

## LENT 1 2011

When I heard the news that Japan had suffered from an earthquake and a Tsunami, I was immediately transported back in time to the day after Christmas as in 2004 when Indonesia was hit by the last big Tsunami. Tragedies come and go in our world, but some force us to stop and wrestle with what scholars call Theodicy, which is the question of how God can be called good if God allows such awful things to happen.

That Tsunami in 2004 had that effect on me; if for no other reason than I had an Indonesian student at the time whose family was affected. It was in between semesters, so I had some time, and I remember going for long walks during which I tried to reconcile my belief in a God who loves all his children with a God who allows such horrible natural disasters.

Now if I were a fundamentalist I would tell you that it's a sign that the end is near. If I were the kind of preacher who liked to deal the guilt card then I would conclude that we are all miserable sinners who deserve whatever we get. But truth, real truth, is rarely so simple or one-sided, and our tendency to scapegoat someone, even God, in order to have someone to blame is really just avoiding the hard questions.

Back to 2004, I remember when I reached the resolution that stays with me to this day. I was walking my dog, Lucy along the Dodder River in Dublin when it came to me. I'm not saying it's "true" in the ultimate sense of the word, but it's as far as my little mind could take it.

We live on a planet with fire, energy, at its core, and nothing lives without energy. Around this core are the planets of the earth, over which is layered the land and water which we see and know. In order for the planet to exist and function, the plates of the earth need to be able to shift in order to contain and manage the pressure coming from the earth's core. If the plates could not shift, then pressure would build up and our planet would explode and we would not be here to even ask these questions.

There are so many examples in life of when elasticity is preferable to rigidity, and this is an example of how the flexibility of the planet both makes life here possible and necessitates the existence of things like earthquakes and Tsunamis.

This is what I call "The Deal." The God who made us and loves us also allows danger and tragedy, and Christians who try to present God as their warm cuddly friend are engaging in a kind of false advertising. The answers are complex because life is complex.

We speak of God as our Father because scripture teaches us that God's relationship with us is analogous to a parent/child relationship. But that is not all God is. God is also the creator of the universe. God is also our Judge. God is also our Savior. We have many metaphors for God, and they are all true, but none to the exclusion of the others, and when we are confronted with the results of natural disaster we feel the tension between God as our parent and God as the creator of the universe. That's the deal; at least as much as my brain can understand it.

The point of the Christian faith is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourself. So how do these loves hold up in a crisis?

We love lots of people in our lives who hurt us, or allow us to be hurt, so while my heart breaks for the people of Japan, I am still here to thank God for life and love and forgiveness and the promise of eternity. I may shake my fist at heaven every once in a while, but I know that God can absorb it.

Loving our neighbor is easy with this one. Reach out in love to those who are living here but whose roots are in Japan. Donate to reputable relief agencies because the need is going to be vast.

I'll get back to talking about Lent and sin and such things next week. Today my heart is with all those who suffer, and while at times like this I don't always like "The Deal," I will always be thankful to God for life, love and the ability to question the creator of the universe.

Amen.