

Bad Things - Good People

Many years ago Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book that swept North America and beyond. It is called, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People". You may be aware of it and you may also know that Rabbi Kushner wrote that book, as he struggled to come to terms with the death of his son. His son was diagnosed with progeria, also known as rapid aging disease. By the age of 10, his son looked grotesque. People with progeria have very limited physical growth and limited life expectancy. Rabbi Kushner watched his son go through excruciating social exclusion, physical and emotional pain, and then his early death.

The rabbi was a religious scholar. He taught others about the nature of God. He comforted others in their time of need. He walked with others through their journeys of grief. But it is quite a different story when the difficult times come to rest at our door. Now it was his turn to move in this painful space. He had no choice but to discover and to embrace the role of God in all of this - God's apparent absence,

and the presence of God that he longed for. He asked himself a million times, why did God allow this to happen to his son and his family?

When was God planing to intervene and fix this mess?

When bad things happen to good people, a variety of reasons are usually offered to explain what happened:

#1. They deserved it – Sure it’s a surprise. We thought they were pretty good people. We do not know what their sin was, or their parent’s, but they obviously did something bad and now they were paying the price. As some would say, now they are - “getting their come uppins”.

When bad things happen to good people, we figure that it must be a consequence of something they did that was not nice. It was payback time.

A good friend of mine suddenly got very ill, and the doctors could not determine a diagnosis. The young family was very distraught. A well- meaning, self-righteous friend of mine, suggested that my friend

likely had 'unconfessed sin' in their life and that their horrible illness was probably the result of this! God was getting them for failing to repent!

We long to explain everything....regardless of how misdirected, uninformed and ridiculous our explanations can become. Sometimes we sit smugly and resign ourselves to the notion that, "I guess they must have deserved it".

#2. To teach a lesson - Sometimes God brings bad things to good people to teach them a lesson! Someone asks us for a ride to church. We don't really want to do it. They live in a place that is not convenient for us to drive to. So we make up an excuse as to why we can't help them. It is a lie. There is really no reason, other than our own selfishness. We tell them, "No, I'm sorry". En route to church we have a flat tire. We have no spare. Very quickly, the day becomes a mess. Some say that God orchestrated this, specifically to teach us a lesson.

Play nice! Do unto others. Take care of one another. Love one another. If you don't, God is going to have to teach you a lesson!

#3. I need a flower for my garden- Have you ever heard that expression - sometimes, when a person dies, often at a young age, someone might say, "God needed another flower for His garden." The expression implies that God intentionally took the life of that child or adult because God preferred that the person be with God rather than his or her human family! Another flower that God picked for His garden!

When bad things happen to good people we hear all sorts of things as people try to make sense of it. "Where Was God? Why didn't God prevent this? Oh....maybe it is because of this or that, - that is why this bad thing happened." And after taking some shots at God, we then start to beat ourselves up with all sorts of would haves, should have, could haves.

The province of Saskatchewan and beyond is going through all of this right now. Most of them were young. None of them wanted this. None of them were the cause of this. But a bad bad thing happened and so many have paid the price.

Did God do this because He believed they deserved it?

Did God do this to teach them a lesson?

Did God do this because He needed more flowers for his garden?

Did God cause this? If God did not cause this, then why did God not prevent this? In the past week, many people asked these questions over and over and many will continue to, in the weeks and even years ahead. This was a terrible, awful tragedy. These are big terrifying questions.

He went back to the Scriptures. He listened to what others who had suffered tragedy had to say. He spent time reflecting, discussing

with others. He spent much time in prayer. After a horrible, dark and heavy journey, this is where Rabbi Kushner landed.

God is not a vengeful God. God is a God of love. God does not cause bad things to happen to good or bad people – for any reason – no matter how bad a person is – no matter how much they try and how much they fail....God does not cause bad things to happen to good people...or any people for that matter. God is not sitting there behind a big oak desk doling out punishment, to teach lessons, or to pick flowers.

God has given us free will. Can you imagine your life without that? Absolutely no reason to ask yourself questions like:

Will I get up, or stay in bed? Will I go here or go there? Do this or do that? Be this or be that? Say please and thank you or not? Do something kind for someone, or not? Try to make my home, my community, my world a kinder, gentler place or not?

Living without the luxury of free will....everything pre-ordained for us - from the smallest decisions to the biggest. There would be no need for faith. No need for thought or reflection or consideration or discussion - life as a robot.

So with this crazy thing called free will, for which we are very thankful, sometimes we make good choices. Sometimes we don't. But the choice is ours. Sometimes we choose to pick up other peoples' random litter. Sometimes we don't. Sometimes we choose to say things that wound a heart. Sometimes we choose to refrain from saying things that would heal a heart. Sometimes we choose to be compassionate, and supportive, overflowing with patience, and empathy, and love. Sometimes we choose to be otherwise. We have moments of sheer perfection. We have moments that fall short of that. But we always have a choice....even when we feel we don't.

Have you heard about this notion called Grace? It is love and kindness and compassion and generosity that is unwarranted. It is

unearned forgiveness - unmerited blessing. That is the platform from which God operates. If we have learned nothing else, we need to know that the word **God** is interchangeable with the word **love**- a love that is without limit, a love that will never give up, a love that is inclusive, and generous, and unstoppable. C.S Lewis has written, "Though our feelings come and go, God's love for us does not." Someone once said that, "God loves you more in a moment than anyone else could in a lifetime." Phillip Yancey says that Grace teaches us that God loves us because of who **God** is, not because of who **we** are."

Oh I know that on our good days, we are able to accept that God loves us. Perhaps, mistakenly, we even feel we deserve God's love. We think we have earned that merit badge. We want to wear it on our sleeve. "Look what I got! Haven't I done well!?" But it's not like that. God loves us not because of who or even how we are. **God loves us because of who God is!**

Right now I believe that much of what we call God, is being expressed into the lives of those exceedingly distraught parents and brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents in Humboldt, Saskatchewan - that any love and support and care and compassion they feel, comes ultimately from God. Love always has its genesis in God. In the tears, the hugs, the just being there, the showing up, the food, the love.....God is there.

And it is not there because of anything those devastated people of Humboldt have done or not done. They might be Christians, or Jews, or Muslims, atheists or agnostics. Some of them might be gay, or divorced, or single parents. Some might be well educated. Some might not be. Some might have great jobs, others unemployed. God is there.

Romans tells us that **nothing** can separate us from the love of God....even our own ignorance, or our own desire to be separate from God, or our own bad decisions. **Nothing** can separate us from the love of God! God is for us. "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,

nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

1 John reminds us in so many ways that God is love. **Where love is present, - God is present.**

I can't prove any of this. It is not logical or rational. There is no high or low tech tool to measure it or detect it or quantify it. But I have free will and I choose to have faith and to draw on my faith especially at times like this. I believe that right now, God is in Humbolt, Saskatchewan and everywhere that people are hurting because of this terrible, life altering tragedy. I also believe God is in Syria, and in the slums of Calcutta, and Nairobi. I believe God is at the Civic hospital and the General, and the Royal Ottawa, and the Queensway Carleton.

Where love is, God is.

Bad things happen to good people everywhere at one time or another. I hope that you reflect on this. I hope that you spend some

time considering where God might be in the midst of your life....the good, the bad and the ugly days of your life. Receive the grace that God offers. In faith, believe.

Amen