

In the face of evil we are often haunted by the question, "Why O God?" Why do the innocent suffer? Why does evil seem to have free reign in our world? Entire books of the Bible have attempted to address the problem of evil and suffering (see the Old Testament book of Job and the New Testament book of Revelation), but we are left to ponder the question and to ultimately trust God.

Often, when faced with tragedy, we hear things like, "It was God's will." or "This was God's judgment." While those pat answers may work for some, including some big names in the Christian media, they don't work for me. Whether it be a toddler falling into a pool and drowning or horrific events like 9-11, Katrina or the massacres at Columbine, Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook and most recently Las Vegas, how can we possibly, even for a moment, think that God is somehow responsible? Is God the author of evil and human suffering? What is the difference between tragedy and judgment? What is evil and what is its role in human tragedy and suffering? I don't pretend to have all the answers, nor do I have the space here to address all those questions, but what follows are some of my thoughts.

While we don't often verbalize it, we often think it. That is, we often assign a cause/effect relationship to the victims and their suffering. Look at the book of Job. It's a book that specifically examines the problem of innocent suffering. Job's three friends had a cause/effect theology. Bad things aren't supposed to happen to good people (and Job is described in the prologue of the book as blameless and upright, one who feared God and shunned evil), so therefore Job, you must be at fault somehow. There must be some secret sin you haven't confessed, otherwise you wouldn't be suffering like this. The best thing his friends did was to sit in silence with Job for seven days and nights because they saw how great Job's suffering was. It's when they opened their mouths and tried to explain Job's suffering that they failed.

Yes, we at times think very much like those well meaning friends. While some things are certainly God's will and there is clear biblical evidence that God does indeed cause judgment to come upon individuals and entire nations, including his people Israel, these explanations seem hollow in the face of what happened the other day at Las Vegas. While it may be easy to ascribe events like this to God's will or even his mysterious judgment, I think that kind of thinking borders on intellectual and theological laziness.

The Bible tells us that God is a God of grace and compassion who withholds judgment so that we have the opportunity to repent and be saved:

"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

"I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:1-4)

The God of grace has promised a new creation devoid of suffering, pain, mourning and death. The New Testament witness is that through Jesus Christ God has defeated the power of sin and death; they no longer lay claim to our lives. There will be a new day. In the book of Revelation we have a glimpse of that new day:

"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Revelation 21:4)

Though we have a vision of a new day, evil and sin are still on the loose, even though their days are numbered. While I can think of many words in response to this week's tragedy, only one adequately describes the events of that day: "Demonic". Yes, Virginia there is a Satan. While many religious teachers and institutions downplay or even deny the existence of Satan, there is no doubt in my mind that this tragedy is the result of demonic forces at work. St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians:

"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." (Ephesians 6:12)

While we never seem to have adequate answers in the face of tragedy and innocent suffering, we are reminded that even while God is in the process of transforming lives and the creation, there is at the same time evil in the world. There is a spiritual war raging all around us. Most of the time we are oblivious to the battle, but at times we can clearly see the face of evil in our midst. St. Paul wrote the following words to the Christians living in the city of Ephesus, who were, by the way, surrounded by paganism and were quite familiar with the face of evil:

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. (Ephesians 6:10-18)

So, brothers and sisters in Christ, put on the full armor of God and pray that God will continue to raise up men and women of integrity and righteousness to be the salt of the earth. Like a mustard seed, may our faith and witness grow through the power of the Holy Spirit and so transform the world one person at a time. Pray for one another, for our nation, and for the family and friends of those who were slain.

Peace. Chaplain Swanson