaps we might believe in a God of limited power, but a God of never-ending love.

So, when it comes to bad things happening, we need to realize that there's no reason or logic, and that ultimately the world is chaotic. It's how we deal with the chaos that makes us human.