The Question of "Why?: Spiritual Reactions to the Tsunami Event

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol13/iss2/14

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Andrea Bollie

Photographs alive in my mind,
A place unshared.
Words - empty - to describe
Lepers, lying on boards with wheels,
Pulling themselves up the disheveled street.

Children sweeping under my feet,
Begging for one rupee coin.
Mothers with baby on hip,
Dip to their mouth and to my hand,
Begging for some rupee coin or a bite to eat.

A woman in labor, a woman cries,
A woman despised;
Another girl child born.
Abandoned by her husband
Because she could not produce a boy.

Children starving in their beds.
Sick girls dying in the corner,
Ravenous and lice infested
Because of their gender.

Streams of urine outline their homes.
I gasp for my breath and numb my face;

10 rupees in my pocket when I left the house.
12 stop lights we traveled, 30 beggars,
Some lepers, some women, some old and some blind.
Grabbing my hands, reaching out.
Only 10 rupee coins in my pocket.

Cries and hollers, streams of urine, infection, amputation,
Hate, love, abandonment, and starvation, all circling my brain,
Looking for a place, an image, an answer, on paper.
Tracing my heart, wetting my eyes, remaining alive.

THE QUESTION OF "WHY?"

SPIRITUAL REACTIONS TO THE TSUNAMI EVENT

Rev. Dr. Herbert Hoefer, Missions Chair, Division of Theology

Why do bad things happen?
Why do they happen to good people?
Do events, good and bad, just happen randomly?
Do all things happen for a purpose?
Is there some meaning behind history, behind my history?
Is there some divine will that orders everything?

We all have faced these questions in our life, and we will face them all through life. We know that pain and suffering are facts to be faced. The illustration I use for myself is that we are all standing on the battlefield of life. Bullets are flying all around us. Inevitably, some bullets will hit each of us. Even so, why should some people get hit devastatingly, and others not?

In January-February, I spent two months in India and Sri Lanka as the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod Area Director for mission work in those lands. I had served as a missionary in India for 15 years, so I am familiar with the cultures, religions, and one of the languages, Tamil. Just before my wife and I left, the tsunami hit those lands on December 26th. LCMS World Relief quickly contacted me in India and directed me to go to Sri Lanka to head a survey team to determine how we might best help the survivors of this disaster.

We went primarily to the heavily hit region of northeastern Sri Lanka, which is Tamil-speaking. Our partner church in Sri Lanka is a Tamil-speaking church, and they had already made several trips to provide emergency relief to that region. We thought of focusing on this region also because it is under the control of the Tamil Tigers, a terrorist organization that has been leading a rebellion against the Sri Lankan government. For this reason, very few foreign non-government organizations were willing to go to the region to help.

We thought we would have a niche of unmet need by working through our partner church. Indeed, the efforts of our partner church, the Lanka Lutheran Church, have been very well received. It is an outreach of Christian love to Hindus and Muslims, who have invited the LLC to establish "Lutheran Villages" by rehabilitating people in three locations of the region.

Along with the practical work of trying to discern how to help get these people back on their feet economically, we inevitably carried on a ministry of compassion. One of the major needs we found was the need to find meaning in the catastrophic event. Most of the survivors we met were plagued by various forms of "survivor guilt." They had lost loved ones, neighbors, and whole communities, but they had survived: "Why me? I am no better and in many ways worse than those who died. I feel guilty that I have survived while they perished." How does
one help people work through these deep feelings that plague them day and night?

People were also plagued by philosophical questions of meaning: What is the message/meaning of the event? Because I spoke the local language, I was able to converse with the people on this deeply unsettling topic. Buddhists and Hindus responded according to their belief in the eternal law of karma: bad things happen to you because of bad things done. One young Buddhist lady, for example, said: "All the good have been taken away. Only the bad are left. I am left here to suffer. I am one of the bad."

When we were looking to help a Muslim village, I requested to meet the local Imam. We wanted to determine if they would accept help from Christians, since we knew some Muslims want help only from fellow Muslims. We had heard that Kuwaiti and Saudi Arabian representatives had already helicoptered in to see the situation. The Imam and his mosque elders quickly responded that they would accept help from anyone.

I asked the Imam and his Council members also how they were interpreting this horrendous event to their people. They gave explanations like: "This was all decided beforehand by God so that it had to happen." "It is a warning from God that we should cease our sinful ways and follow His commands." "God was showing that He is in charge." "People who believed in God and died in this event went to heaven, so there was no injustice."

The crisis of faith that occurs in events of such great suffering was reflected in the tearful comment of one Muslim woman: "I can understand if some human being would do such a cruel thing, but I cannot understand when God does it."

If such a disaster would happen to me, what would my crisis of faith be? Since it does happen, shouldn't it be a crisis for my faith in a just, loving God? "Tsunamis" of greater and lesser magnitude are happening all the time. How do I make sense of it? Is it just my need to make sense, but there really is no sense at all?

There are two instances recorded in the New Testament where Jesus was confronted with this question. One is in John 9 where Jesus' disciples ask him why a man would be born blind; whose fault was it? The other is in Luke 13 where Jesus refers to those who blamed people who had experienced personal tragedy saying that they must have somehow deserved this punishment. In neither instance does Jesus provide an answer to the question of "Why?" Rather, He calls His disciples to "do the works of Him Who sent me" and to repent of their own short-sightedness in life.

When I asked Christians in Sri Lanka why this happened, they simply gave two gestures, one lifting their hands up in questioning to God and the other stretching out toward the needs around them. In response to the Muslim woman's lament about the cruelty of God, I could only respond: "God does care for you, and we are here to share that love of God with you."