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Is God in COVID-19?

Apr 7, 2020 · Scott Hoezee

When something tragic or devastating happens in our lives, it's our natural human desire to understand why it happened. All through history people—some well-meaning, others a bit judgmental and mean-spirited—have tried to parse major events in terms of what God was doing or saying through it all. For example:

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- Just over thirty years ago, after a devastating earthquake in San Francisco, pastor and seminary president, Richard Mouw was invited to preach in a California church. Mouw sensed that the congregation wanted him to give them the “answer” as to why the earthquake happened. What’s more, he sensed some might have wanted to hear from Mouw what a few other prominent pastors in the U.S. were saying: the earthquake was a punishment from God. God was punishing San Francisco for having such a large gay population and/or for other lapses and sins. Mouw didn’t want to play that game and so chose as his preaching text the line from 1 Kings 19 (the story where Elijah is hiding in a cave) that says “God was not in the earthquake.”
- After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, some religious figures suggested the attacks were God’s punishment for America’s tolerance of abortions or gay marriage.
- And recently in my seminary Old Testament Prophets class—back only a few short weeks ago when we could still *have* classes in person—a student asked me and my co-professor to react to something he had heard: that the COVID-19 virus that started in Wuhan, China, was God’s punishment of the Chinese government for persecuting the Church.

#2 Thessalonians

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Connecting Dots?

Most of the time—if not all of the time—trying to connect the dots like this leads to error. It did in the New Testament. In John 9, Jesus and the disciples encounter a man who had been born blind. “Who sinned that this bad thing happened, Lord?” the disciples asked. “Was it this guy or his parents?” Jesus’ answer was “Neither.” It doesn’t work this way.

In Luke 13, Jesus and some others hear of two sad things: Pilate had killed a group of Galileans and eighteen people had died when a tower in Siloam fell on them. To those who wanted to connect these bad events to God’s direct punishing of the sins of those people who had died, Jesus once again essentially said, “It doesn’t work that way.” In fact, he went on to say that those victims were not lesser or greater sinners than anyone else and so our chief job is not to connect dots of judgment where others are concerned but to make sure we repent of our own sins on a regular basis. That ought to keep most of us plenty busy.

So Where Is God?

So where is God in the midst of this pandemic? Probably where he always is: close to the brokenhearted and the sick. God laments yet another event that mars his good creation in ways he never wanted when in the beginning he said: “Let there be light.” Sickness, disease, the poverty that makes this far worse for millions, the

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#bold faith

#Book of Ruth

#Bride of Christ

#Calling

#Christ

#Christ's birth

#Christ's return

#Christian doctrine

#Christian Faith

#ChristianCharacter

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#Christmas

#Christmas Story

#Christology

#Church

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#Confession

disruption, and most of all the death: none of it is part of God's original plan.

Can the Church use the seriousness of this moment to call people to God? Can we realize afresh how precarious our lives are and so entrust ourselves to a God who loves us and this broken world so much that he sent his only Son to die for it all? Yes and yes. This is our positive witness of love and grace.

The COVID-19 crisis has descended on us during the season of Lent, a time set aside to follow Jesus to the cross. Lent began on Ash Wednesday when we were called to remember that we are but dust. None of us knew back on February 26th how quickly our frailty and need for salvation would become so abundantly apparent. Yet here we are only a few short weeks later.

The Real Message

So is God conveying some specific message through this pandemic? Is God punishing some specific sins? Is this all a sign of the End Times? Definitely trying to answer questions like this will likely lead to error.

But God *is* always conveying a message: it's the Good News of the Gospel. Jesus saves! Grace abounds! Is God punishing sins? He already did that on Golgotha—it was on Jesus that the iniquities of us all got laid. Are these the End Times? Jesus indicated we've been living in the last days ever since his resurrection from the dead. And because of that, the conclusion of the

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matter is already known: Jesus wins! Jesus reigns! The kingdoms of this world have become the Kingdom of our God and of his Christ.

If this pandemic helps us to focus on and proclaim these messages, then we will not be led into error. We will be led into hope.

Are you seeking peace and comfort from God's Word during this uncertain time? If so, study some of the most comforting passages in God's Word with *Groundwork*. Subscribe to *Groundwork* and receive "Words of Comfort" a four-week Bible study series delivered right to your email inbox.

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