

St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford
Sermon by Paul Shaker
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A preacher was in rare form one Sunday, filled with fire and brimstone: "If you don't repent, you will be sent to hell where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. A man in the front row raised his hand and said, "Preacher, but I have no teeth! The preacher shot back, "Teeth will be provided!"

We all know that life is not fair. Today, the Gospel tells us about two tragedies: First, Galileans killed in a surprise attack. Second, The Tower of Siloam fell and killed 18 innocent people. Was it their sin or the sin of their parents?

We still ask the same questions:

If God loves us, why did He send a tornado to kill 23 people in Alabama, or allow 50 people to get shot in New Zealand? What do insurance companies call tornados and earthquakes? Acts of God!

After the Oklahoma City bombing, there was a famous picture of a fireman holding the body of a small child. Under the picture it said:

"There but for the grace of God go I." **There but for the grace of God go I???**

You mean that beautiful child did not have God's grace? Or, that God did not love that child?

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book "When Bad Things Happen to Good People?" when his 14 year old son Aaron died. One person said to Rabbi Kushner, "You wrote a book that has helped millions of people around the world. When are you going to accept that God let your son die so that you could write that book?"

Jesus is telling us that God does not punish us with tornados. Earthquakes, drive by shootings, heroin overdoses, and cancer are NOT God's will. Despite what Pat Robertson said, 9/11 was NOT God's wrath on America for allowing abortion and homosexuality. God's wrath on America is having to listen to Pat Robertson in the first place. Biology makes cancer. Not God. God set life in motion. The wind that gives us gentle breezes sometimes turns into a horrible, destructive tornado.

But, I thought that God was all-powerful. I thought God was in control. God *is* all-powerful, but God loved us enough to give us free will. God freely took His hands and tied them behind His back. God knew that only by giving us free will could we freely and totally love Him in return. If God pulled all the strings, we would be no more than puppets. God loves us enough to want our love for him to be totally free. Otherwise it is not really love. Unfortunately, the price of free will is that sometimes bad things happen to good and to bad people.

God knew that giving us free will would mean He could not control everything, that sometimes bad things would happen. God screamed into the heart of the gunman to not shoot those 50 men, women and children. But the gunman did not listen. God feels every ounce of pain we feel. God shows us that giving us free will cost Him more than it costs us.

A woman came to me and said, "Paul, my ankle hurts. Pray for my ankle to heal." Every Sunday after that, she said with a smile, "My ankle still hurts! A lot of good your prayers have done!" The miracle was not that God made her ankle feel better. The miracle was that we laughed together. We became friends. That love and laughter are the Burning Bush, God's love burning inside us so we don't burn out. It is the fire of God's love that keeps us from letting our hearts become like stone. People betray us. It is so easy to let hatred turn our hearts into stone if we let it.

Repentance is asking God to take the bitterness from our hearts. In 1990, a drug dealer came into the church where I was a priest. When he saw the children hugging their parents and neighbors at the sign of peace, I saw him fall to the ground and start to cry. He told me he never had that love growing up. Repentance is giving God a second chance, crying with God when you go through the pain of divorce. Getting angry with God when life is not fair.

I remember getting so angry with God when I realized that I was different from other boys. My friends talked about girls. They went out on dates. I hid in my room and studied. I was having dreams that were not of girls. I was really afraid. I yelled at God, "God, I did not ask to be born this way. You said whatever we ask in your name you will do. In Jesus' name, I do not want to be gay. I don't want to hurt my parents." God did not answer me. For years, I stayed in the closet.

Our priest was preparing us for confirmation. He asked me what I would do if I were in the back seat of my father's car with a beautiful woman. "Of course, Father, I would show her respect, and do everything the church told me to do." Ironically, it was in the seminary, where 65% of the seminarians were gay, that I finally felt able to **accept myself, to come out.**

God finally answered my prayer. I stood up, raised my arms, and cried out, "I am who I am!" I realized that I was as close to God as I was to my own heart. For the first time, I was not ashamed of who I was. In my prayer, I could feel God loving me and letting me know He loved me just as I am. God's love is the Burning Bush that burns in my heart. This is the love that keeps us going when life is not fair. For the first time, I can come to church here at St. John's and not pretend to be someone I am not. You don't make me feel ashamed. Repentance is changing our mind, seeing that God is always with us, laughing in our joy and crying in our

sadness. God does not cause tragedies to happen, but God desperately wants to transform our pain into hope, to feel that love like a Burning Bush in our lives. I received a card one day with a picture of beavers working on the river. Most of them looked disgusted, bored, and unhappy. One, however, was whistling and carrying his logs on his shoulder with a snap in his step. Inside the card it said, “When you believe in God, even Monday mornings aren’t that bad.”