

10-15-17 BUCYRUS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?”

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Scripture: Romans 5:1-11 NRSV

I saw the movie, *Pearl Harbor*. I know that it is just a movie. I am quite certain that things on December 7, 1941 didn't happen just like they happened in the movie. Movies are entertainment and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was very real.

Pearl Harbor is a long movie, three hours, with the first hour or perhaps even more showing events that proceeded the attack - Japan's anger with the U.S. and possible warnings the government might have had. The last hour or so dealt with a retaliatory strike against Tokyo. Then there was the part in the middle, the actual attack on Pearl Harbor.

I don't want you to think by my description that this movie is some boring war documentary that goes on for three hours. That is far from the case. The movie does tell the story but it does so in a format that is part action movie, part love story, and part drama all rolled into one. I just don't want to mess up the whole story line for those who want to go see the movie.

In most any movie everyone has his or her favorite part. Pearl Harbor was no exception. To me it was rather obvious that the writers wanted our favorite part to be towards the end when the two heroes of the movie, played by Ben Affleck and Josh Harnett, are involved in the American retaliation with a bombing run over Tokyo. It was a moment when the good guys strike back.

While that part of the movie was good, it was not my favorite part. The part I liked best was not particularly entertaining, but it really spoke to me. The bombs landing on all of the ships with all of the loss of life and damage was very powerful. Then, in the middle of all of this carnage is a priest, standing in waist deep water with dead bodies floating all around him. He was pronouncing last rites on the dead. Then this voice in the background says three words. If you weren't paying attention it would be very easy to miss, "Where was God?" For me, it was one of the most powerful, heart wrenching movie scenes I have come across in a very long time.

It really is a very good question, however. Where was God during the attack on Pearl Harbor? For that matter, where was God when the Federal Building

in Oklahoma City was bombed, or our embassies in Africa? Where was God when the stack of logs for the Texas A&M bonfire collapsed and killed so many students? Where was God this past month or two with all the floods and hurricanes, and wildfires? Where is God in the midst of all the shootings and murders around us? Where is God when our loved ones commit suicide? Where is God whenever tragedy strikes our lives? Where is God whenever we have to deal with pain and devastation? Where is God?

This isn't really a new question to me. I have heard it many times before. I heard it again and again in seminary in response to case studies we reviewed. I heard it during real life situations I face in the course of doing ministry throughout my 21 years in ministry. I have heard it, though perhaps not in those exact words, in many visits in homes, hospitals, and nursing homes.

As I watched Pearl Harbor and heard the question again a bit of a chill ran down me. It is not an unfamiliar feeling. I have felt it many times before. I feel it just about any time I hear the question, "Where is/was God?"

I think that there is really another question that is at the root of this question. As I have observed it there are two possibilities, though there may be others as well. For many the real question is, why has God abandoned me at the very moment when I need Him most? It seems to me that the anonymous poet of "Footprints in the Sand" had that right. Saying in essence, I didn't abandon you. It was then that I was carrying you.

The second root question I have observed is, if God is alive and real, and God really loves and cares for His children, how can He possibly let this happen? Why do bad things happen to good people? Did you catch the end of that question? "How could God possibly let this happen?" The statement is an indictment that perhaps there is no God at all, and even if there is, God doesn't care about us. God doesn't care about the people of this world.

Nothing could be further from the truth. But, it seems to me that this is just what the world around us would like to have us believe. Where was God? God wasn't there. God doesn't care. We point our fingers at God. We blame God for all that is wrong around us. Then we forget, God gives us the ability to make decisions and choose our path in life.

Where was God at Pearl Harbor is the same as asking why did God let the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor. It removes human choice from the equation. Could God have stopped the attack? Does God have that kind of power? Without question the answer is yes. Does God use that kind of power? Here

the answer is no. God gives us, the human creature, the ability to think and to choose. That does not mean that God isn't there. It doesn't mean that God is not at work in the situation.

Somehow, too many of us have gotten it into our minds that when something bad happens in our lives that God isn't there. In every negative situation that comes into our lives, if we are willing to look, God is there. God is at work.

We cannot assume that just because bad things happen in our lives and in the world around us that God isn't there. God is there. If we look, we will see evidence of God's hand around us. We can see that God is working in people's lives, even in the worst situations possible.

Paul tells us that we should expect this in our text this morning. As I read these verses from the letter to the Romans I see a lesson that is primarily about faith and hope. But, it seems to me that we need the entire lesson to make that faith and hope real and alive. All too often folks get the "Where is God?" attitude. Too many of us have it in our minds that when we come to faith in Jesus Christ that nothing bad will happen in our lives again. The plain and simple fact is, nothing could be further from the truth. It isn't reality.

Paul knew that. Paul knew what suffering really was. Paul knew that even people of faith suffer. Perhaps it would be better if I said that Paul knew that *especially* people of faith suffer, and to Paul that suffering was not such a bad thing. He says, "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." If anyone was ever qualified to make such a statement it was Paul.

It's important for us to think about God's work in the world as the triune God. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit - One God, three persons. God the Father and Creator gave us this free will, this ability to choose. God the Son came into the world to be one of us. He suffered and died for us. God the Holy Spirit is an ongoing part of our lives. The Holy Spirit leads us and directs us. And, the Holy Spirit comforts us when these times of crisis intrude on our lives. The Holy Spirit is God's presence in our lives in all times, places, and situations.

When I look back on my life, it is easy for me to see that I don't know what real suffering is all about. I have experienced little if any real suffering. I have always had a roof over my head and plenty of food to eat. I have almost always

had a good job. I am very blessed living out my calling here with you. I have a nice vehicle to drive. There is little in the way of material things I want or need. I have good health, a beautiful daughter. While I have lost some relatives and friends, for the most part it has been at the end of a long life where they would have also said they were very blessed. I don't think I know what it is like to have real suffering as a part of my life. I haven't experienced it.

Still, others around me have. Through them I have seen it. Where was God? In each of these and many other varied situations, I know that God is there, working to bring healing and wholeness in that time and place. God was there to comfort and strengthen and bring hope to His children involved.

The image in the movie of that chaplain standing in the water is still very vivid in my mind. Where was God? While I realize that the chaplain was probably an artistic liberty, God was in the waters of Pearl Harbor. God's grace was there. God was there and working through the many chaplains of the armed forces. During time of war they might suffer greatly. During time of war, they would need endurance. During time of war they would need hope.

Paul's words of faith and hope to the Romans are as true today as they were so many years ago. When we are feeling as though we stand in waste deep water and things seem to be getting worse, God is still there and working in the situation.

During our times of difficulty, during our times of suffering, the same is true for us. In times of difficulty we need strength and endurance. In times of suffering we need hope. And thanks be to God, that those are the very times that God who is always present in our lives does His very best work. In good times and in bad, God is with us to strengthen our lives and our faith. God is with us in every situation to heal our lives, to strengthen our faith, and place hope in our hearts.

Thanks be to God.