

***“Why do bad things...”***

*A Homily by Stephen Martz for the people of Holy Innocents & St. Nicholas  
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*Job 38:1-7 + Psalm 104 + Hebrews 5:1-10 +  
Mark 10:35-45*

As we prepare our two congregations to take a giant step together, I cannot help but notice our companions today are Job -- and some quarrelsome disciples.

We all know the story of Job, a righteous and blameless man, who becomes caught up in huge forces, way larger than himself. He loses everything – wealth, family, health, even his dignity. The Book of Job is the story of his coming to terms with a God who would allow such calamity to befall him in spite of his holy life.

*Why do bad things happen to good people?* Job doesn't know, and God's answer from the whirlwind is, to many, not completely satisfactory. And so the question persists. We continue to ask it today, as our ancestors have before us.

It's a question that's been an important part of my spiritual journey.

- In the 1960s, like many of my generation, I sought to reconcile the horrors of war and racism with a God of power and might – and love
- I studied the Holocaust intensely during the mid-1970s, wrestling with the enormity of the Shoah and the near destruction of God's chosen people.

- And in the 1980s, I was immersed in ministry to people with AIDS, where again I grappled with how to reconcile terrible human suffering and a good, loving, and powerful God.

My answer, after all the years of struggle, is provisional, and not unlike God's answer from the whirlwind. God's goodness and love is, to me, incontestable. I've felt it and known it in my life. Yet I've also seen the power of evil up close, and its existence seems to me equally undeniable.

All I can say is that from my present human vantage point, I cannot understand, although I believe one day I will know; I will see the irreconcilable reconciled. But I've learned something else along the way; that is the power of joy and hope and love, and the importance of living from these.

Today, and in the weeks ahead, we begin to absorb the painful news that the time has come for the building that has long housed the Church of the Holy Innocents to close. I know a church building closing is not a comparable tragedy to slavery and racism; to the Shoah, terrible illnesses, or the ravages of war.

Yet the building at 425 Illinois Boulevard has been a spiritual home to many wonderful people for four decades. It has held their joys and sorrows, marked the great transitions of their lives, and been a place they have known God.

And so, inevitably we will ask: Why is this bad thing happening to such good people? Why couldn't it have been different? How did things reach this point? How could God let this happen?

I would love to be able to stand before you and explain with great eloquence *Why* and *How* this has come to pass. Yet all I can offer is our Christian faith that from death comes life, and then invite you to embrace life. This will take courage, for it means first of all we must let go of what we are holding.

For the people of Holy Innocents, this will mean letting go of a beloved building. For the people of St. Nicholas, it will mean sharing a beloved building, and allowing it to be reshaped until it belongs to all. For both congregations it will mean living with joy and hope and love so we can embrace the new things and new people God is giving us.

As hard as this may be, I am believe we will be successful because I am convinced God is doing something new wonderful with us, and is guiding us in ways far beyond our personal preferences. Let me explain what I mean with a confession.

When I began this ministry with the two churches, my heart was only part way in it. I undertook it because it made strategic sense. But, truth be told, when I heard myself volunteering to work in two parishes, one part of me thought: *Boy, you've gone bonkers! What are you doing?*

As Carla sometimes reminds me, I've spent much of my children's college tuition these past four and one-half years training to be a Jungian analyst. Analytic work has been and is deeply meaningful to me. When I completed my required four years of classes in May, I was looking forward to using the day and a half this freed up each week to expand my analytic practice.

And, frankly, I was hoping to earn back some of that tuition money before the kids reach college in a few years! Instead, I heard myself volunteering to cut back my analytic hours and increase my time in parish ministry.

Now, I'm the elder son of an alcoholic and I know all too well the rescuer in me. I knew part of my motivation was rescuing. I know, too, from years of painful experience, that when my rescuer mounts his horse and goes out to save someone or something, I'm usually the one who gets slain – along with my family.

So, I confess, I was divided when I began this work. Yes, it was the right thing to do, but maybe not for me. Imagine how surprised I am, then, to realize I've fallen in love with the people of Holy Innocents, deepened my love for the people of St. Nicholas, and never been happier in parish ministry.

I am sure God has been doing something wonderful with me and has guided me into a place I probably shouldn't have gone. Of course, just because I love what I'm doing doesn't prove God is doing something wonderful with *all of us*. This could be just my thing – or I could just be plain bonkers.

But I'm not. This is not just about me. I may see it more clearly than anyone because I've spent the most time with each congregation, but something hope-filled and wonderful has begun.

- It is apparent in the grace-filled interactions between members of both churches; in the willingness of the people of both congregations to embrace

one another. One of the joys of this work for me has been to hear separately from each congregation how much they like the people in the other congregation.

- It is evident in the synergy between the mission the two congregations do – and in the interesting fact that ministry and mission has increased in both congregations since our relationship began
- It is palpable in the gifts each congregation brings to this new endeavor; the dedication and commitment of the people of Holy Innocents will immeasurably enrich the vitality and future orientation of the people of St. Nicholas, and vice-versa.

No, I'm not bonkers. God truly is in our midst, bringing about something new and full of life. May we open our hands and accept the gift being offered.

I'll close by relating what I experienced Tuesday night when I met with the Bishop's Committee at Holy Innocents to relay the news that it would be that congregation's building which closed. The grief, as you can imagine, was great.

What blew me away, though, was the hope – I did not expect to see it that quickly – and, even more, the ability to hold grief and hope in tension. Holding those two

powerful emotions together is a mark of considerable spiritual maturity – which is probably one reason I’ve been so drawn to the people of Holy Innocents.

Ginny Gibbs, participating in the meeting by speakerphone from her vacation in Utah, was the first to give this voice, when she said that as sad as this day was, it was also a new beginning, one filled with hope for new ministry and new relationships.

As the meeting continued, every member of the Bishop’s Committee said the same thing in their own words. I was astonished and humbled. And I could not help thinking how glad Jesus would have been to have had this group of disciples with him that night instead of the vain and quarrelsome group he actually called.

I am not so naïve to think this coming together of St. Nicholas and the Holy Innocents will be a piece of cake. I’m sure we will have our moments. But if we continue to hold our grief and sadness in tension with our hope and love, we will in time step into a bright Easter morn. And Jesus will be really glad.