

Voices: Suffering and our role as people of faith

March 23, 2020

Our role as Christians during this pandemic goes well beyond meeting basic human needs. Each member of the Texas Christian Community Development Network has a type of priestly role to help those who are afraid, confused and maybe even angry about the chaos caused by the COVID-19 outbreak.

Listening to the under-resourced in our communities who may lose jobs, housing and even their own health is our privilege. We cannot “fix” it, but we can stand in the gap as God’s representatives to assure them he is there. God has been there through centuries of suffering and pain of his people.

Throughout history, human suffering has impacted millions of people. Whether from plagues like the Black Death in the 14th century; pandemics such as smallpox, cholera, HIV/AIDS and Ebola; or from extreme poverty, wars, natural disasters or political corruption, pain and death have impacted billions of families. Pain seems to be everywhere.

Why does God allow suffering?

How could a good God allow such pain and suffering? Regardless of one’s religion or worldview, there is a deep need—especially in times of crisis—to understand the source of the problem. Even those who have been numbed by a secular existential mindset often are awakened to the reality of death as a reality that draws near.

The thousands of teens and young adults who played beach volleyball for

days and drank too much beer during their spring breaks eventually see things differently when a relative, friend or acquaintance dies from a disease, accident or crisis. Funerals have a subtle way of jump-starting the big questions of life.

There are those who simply believe if there is a God, then he/she/it is distant and unconcerned for situations we mortals face.

While the major religions differ on the source and cause of human suffering, Christianity is not singular in its answer.

Some believe pandemics like COVID-19 are sent as punishment for a rebellious world, often quoting “end-times” verses out of Revelation.

Others believe suffering is primarily God’s way of deepening the faith of those who have lived shallow and compromising lifestyles to help them recognize their finitude and commitment.

Other followers of Christ are comfortable with a high view of the sovereignty of God and trust he is in control and can be trusted amidst all the trials of life we cannot understand.

How could a good God suffer?

Perhaps a better question than how a good God can allow suffering might be, “How can it be that a good God also can suffer?”

The word “compassion” comes from words that mean “to enter the pain.” For many Christians, feeling sorry for someone who is struggling is enough. Yet, the very essence of historical Christianity is God through Christ is a compassionate God and “became flesh” and took on our pain and suffering by his sacrifice and suffering. He enters our pain.

How can a “good person” allow suffering?

While certainly we should be thankful the coronavirus cannot be compared to the Black Death, perhaps these unique days of pandemic offer us a chance to ask big questions that matter.

Could it be one outcome of our stay-home retreats is to spend some time reflecting on our own lives?

Can we genuinely explore our own compassion threshold to enter the pain of others across the street or around the world?

Do we care for the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the immigrant and all those who are suffering in ways we cannot imagine?

Then can we ask ourselves, “What am I doing about it?”

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