How is Good Friday Good?

Homily for Good Friday at St. Paul Cathedral 2014

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Peace be with you!  How is Good Friday good?  This last week I saw the recent blockbuster movie “Noah.”  It’s a fictionalized account of events that lead up to the construction of the famous “Noah’s Arc.”  Some of the events can be found in the Bible but others cannot.

One of the more compelling pieces of fictionalization in the movie involves Noah’s family.  They are trying to grasp why God who is good and the author of all creation would punish humans in such a brutal way, sending a flood to wipe all life off the face of the planet.  Just what kind of God is this?

This is even more the case when we consider what happens to God’s own son: Jesus.  Indeed, Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ” and more recently Mark Burnett’s film “The Son of God” leave a lot of people wondering, did God really want this for his son?  Both films capture the brutality of what Jesus faced.

Today, we tend to knock the edges off the reality of crucifixion.  We wear crosses as jewelry items.  But the early Church was close enough to know that when a person was crucified – literally tied or nailed to a cross – what slowly killed him was the weight of his body slowly suffocating to death.  So when the centurions broke the legs of the criminals besides the crucified Jesus, they were actually hastening death.  That means we can read the detail about the legs of Jesus NOT being broken as a fact that underscores the particularly cruel and tortuous kind of crucifixion that Jesus suffered before his death.

Why is this?  Why did Jesus have to die?  Why did Jesus have to die this way?  Why did Jesus have to die in what seems to be one of the very cruelest forms of capital punishment?  Why did someone so good have to die in such a vile way?  Why did God allow this to happen?

Aren’t these our questions too?  I suspect there is not one of us who doesn’t at some point grapple with the great paradox of a God who is totally sovereign and a creation that is radically free.

In terms of our humanity, have we not seen this radical “freedom” expressed in terrible ways?  The slaughter of seven million Jews!  The massacre of Hutus and Tutsi in Rawanda!  The terrible famines in the African sub-Sahara caused by human indifference and governmental incompetence!  The millions and millions who, today, live in poverty despite unprecedented production of global wealth!  Why?

Then there is the sovereign “freedom” of creation itself.  Why are some struck by natural disasters and others are not?  Why the randomness of death in the mudslide at Oso, Washington?
Why the human suffering from the earthquake in Valparaiso, Chile? Why the loss of 20,000 lives after the terrible tsunami in Indonesia? Why?

There is even a kind of sovereign freedom built into the human body. Why do young children die of leukemia? Why do some families seem to have more tragic deaths from Lou Gehrig’s disease than others? Why do some people have hearts or kidneys or lungs more prone to disease and deterioration than others? Why? Why the cross? Why THIS cross?

In grappling with this question, the German theologian Fr. Hans Urs von Balthasar suggests that the very manner by which Jesus suffers and dies means that no human suffering ever remains unknown to God. Why? Because, in his tortuous death, Jesus – as God – takes divine light into the darkest corners of human suffering, the most violent corners of human action, and the most forsaken places of human isolation. In Jesus, God deliberately chooses to take on our humanity in its most painful, violent and unjust aspects because he wants to divinize every nook and cranny of human existence and our human experience. As St. Paul notes, Jesus “…accepted death, even death on a cross….”

Certainly this does not resolve the pain, grief and sorrow we feel in the face of human tragedy. But Christ on the cross reminds us that – even in our darkest hour of suffering – we are never alone.

Indeed, as Benedictine Abbot Dom Anscar Vonier notes: “Goodness itself, sanctity itself, is fostered by the proximity of evil.” Then citing St. Augustine, Dom Vonier goes on to note: “It pleased God to make good come out of evil. God could have abolished all evil in his omnipotence. But he did not. He did a better thing. He made good come out of evil. He makes sanctity come out of it. He makes martyrs through the cruelty of man and gives the Church the most glorious traditions of fortitude and courage through the very presence of enemies in her midst and around her walls. When the great day of harvest comes, sanctity will be found so great and so high by the very reason of the wickedness that encompassed it.”

Friends, there are no easy answers to the very real questions that arise from human suffering. But I am always struck by the truth of St. Augustine’s insights when I visit parish communities all across Central Washington. I am often in awe by how human tragedy sparks Christian love, be that the loss of a loved one, the tragedy of a forest fire, or the financial generosity for our Church missionary initiatives around the world.

In so many ways, the “goodness” by which Jesus responds to unjust suffering marks our path to bring “goodness” to the broken and wounded places of our own world, too. Perhaps the “good” of Good Friday lies in the very fact that through the horrible death of Jesus on the cross we now have a pathway that lets every injustice, every suffering, every sorrow, every cruelty and every death become an instrument of grace, a catalyst of charity and – imitating Jesus – a great act of love bearing the divine light. Peace be with you!