

BURIED - Lent 3c – March 7, 2010

Wisdom is not so much having more answers as it is asking better questions. “Why did this happen?” is a question that rises insistently after events like Haiti, Chile, 9-11, Katrina. It rose in the minds of Jesus’ companions, too. Why were these people killed when a building fell down? Why were these people killed by a violent ruler? “Why did it happen?” It’s a natural question, but is there a better question?

Every January, students preparing for ministry at ELCA seminaries take the month for off-campus study: hands-on experience in new settings (a prison, an inner city mission, an Indian reservation). This January three students from Wartburg Seminary were doing their “J term” at St. Joseph Home for Boys in Port au Prince, Haiti. That’s where they were when the earth began to shake on January 12.

Reports are that it shook for about 35 seconds, and St. Joseph’s Home collapsed. Ben Larson and his wife Renee, and Ben’s cousin Jon – all seniors to be ordained this year – were inside. Jon and Renee managed to get out of the building with difficulty, but Renee saw two of the building’s six stories collapse on her husband Ben. Peering into the ruins, she couldn’t see him, but she could hear him.

Not yelling for help or moaning, he was singing. She shouted that she and Jon were all right and that she loved him. Then his singing stopped.

Figures indicate that about 200,000 bodies have been recovered. Another 100,00 may yet be found. With the overwhelming devastation, who would attempt the rescue or recovery of one seminarian from the midwest? The US Embassy, the US State Department, the US Military told Renee they could get to it in about a month... Three days after the quake, she and Jon returned to the US, leaving Ben under the rubble. Back home, leaders from the ELCA found ways to pull together a crew of Haitian locals and paid them to move fallen plaster and beams in a recovery effort. They found Ben after 16 days.

Ben was 25 years old, married for two years, soon to be ordained, the son of two Lutheran pastors – one of them, April Larson, the first woman to become a bishop in the ELCA. Why did this happen to him – and to 300,00 others?

We have heard speculation about such things. We've heard that God targeted Haiti because of their superstitious religion and rituals; that God targeted New Orleans for some of those same practices; that In 2004 God sent a tsunami crashing into Indonesia to reduce the Muslim population. And God sent airplanes

into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9/11, why? I don't see the value in this kind of speculation; I don't agree with these conclusions; I listen to the teaching of Jesus: God is not out to get bad people with falling buildings.

“Do you think that those who died were the worst sinners?” Jesus asks. After this non-answer, he changes the subject, turns it right back on his listeners and warns them that they had better repent. It seems a strange thing to do, flipping the conversation around like that; it's the kind of thing Jesus (in his wisdom) does a lot. “Why do buildings fall down and crush people” is not the question. Since buildings sometimes fall down and crush people, since cars get in wrecks, since there is violence in warfare, in our streets and even in our home... since those things happen, what shall we do? Repent. Next time, any minute now, it could be you.

Always we need to remember what repentance is. An apology from Mark Mc Gwire about steroids or from Tiger Woods about infidelities is not repentance. Feeling really bad for something you've done – whether it becomes known or not - is not repentance; it's remorse. In a lot of situations, remorse is called for: we should feel bad and be apologetic when we hurt or betray someone. But repentance is turning from past behaviors and going another way. Repentance

rearranges your brain and your will, so that the thing you did before that makes you feel guilt and shame – you do not do that thing any more. No more cheating, no more betrayal, no more lying about it.

We won't necessarily know if Tiger Woods and Dave Letterman repent – if their behavior is changed. But repentance is not just for some who apologize on TV. Repentance is for you and me – who may or may not have cheated in games or in business, who may or may not have betrayed a spouse or a friend, who may or may not lash out in anger, may or may not engage in malicious gossip, may or may not care for self at the expense of neighbor, may or may not compromise our values and betray ourselves, may or may not think of God as an occasional helper instead of our always and forever Lord.

Look around, Jesus is saying. Buildings fall down when no one is expecting it. Don't delay; repent now. Live as you should; be who you should be, now. "But that's hard," we say. Yes, it is. Thank God for the parable of the fig tree, tacked on to this story. The fig tree was not what it was meant to be, not producing fruit as it was meant to do, and was about to be cut down. The caretaker of the tree said to the owner of the tree, "Give it more time." If we have more time (this afternoon, today, this month), we should repent and pray God to give us grace to

become what we are meant to be: faithful disciples who bear fruit for God, wise disciples who ask not “why did this happen” but “since this has happened, what shall I do?” Amen.