

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I imagine that the shooting that took place this past week at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina is something most of us have heard about by this time. In case you didn't hear, this past Wednesday evening as parishioners gathered at this historic black church for a Bible study, a white visitor – after sitting with them for over an hour – opened fire and ultimately killed 9 innocent people. It's yet another tragedy in a long line of tragedies that has marred our country's landscape. And what makes this horror even more surreal is what happened this very same week in Spokane, Washington. There, a chapter president of the NAACP, who is actually white racially-speaking, resigned, because she deceived everyone into thinking she was a black woman because she identifies as a trans-racial person. In the first instance it's white hates black, and in the second it's white tries to be black!

Well, as I was watching some of the TV coverage of this mass shooting in Charleston, it brought to mind other recent tragedies like the Nickel Mines school shooting in Lancaster County or the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre in Connecticut. And that ancient, primeval question again came right to the fore: Why do bad things happen to good people?

It is by no co-incidence that today's first reading addresses this very question. Remember, last week we talked about God-incidences! Here, we heard from the Book of Job. You might know the story of Job from the Old Testament. He was a successful man by all accounts – with a good job, a great family, and real friends. On top of that, he was faithful to God. In fact, he was so blameless and virtuous in God's sight that one day – as the opening of the Book of Job tells us – Satan came before the throne of God. And he asked God's permission to take away all the blessings Job had in his life to see if Job would still be faithful to God then – Satan's bet was the Job would curse God when tragedy befell Him. And then the calamities came. One day his children were killed in a tragic accident. Then thieves came and stole all his livestock. Job even became infested with ulcerous boils. It's a prime example of horrible things happening to a righteous person.

And although Job never cursed God despite the counsel from others to do so, because “apparently God had cursed Job”, he and those around him, out of desperation, did direct to God that same ancient, primeval question – “Why”? God answers in stunning detail by asking Job a series of questions: “Who made the earth?” As we heard today: “Who made the sea?” “Who made light?” And much like we experience as we wrestle with such evil atrocities in our world today, Job too was reduced to silence. Of course he wasn't there when God created the world. And of course He didn't know how the sea was formed or when light was produced. But, God does know.

But if God knows the answers to these questions, then He must also know why such tragedy befell Job in the first place. And He certainly must know why innocent people suffered at the hands of violent gunmen. And yet no answers that God could ever give would alleviate all the hurt, satisfy the avalanche of all the questions, or take away the fact that it did happen.

My friends, like the disciples crossing the stormy Sea of Galilee, we too are in a boat facing the winds, the squalls, and the lightening and thunder that occur over and over again in this journey of life. Those first disciples asked Jesus, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing”, as the waves nearly sank their boat? But of course, Jesus cared – He loved them. And He loves all of us. But, Jesus did not answer their question either. He simply rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Quiet! Be still!” And they obeyed.

The point is that answers to our questions are not what is needed to get through and survive. Rather, looking to Jesus and deepening our faith in Him, is. In our lives, we are exposed to countless dangers, temptations to fall into sin, misleading advice from others, passions and desires that seek to lead us astray. But, we must “never lose confidence – when temptations arise, we must keep our eyes on God, who alone can deliver us.” For, as St. Paul says, we are a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.” And that will always be truly Good News every time there are dark, depressing news headlines. God bless you.