

St. Barnabas Parish
The Ven. Douglas Edwards
March 23, 2025
Lent 3

Last month I was star gazing with an attorney friend when he asked me a simple enough question: “Are we going to have a nuclear war? I am scared.”

Imbedded in his question was a sense that he lacked control over his world, that chaos is emerging and overtaking his very life. Would evil overcome civility at such a profound level that civilization would be destroyed? Would God allow such a thing to happen? Does chaos ultimately prevail over natural order? What, if anything, can we do to bring about peace and justice when global events seem to defy our basic assumptions?

Human beings hate chaos. We generally refuse to believe in randomness and have built into our collective psyche a world paradigm to protect us from chaos. Let’s consider the opening of Genesis--

In the beginning when God created^[a] the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters.

This is theological imagery telling us that in the beginning was chaos-- a dark, formless void covered by the symbol of chaos—water. Water represents chaos because it cannot be controlled like other substances. One can hold grains of rice or cereal, but water seemingly goes where it wills. But over this chaos blows the spirit of God, bringing order out of chaos. Chaos is defeated, or at least tamed.

This is our theological bias. It is very useful for us, but it has limitations. After all, it is a human construct attempting to demonstrate that God is master over all. This comforts us that random events, tragedies, do not determine our present or our future. Hovering over our brokenness is the Spirit of God, ready to move and bring order, bring Godliness, when bad things happen to good people.

Unfortunately, in our psyche’s battle against the reality of chaos, Christianity has embraced the following corollary rule—if bad things happen to someone it is because they have sinned and are simply receiving God’s judgement.

Let me give you examples:

1. Along the same strain is the pronouncement from Archbishop Kirill, the Russian Orthodox Patriarch who preaches that the war in Ukraine is a “Metaphysical struggle against sin.” The Patriarch specifically sites Ukraine’s sin of holding a “gay parade” in 2021. Yep, a “gay rights parade” caused and justifies the ongoing war. Just how severe is God’s punishment against the gay-accepting Ukrainians?

Let’s me take you on a three-legged driving tour of California. But before we put our foot to the pedal, keep in mind this fact: California’s population is 42 million, Ukraine’s, before the war to rid it of sin, was 41 million-- very comparable. Ok, we start driving north from Santa Barbara to Monterrey and looked inside every house only to find every occupant dead. This represents the soldiers killed to date. Our second leg takes us to every home, every apartment in Kern County where every occupant is wounded from gunshot or shrapnel. These are the wounded in Kirill’s war against sin. Horrified, on our final leg we go south to LA County and enter every dwelling only to find each and every one empty. This reflects Ukrainian families who have fled their homes, mostly to Europe, from the war. This is the scope of the Russian war against Ukraine.

Again, the Russian Orthodox Patriarch claims this is God’s punishment exacted by God’s “Avenging Angel,” Vladimir Putin, because of a gay-pride parade. Many Russians find this explanation comforting. The chaos of war has been given religious order.

2. Turning to today's Gospel, Jesus is asked to explain the death of 18 workers on a construction project in Siloam. They died when a portion of the tower fell. The project was controversial because the Roman governor, Pilate—yes, the same Pilate who ordered Jesus to be crucified, was paying for the construction with money forcibly taken from the Temple treasury. So, the argument went: The workers' were in effect collaborating with the Roman governor who violated God's law by stealing temple funds. God's judgement was against both Pilate and the workers, with the workers killed by God's vengeful hand. This sort of thinking has been embraced by every resistance movement to justify retributions against occupation collaborators.

Jesus says "No!" None of the above reflect God judgement. None of the above were horrible people marked by God as deserving an early death. Further, Jesus says that our sins are no less than theirs. He turns the table and says "those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Now here is the rub. Jesus says that we are all sinners and we need to repent or we can expect nothing but calamity. The biblical Greek for sin means "to miss the mark." Lent is all about repentance. The Greek word, *metanoia*, means to change direction. It is not enough to stop missing the mark, but we must also change direction and find the mark.

Among the best teachers of repentance are the folks who take missing the mark seriously in the context of acceptance. Here are the first 7 of 12 steps toward redemption offered at any Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step 2: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Step 3: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.

Step 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Step 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Step 6: Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Step 7: Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

For Christians, the mark we seek is God. This is our antidote to the chaos in our souls and the world. Blaming victims may make you feel superior or protected from chaos, but this is wrong and perilous for your soul. Would you be a holy person? Would you like to experience inner peace during these times? If so, follow the psalmist's path.

- 1 O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you; *
my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you,
as in a barren and dry land where there is no water.
- 3 For your loving-kindness is better than life itself; *
my lips shall give you praise.
- 6 When I remember you upon my bed, *
and meditate on you in the night watches.
- 7 For you have been my helper, *
and under the shadow of your wings I will rejoice.
- 8 My soul clings to you; *
your right hand holds me fast.