

“Turn Your Face To The Light”

In the name of our crucified Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

The summer I worked as a hospital chaplain at the then K-W Hospital in Kitchener, now Grand River Hospital, between my second and third year of seminary, the calls I dreaded most did not come from the emergency room, the psychiatric ward, or even the morgue. They came from the pediatric floor, where little babies lay in cribs with bandages covering half their heads and sweet-faced children pushed IV poles down the hall.

One day I received a call to come sit with a mother while her five year old daughter was in surgery. Earlier in the week, the girl had been playing with a friend when her head began to hurt. By the time she found her mother, she could no longer see. At the hospital, a CAT scan confirmed that a large tumour was pressing on the girl's optic nerve and she was scheduled for surgery as soon as possible.

On the day of the operation, I found the mother sitting under the fluorescent lights in the waiting room and as odd as this sounds, the mother smelled like she had just smoked an entire pack of cigarettes. She smelled as if she had puffed every one of them. She was staring at a patch of carpet in front of her, with her eyebrows raised in that half-hypnotized look that warned me to move slowly. I sat down beside her, she came to and after some small talk she told me just how awful it was. She even told me why it happened.

“It's my punishment,” she said, “for smoking these damned cigarettes. God couldn't get my attention any other way, so he made my baby sick.” Then she started crying so hard that what she said came out like a siren: “Now I'm supposed to stop, but I can't stop. I'm going to kill my own child.”

This was hard for me to hear. I decided to forego reflective listening and concentrate on remedial theology instead. “I don't believe in a God like that,” I said. “The God I know wouldn't do something like that.” The only problem with my response was that it messed with the mother's world view at the very moment she needed it most. However miserable it made her, she preferred a punishing God to an absent or capricious one. I may have been able to reconcile a loving God with her daughter's brain tumour, but at the moment she could not. If there was something wrong with her daughter, then there had to be a reason. She was even willing to be the reason. At least that way she could get a grip on the catastrophe.

Even those of us who claim to know better react the same way. Calamity strikes and we wonder what we did wrong. We scrutinize our behaviour, our relationships, our diets, our beliefs. We hunt for some cause to explain the effect, in hopes that we can stop causing it. What this tells me, anyways, is that we are less interested in truth than consequences. What we crave, above all, is control over the chaos of our lives.

In today's gospel reading, Luke does not divulge the motive of those who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. The implication is that those who died deserved what they got, or at least that is the question Jesus suggests. “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?”

It is a tempting question that solves a lot of problems. One, it answers the riddle of why bad things happen to good people. They don't. Bad things only happen to bad people. Two, it punishes sinners right out in the open as a warning to everyone. Three, it gives us a God who obeys the laws of physics. For every action, there is an opposite and equal reaction. Any questions?

It is a tempting equation, but Jesus won't go there. "No," he tells the crowd, "but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." Some would say this is what we call giving with one hand and taking with the other. No, Jesus says, there is no connection between the suffering and the sin. Whew! But unless you repent, you are going to lose some blood too. Oh!

There is no sense spending too much time trying to decipher this piece of the good news. As far as I can tell, it is not meant to aid reason but to disarm it. In an intervention aimed below his listener's heads, Jesus teaches the panic they have inside of them about all the awful things that are happening around them. They are terrified by those things, for good reason. They have searched their hearts for any bait that might bring disaster sniffing their way. They have lain awake at night making lists of their mistakes.

While Jesus does not honour their illusion that they can protect themselves in this way, he does seem to honour the vulnerability that their fright has opened up in them. It is not a bad thing for them to feel the full fragility of their lives. It is not a bad thing for them to count their breaths in the dark, not if it makes them turn toward the light.

It is that turning he wants for them, which is why Jesus tweaks their fear. Don't worry about Pilate and all the other things that can come crashing down on your heads, he tells them. Terrible things happen, and you are not always to blame. But don't let that stop you from doing what you are doing. That torn place your fear has opened up inside of you is a holy place, look around while you are there. Pay attention to what you feel. It may hurt you to stay there and it may hurt you to see, but it is not the kind of hurt that leads to death. It is the kind that leads to life.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. Depending on what you want from God, this may not sound like good news to you. I doubt that it would have sounded like good news to the mother in that waiting room. But for those of us who have discovered that we cannot make life safe nor God time, it is gospel enough. That way, whatever befalls us, we will fall the right way. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.