

Why? This was the one word question I was asked by family members when I was the first responder as East Bridgewater Fire Chaplain arriving at the fatal house fire that took place in town a few weeks ago. These people had lost their beloved husband, father, and grand-father along with their lovely home. They were trying to make sense of the horrific event so they asked the clergyman, “Why?”

This is the question that clergy are often asked in times of great tragedy. ‘Why’ is the short form of the question. Longer forms of the question include, ‘Why is God doing this to us?’ or ‘Why is God letting this happen?’ or ‘Why did God take such a good man?’ or ‘Am I being punished by God?’ and on. You get the picture.

My response to each of the family members who asked me, ‘why’ was the same for all three. I hugged them and said, “I am so sorry for your loss.” That was no time for theology. They were in the early stage of trauma. Words have little effect in the midst of trauma. There was no making sense in that situation.

The question needs sorting out, however. A sermon is a good place to do it, so lucky you, here we go. I was asked the question three times by three different family members, but none of them pressed me on the question demanding an answer. If I had been pressed for an

answer, I would have said something along the lines of, 'So you are really asking where is God in all of this.' That is a perfectly valid question.

My answer is that God didn't do this. This was a terrible accident and tragedy. I'll tell you where God is on this. God is on your side. God grieves at this as much if not more than you. In the Gospel of John that we heard this morning, Mary and Martha were grieving the death of their beloved brother, Lazarus. Jesus joined them in their grief and Jesus wept.

The Book of Genesis has the creation story in which God brings order to chaos. Well if that is the case, God did not finish the job. There is still plenty of chaos out there.

Tragedy befalls humans in many forms. There are acts of nature: hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, lightening, you name it, cause enormous human suffering and death.

Accidents happen all the time. A bolt shears in an engine on flight 205, the plane crashes, people die and lives are ruined. Flight 207 with the same airplane flies and lands safely and people go on with their lives. An 86 year-old East Bridgewater man starts his lawn mower for the first time in the season and it catches fire, the engine blows up and he dies.

People have free will. We have the ability to kill and cure each other. We have the ability to help and to hurt each other. This is the randomness of our world.

I reject the idea that God sends tragedy on people. I also reject the idea that God punishes people for their sins through tragedy, or that God is sending a sign. I also reject the idea that God has a plan and that we are merely acting out that plan. Not only do I not believe that God is like that but I could not worship such a God.

The times when I have been most angry with other clergy has been during funerals. I have heard clergy say that God, 'called the person home.' Ugh! Even worse, I heard a clergy person say at the funeral of a child that God needed that child more than we did. That makes me crazy. That is the worst possible image of God. I can't imagine how someone could think that, but they do.

No, let the gospel teach us what God is like. When we weep, Jesus weeps with us. God is also there for us in other times. God inspires us to do things that we did not think we were capable of doing. God inspires us to be compassionate, forgiving, kind, and loving.

One thing that I find curious about the 'why' question is that it comes up when people face tragedy. I wonder why it doesn't come up when good things happen. When love happens, the birth of a child, an act of compassion... why? Where is God in that? It is curious to me

why God gets blamed when bad things happen but not when good things happen. Humans are a curious lot.

I can tell you this. The day of that fire, April 24, 2017 will never be forgotten by me or anyone else who was involved. It was the most intense day of my ministry and I hope and pray that it is never repeated. It was one of those times when core questions about life, death, and faith hit us in the face. I'm glad I was there to minister to the family when they were most in need. I also contacted their parish priest who came immediately. Between the two of us, I believe they got some helpful ministry.

This, by the way, is a tragedy that effects the entire community. The grandson of the deceased is a math teacher at East Bridgewater Jr/Sr High. Police and firefighters were coming up and hugging them. They were on a first name basis. This community will be reeling from this for a long while.

I think those big questions that I have been speaking of cannot be dealt with in time of crisis. I think that this is a setting to work them out. I am calling for a 'sermon talk back' today. After worship and sometime of fellowship lets come back into the sanctuary and talk about this. Let's talk about the horrific event and how it has affected you. Let's talk about the sermon and the thoughts I have set forth in it. All views are valid. It is safe to say anything that's on your mind.

Let me finish up by saying that I hope and pray nothing like what happened to the Pellegrino family happens to you. But that is not to say you will not face tragedy in your life. Very few lives are lived without the experience of tragedy. I pray that when that time comes you cope with it by not turning away from God but turning to God. God is there for you then and God is there for you now. AMEN