

Answering the troubling question: Where is God when disasters strike?

By Rev. Tim Dearborn, Ph.D

When horrific disaster hits we inevitably ask, “Where is God? Why did God allow this to happen?” The media is filled with religious replies, ranging from “it’s God’s will” to “God is judging people” to “nature is punishing us for our abuse” to “we’re but gnats on the face of the earth, insignificant to the universe.”

What do we say as a Church? We know the Gospel is good news of great joy and that “We have received a kingdom which cannot be shaken” (Hebrews 12:28). But when everything in our life (and world) is shaken, how do we respond? We are admonished in 1 Peter 3:14-15: “Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your heart sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” And so, as defenders of hope in a frightened world, what defense do we bring? There’s no time in crises for lengthy theological treatises. If we can’t say something helpful in three minutes, we will never be heard.

First, the Gospel loudly proclaims that God’s will for people is life—not death and suffering. God grieves over human sin and suffering. Jesus wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19.41). Ezekiel proclaimed that God “takes no pleasure in the death of anyone” (Ezekiel 18.32). God does more than grieve, for in Christ, God entered into our broken lives and carried our pains (Isaiah 53.4). He not only carried our pain, he triumphed over all that keeps us from experiencing the fullness of life (Philippians 2.5-11, John 10.10).

Second, though this triumph over suffering has been secured in Christ, it won’t be completely realized until the New Creation. We live in the meantime, stretched between the pains of the present and the promises of the future. We live between God’s good original creation, its fallen brokenness, its redemption in Christ, and its fulfillment in the coming kingdom. In this meantime, we are not exempt from experiencing the brokenness of creation: disease, disasters, death. God usually doesn’t overturn natural law, or the consequences of creation’s fall. “All of creation is groaning in labor” awaiting the fulfillment of our corporate redemption. Then it, too, will be set free (Romans 8.18-25).

Third, we confidently proclaim that suffering doesn’t have the last word! One day, God “...will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more... ‘See, I am making all things new’” (Revelation 21:3-5). When Israel was captive in Babylon, God gave them profound words of guidance: “I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). Hope in Hebrew is a wonderful picture word, describing the tension placed on a spider’s web. When disconnected, it can bear no weight. When firmly anchored between two points and stretched tight, the web can bear great weight. Hope is to be stretched between two places—firmly anchored in both the present and the future. The strands in a web become the pathway for hope. As Hebrews 6.18-20 says, “the hope that we have in Jesus Christ is an utterly reliable anchor for our souls, fixed in the innermost shrine of heaven, where Jesus has already entered on our behalf.”

Finally, because of our hope we don't merely give in to suffering, resigning ourselves to it as our lot in life. Nor do we seek to escape the woes of the world. Israel was called to seek the welfare of Babylon, plant gardens in the city of its captivity. Hope frees us to live in joyous rebellion against all that keeps life from becoming what God intends it to be. "The Father of mercies and the God of all comfort comforts us in our affliction that we might be able to bring comfort to those who suffer with the comfort we have received" (2 Corinthians 1.3-4). We have the privilege of allowing the Spirit of God to pour out the love of Christ through our hearts and hands. As God's people, we are an army of caregivers, bringing tangible hope to people weighed down in suffering next door, and around the world. As we both bring comfort to the pains of suffering, and seek to remove its causes, we manifest in the brokenness of the present signs of the splendor of God's future.

The Rev. Tim Dearborn, Ph.D, is Associate Director for Faith and Development with World Vision International.