

Go Light Your World:
Work, For the Night Is Coming
John 9:1-5

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Dr. J. Howard Olds

Why do bad things happen to good people? Why doesn't somebody come to help us? How could this happen in the U.S.A.? Where is God when it hurts?

It's been another unbelievable week of questions in the light of human tragedy. While our inquiring minds want concrete answers, we gather for worship knowing full well that we must live the questions. So on our way to Holy Communion, let me ask two questions that seem to be on everybody's mind.

WHY DO PEOPLE SUFFER? I picked the Scripture for today long before there was a storm named Katrina. As Jesus and the disciples went along, they encountered a man who had been blind from birth. The inquisitive disciples want to know. Who's to blame for this? Did this man sin or was it the sin of his parents that caused him to be born blind? Exactly why did this happen in the first place? We always want to know the reasons why things happen to us.

Some people say, people are to blame for the tragedy that has unfolded in our living rooms this week. People had a warning, why didn't they get out? How can you get out if you have no money, no transportation, no legs on which to walk? In dramatic fashion we have witnessed something that has been in the making in this country for a very long time. That is, the division between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have nots, the healthy and the handicapped. Maybe people do bear part of the blame—not the people stranded in New Orleans, but you and I who call ourselves Americans.

Some people say the systems failed. It's the government's fault; it's FEMA's fault. Where is the Red Cross when you need them? Why doesn't the church do something? Of course, all of us who claim to be "helpers of the hurting" bear some responsibility even though we are human and capable of being overwhelmed. Perhaps the worst thing we can do is get on television and say to people sitting on their rooftops, "We understand; we know how you feel!" We don't understand. We don't know how they feel. So let's stop pretending we do.

A group called Repent America issued a statement this week, "God's responsible for this storm." They equate the destruction of New Orleans with the leveling of Sodom and Gomorrah. At last we got what we deserved. Some atheists, who refuse to believe in God at all, will cite the suffering of people as an excuse for unbelief. Some people say God is to blame.

What will Jesus say? Jesus said in reply to the disciples, "*Neither this man nor his parents sinned.*" Waiting on tiptoes for someone to blame, we hear silence

instead. Not one theological explanation of why anybody suffers. Who's to blame? Without saying a word, Jesus answers, "*No one.*" When Job of old asks the God of the ages why people suffer, God replied, "*Your small mind could not comprehend it if I tried to explain it, oh, mortal one.*"

Why do people suffer? I don't know. Why do winds blow out of control and water destroy everything in its path? I don't know. We who have been schooled in the science of cause and effect find that hard to swallow. To everything there is a reason and an explanation to everything that happens, we like to say misquoting those famous words of Ecclesiastes.

I say to you today, "No way." There is nothing orderly about chaos. Everything does not happen for a reason. Some things just happen. To give answers where there are not answers is only to add to the confusion. So we go on with our questions.

WHAT CAN WE DO? Jesus answered that question about suffering and He answers it pretty direct. "*This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. Work while it is day. For the night is coming when no one can work.*" What a mandate in the face of suffering.

Seize the opportunity. The Chinese symbols for "crisis" are identical to those for the word "opportunity." The word "crisis" literally translated in Chinese reads: "A crisis is an opportunity riding the dangerous wind." What a way to web two words together—crisis and opportunity.

A Baptist friend called me the other night and said, "What do you think John Wesley would do in this crisis? It caused me to think of this Wesley quote:

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as you ever can.

We have an opportunity to do the works of God. Here are some ways we've begun.

- We have already sent a truck load of 90,000 bottles of water through FEMA to New Orleans. One of our members is taking it personally. I signed a check for it Friday. A second load of 100,000 bottles will be sent the first of the week.
- We are working hourly with the Red Cross on using our Family Life Center as a shelter for evacuees which will most likely take place this coming week.
- We are collecting health kits and flood buckets for United Methodist Committee on Relief who are there working on our behalf. The trailer is on our parking lot for this collection.
- We are offering to adopt ten families for long-term recovery and have notified the Red Cross of our willingness to do so.

- We can pray for God's mercy, wisdom, comfort and guidance for those suffering and those on the front lines of relief. I can't think of a better Sunday to do it—the Sunday for Holy Communion. It is an hour to pray. The prayer service this Wednesday at 6:45 will be a focused time to do so.
- We can write a check to UMCOR, our denominational relief agency on the scene, or if you prefer, send your donations to the Red Cross or Salvation Army. Money is the best gift you can make at this time.

We can discern the important in the midst of the urgent. Steven Covey in his writing urges us to, "Put first things first." Of course, Jesus understood that principle long before Covey was born. The real challenge in the midst of the urgent is the discernment of the important. It is always true.

Urgency makes us want to do something, even if the something we do is not helpful. Let me explain what I mean. With the warning of increased gas prices, people ran out and filled up their SUVs and all the gas cans they could find, creating a gas shortage in Brentwood, Tennessee, even though they were not going anywhere. That's the kind of stuff that panic is made of, making problems worse rather than better.

The sight of hungry people on the sidewalks of New Orleans and Mississippi makes us want to run out and buy a bag of groceries along with some canned goods and used clothing and put them on a truck bound for the South. This creates what is known in the relief business as the disaster that follows the disaster because it is extremely difficult to sort out a small quantity of things and get them to the right place. Send the money and let them buy the goods in quantities that does not demand sorting by volunteers.

Relief is not about making us feel good. Relief is about getting the needed resources to the right places, in the right way, for the right reason, at the right time. This is not about the news; this is about need. This is not about recognition; this is about resources. United Methodists do not need to make a big scene about going, they are already there. That is one asset of our connectional system. Let us do all the good we can and be sure the good we do makes a difference.

As we gather at the Table, let us gather to pray. Let us ask the Lord to help those in need. Let us ask the Lord to help us live by faith when we cannot live by sight.

As Mary Baynard put it:

So on I go not knowing,
 I would not if I might.
 I would rather walk in the dark with God,
 Than walk alone by the light.
 I would rather walk with Him by faith,
 Than walk alone by sight.

Amen.

