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# Why, God?

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WASHINGTON

*When my friend Robin was dying, she asked me if I knew a priest she could talk to who would not be, as she put it, “too judgmental.” I knew the perfect man, a friend of our family, a priest conjured up out of an old black-and-white movie, the type who seemed not to exist anymore in a Catholic Church roiled by scandal. Like Father Chuck O’Malley, the New York inner-city priest played by Bing Crosby, Father Kevin O’Neil sings like an angel and plays the piano; he’s handsome, kind and funny. Most important, he has a gift. He can lighten the darkness around the dying and those close to them. When he held my unconscious brother’s hand in the hospital, the doctors were amazed that Michael’s blood pressure would noticeably drop. The only problem was Father Kevin’s reluctance to minister to the dying. It tears at him too much. He did it, though, and he and Robin became quite close. Years later, he still keeps a picture of her in his office. As we’ve seen during this tear-soaked Christmas, death takes no holiday. I asked Father Kevin, who feels the subject so deeply, if he could offer a meditation. This is what he wrote:*

How does one celebrate Christmas with the fresh memory of 20 children and 7 adults ruthlessly murdered in Newtown; with the searing image from Webster of firemen rushing to save lives ensnared in a burning house by a maniac who wrote that his favorite activity was “killing people”? How can we celebrate the love of a God become flesh when God doesn’t seem to do the loving thing? If we believe, as we do, that God is all-powerful and all-knowing, why doesn’t He use this knowledge and power for good in the face of the evils that touch our lives?

The killings on the cusp of Christmas in quiet, little East Coast towns stirred a 30-year-old memory from my first months as a priest in parish ministry in Boston. I was awakened during the night and called to Brigham and Women’s Hospital because a girl of 3 had died. The family was from Peru. My Spanish was passable at best. When I arrived, the little girl’s mother was holding her lifeless body and family members encircled her.

They looked to me as I entered. Truth be told, it was the last place I wanted to go. Who had just lost their child, I didn’t have any words, in English or Spanish, that were cheap, empty. But I stayed. I prayed. I sat with them until after sunrise, sometimes speaking, to let them know that they were not alone in their suffering.



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question in their hearts then, as it is in so many hearts these days, is “Why?”

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The truest answer is: I don’t know. I have theological training to help me to offer some way to account for the unexplainable. But the questions linger. I remember visiting a dear friend hours before her death and reminding her that death is not the end, that we believe in the Resurrection. I asked her, “Are you there yet?” She replied, “I go back and forth.” There was nothing I wanted more than to bring out a bag of proof and say, “See? You can be absolutely confident now.” But there is no absolute bag of proof. I just stayed with her. A life of faith is often lived “back and forth” by believers and those who minister to them.

Implicit here is the question of how we look to God to act and to enter our lives. For whatever reason, certainly foreign to most of us, God has chosen to enter the world today through others, through us. We have stories of miraculous interventions, lightning-bolt moments, but far more often the God of unconditional love comes to us in human form, just as God did over 2,000 years ago.

I believe differently now than 30 years ago. First, I do not expect to have all the answers, nor do I believe that people are really looking for them. Second, I don’t look for the hand of God to stop evil. I don’t expect comfort to come from afar. I really do believe that God enters the world through us. And even though I still have the “Why?” questions, they are not so much “Why, God?” questions. We are human and mortal. We will suffer and die. But how we are with one another in that suffering and dying makes all the difference as to whether God’s presence is felt or not and whether we are comforted or not.

One true thing is this: Faith is lived in family and community, and God is experienced in family and community. We need one another to be God’s presence. When my younger brother, Brian, died suddenly at 44 years old, I was asking “Why?” and I experienced family and friends as unconditional love in the flesh. They couldn’t explain why he died. Even if they could, it wouldn’t have brought him back. Yet the many ways that people reached out to me let me know that I was not alone. They really were the presence of God to me. They held me up to preach at Brian’s funeral. They consoled me as I tried to comfort others. Suffering isolates us. Loving presence brings us back, makes us belong.

A contemporary theologian has described mercy as “entering into the chaos of another.” Christmas is really a celebration of the mercy of God who entered the chaos of our world in the person of Jesus, mercy incarnate. I have never found it easy to be with people who suffer, to enter into the chaos of others. Yet, every time I have done so, it has been a gift to me, better than the wrapped and ribboned packages. I am pulled out of myself to be love’s presence to someone else, even as they are love’s presence to me.

I will never satisfactorily answer the question “Why?” because no matter what response I give, it will always fall short. What I do know is that an unconditionally loving presence soothes broken hearts, binds up wounds, and renews us in life. This is a gift that we can all give, particularly to the suffering. When this gift is given, God’s love is present and Christmas happens daily.