

The Only Question

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Ed.: These remarks were made at a memorial service in a local congregation. An elder in the church, sixty-five years old, first killed his thirty-one-year-old son and then son shot himself. The son had been a schizophrenic for eight years. Because the son had become more and more violent, the father had become more and more concerned that the son would hurt somebody. The son had stopped taking his medication and had refused to return to the psychiatrist. Names of the family members have been changed.

The Reformed theologian Karl Barth said that people come to church on the Sabbath with only one question in their minds: Is it true?¹ The providence of God, the saving power of Jesus Christ, the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit, the resurrection from the dead, the forgiveness of sin: Is it true? When we come to church at 2:00 p.m. on a Monday afternoon for a memorial service for two people who died untimely deaths, the question is even more compelling: Is it true? Can God be trusted on a day like today?

There are other questions of course: *Why* did it happen? *Why* did Mark get so sick? *Why* did Jim sink into such despair? They are the questions one asks late at night when sleep won't come, and our psyches are demanding an explanation. We are only human after all, seeing through a glass dimly, trying to figure things out, wanting to know why bad things happen to good people who didn't do a thing to deserve the hard life dealt them. We want to know why.

Do you remember Rabbi Harold Kushner's best-selling book a few years ago? Most people thought the title was *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*; it was *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. The Christian faith begins at the same place as the rabbi's book. Faith doesn't spend a great deal of time explaining *why* bad things happen to good people. In a world that fell from grace a long time ago, brokenness, illness, tragic endings are facts of life—inevitable, universal, unavoidable.

Because we are human, we want to know why; because we are *only* human, we cannot know why. The Scripture promises that some day we will know why, but that day is not today. God knows what we need today is not an explanation; what we need today is *faith*. What we need is *reassurance* that the resurrection is real. God knows that beneath all our why's is the only question that matters: Can God be trusted with the deaths of those we love? We can live without an explanation, but we cannot live without knowing if it is true that God can be trusted.

In answer to our question, God says, "Yes, it is true" Christ died and was raised so that Jim and Mark could live again. Eternal life is true. Even when fear and sorrow beat their restless wings close around us, it is true. It is true that God will lead us through the worst life can do. When the shadow seems so

thick there can never be light again, it is still true: The comfort of God will seek us out and gradually, gently subdue our grief and restore our spirits.

"How have you endured all of this?" I asked Carolyn (Jim's widow and Mark's mother) on Saturday. "God and the angels," Carolyn said. You see we are not dealing today with a God who comes around only when things are rosy and the birds are singing. There is a cross up there! The God we know in Jesus Christ knows about suffering. The God we know in Jesus Christ gets to the valley of death of loss and grief before we get there, so that He can get ready to catch us when we stumble blindly in, so that He can guide us through the dark. As Carolyn put it, "all the way *through* the valley, Joanna. *Through* the valley." It is true that God can be trusted.

It is also true that bad, even unbelievably bad things happen to good people. Look at Mark. He could no more help his illness than someone helps having cerebral palsy or Hodgkin's disease. In a way you could say Mark died twice—once eight years ago when illness struck and again last Friday. It was more than his share. Bad things happen to good people.

Look at Jim—a man of God who would have any day given up his life for his son and did, in the end. A helplessness overcame him for which he was no match. It is also true that none of it was God's will. Don't you know that God's heart was the first of all hearts to break last Friday morning?² Where is God in all this?—grieving with us, weeping for us, but more than that—drying tears, creating life out of death, hope out of despair, forgiving sin, restoring wholeness.

God is so relentlessly committed to being the God of life that God can use even the worst that can happen, in ways we cannot fathom, for God's good purposes. The question is not *why* bad things happen but: Can God be trusted when they do? Should we hope again? Can we live again, and if so, how?

The Gospel is so exquisitely clear and simple at this point: "Abide in Christ," it says. "Stay close to me," Jesus says. "Bring your brokenness to me." Cut off from him, how could any live? But abiding in him, staying close to his body, the church, we can endure.³

I met somebody yesterday I had not met before. Her name is Lauren. She is three years old, Jim and Carolyn's granddaughter, a bright and happy blond-headed little girl. She wore a bib with a duck on it, and a ready smile on her face as she sat on Carolyn's knee and met the preacher. "Tell Joanna what you say before you have your supper," Carolyn said. Lauren looked at me, a perfect stranger, and spoke as if she was sharing with me the most wonderful news you could imagine: "God is great," Lauren said. "God is good," she said, and suddenly I could not wait to come to church today, so that I could tell you what Lauren said and what the Scripture promises and what faith knows even when the pain is piercing and the shadows fall. God is still great. God is still good. It is true!

O God, you who can roll away even the hard, cold stone of death, send us forth from this place surrounded by the comfort of your Holy Spirit and give us each in our hearts the powerful presence of your peace. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

NOTES

¹ Easter, April 3, 1988, Patrick Willson, Shades Valley Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama.

² See sermon preached by William Sloan Coffin, Riverside Church, New York City, on the occasion of the death of his son, January 23, 1983.

³ John 15.