

One of the most age old questions is “why do bad things happen to good people?” All of us deal with suffering, and inevitably we also ask “why” when we and people we love go through it.

One morning at 7 a.m., Sandra Maddox had her life changed forever. Someone was at her door to give her a message that was unthinkable. It was a police officer, and he came to inform her that her daughter, Tiffany, died in a car accident the previous night.

Understandably, Sandra was devastated. She says that in an instant, her peaceful world had shattered, and that there was no way this could be true.

For Sandra, time at that moment and in the days after lost all meaning as she moved through the motions of each day, doing only what had to be done. Even breathing became a chore. She could not understand why she could never see Tiffany’s beautiful, smiling face again, and wondered why God would allow such a thing to happen. The days become difficult, with each day bringing a fresh wave of grief slamming into her, she says “like a powerful riptide pulling her under.” She couldn’t imagine moving on, for her very soul, her little girl, had been taken from her.

Part of her process of grief included anger at God. She says “I raged at God. Parents aren’t supposed to outlive their children. I knew God was good, but I could not see any good in this. Nothing made sense anymore.” She reflected how young her daughter was and that she had so much to live for, not even starting her own family yet. How could a God of love allow this to happen was her question. And every time she tried to move forward, it seemed to be filled with more despair.

In the midst of this all, she found herself thinking of the last visits she had with Tiffany, and her expressions, one of which was “Mom, I think when you want answers, sometimes you have to get in people’s faces until they give them to you, you know?” And in part because of that, she kept getting in God’s face in a sense by trying to find answers.

At her church, a few months earlier, they had finished a series on a book called “40 days of Purpose,” which is based on the book by the evangelical preacher Rick Warren, “The Purpose Driven Life.” Sandra found phrases they had memorized coming back to her now right when she needed them. These included:

God is more interested in your character than in your comfort.

We are made to last forever.

You are not an accident.

And as she remembered these, Sandra asked herself if it was possible that God could have some purpose in her daughter's death. Sandra said she was stunned by the words the pastor spoke at her graveside service, when he said "Look at the special gifts God gave Sandra in Tiffany's last days," thinking how could losing her daughter possibly be some kind of gift. And so she pondered and prayed and got in God's face as her daughter might have said.

Sandra says that she thought to herself, "could it be possible that God had been preparing me for this very moment of my entire life? Certainly it wasn't God's perfect will to take my daughter, but he had allowed it. Did He have a purpose for my grief and loss?"

Sandra thought about how her own mom had left her when she was a young child. She also thought about her suffering in her life, reflecting on the abusive marriage she walked out of when Tiffany was 14. And she remembered something. In these horrible times, God had taken care of her. She says that somehow each trial they had experienced made the bond between Tiffany and her stronger, even during her rebellious years.

And she also says that God reminded her of the prayer she had prayed back then, "God please bring Tiffany home, not home to me but home to you." She thought of the last time she had seen her, blowing her a kiss in the airport just a few weekends earlier. She thought of the beautiful red scarf wrapped around her neck that was her last gift to her daughter. She reflected how could she have known that this would be the last earthly glimpse she would have of her daughter, and thought might it not just be possible that God had taken Tiffany not away from her but home to herself, and that perhaps he needed her more than she did. And as she thought about this, she says that she will never stop aching to hold her daughter as tears still flow and holidays are rough, but slowly, she found herself asking God to show her His purpose in this all. And slowly, doors began to open.

Sandra was invited to speak at Tiffany's high school, where she let the tears flow as she told the story of the wrong choice she made when she got in a car with a boyfriend who had been drinking.

God then inspired her to write a book for children in Tiffany's memory, a book in which she, Tiffany, is the main character.

And then, one day the women's ministry director at church asked Sandra if she would lead a new program: an outreach to young mothers of toddlers and preschoolers. She felt the breath leave her body. Sandra asked herself if she could handle being in a room with all those "daughters" and how it would go and if it would bring back the pain and regret. But by now, she knew this was about more than a choice, but rather it was about a holy assignment.

And, slowly the darkness was fading and the sun was rising in her life again. God was now showing her a purpose - a way to go on without Tiffany and leave a legacy for her in this world she'd known so little of.

Today, Sandra shares her story wherever she can, before church groups, community groups and school groups, anywhere she is asked to go. She says its amazing how often she meets people who've also lost children, people who need to know that God cares. She tells them giving is necessary, but that if they trust in God's good purposes, that riptide of sorrow may try to sweep them away, but it cannot hold them under.

She closes her story by saying that sometimes, before we can find the sunrise, we must find courage to walk into the darkness.

Suffering is noted in our Gospel today with Jesus bringing up two tragic events. And, while not all of us may have suffered loss like Sandra did, all of us in life have suffered. Sometimes very seriously. And what are we to make of this? Sometimes, we can get philosophical as Sandra did wondering how a God who is loving could allow people to suffer. If God is all-powerful, why would He not intervene and change things in the world? We ask that question "why?" Suffering, as much as we might try to ignore it at times, is a fact of our world. And while we cannot fully understand it's meaning, we must remember that it is not something we are powerless in, nor do we suffer alone.

First, it's important to know that God does have a plan. But with that, we must also know God does not will evil. Jesus makes that point right away. Pilate may have had the Galilean pilgrims killed; they were innocent victims who suffered through the fault of another. Then there are the victims who are killed when a tower fell; Jesus again here is speaking of innocent victims who died and no one was at fault; they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. As one of my theology professors put it, God ensures that the lottery is fair. Sometimes a roulette wheel comes up black; sometimes red; and every so often green. God does not wake up one morning and say "I need this person to die to help make a point." Rather, God allows things to happen. The problem can be from our point of view, we are within time - as such it can seem like the plan takes forever to unfold. Just think back to growing up, and being told we'll get something on our birthday or Christmas which at the time is several weeks or even months away - it seems distant. And then we are told "when you grow up" which seems incomprehensible that we'll be at an age when we will no longer be told when to go to bed, or to eat our vegetables or clean our room; but then it arrives (and we realize mom knew what she was talking about looking back - she had a plan to help us reach our best self). When

our prayers go seemingly unanswered, and we hurt, I don't think it is at all wrong to sometimes be confused, or even angry with God like Sandra gets, getting in His face. Read through the book of Job, or consider reading "A Grief Observed" by C.S. Lewis, a devout Christian who struggled with his faith following his wife's death, both good reads for Lent and Holy Week. In both, you will find moments of bewilderment and even anger - but anger is different than despair, or giving up. We get angry when we love someone because we are engaged in that relationship and are emotional people - but when we love them, we work through it. C.S. Lewis did just this. My favorite quote from that book is: ***When I lay these questions before God I get no answer. But a rather special sort of No answer. It is not the locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate, gaze. As though He shook His head not in refusal but waiving the question. Like, Peace, child; you don't understand.***

How right he is. We are like children, and while we might not understand, all we need to do is to look to the Cross and think if God did not love us, why would He have done that for me? And this is the second point that is so important to remember. Jesus in this Gospel is on his way to Jerusalem to lay down His life. In his encyclical "On the Christian Meaning of Human

Suffering,” Saint John Paul wrote that Christ strikes at the root of our sin and our suffering by overcoming evil with good. Indeed, the suffering of Christ overcomes the worst possible suffering of the human person—permanent alienation from God, the source and summit of all goodness. All suffering in this life—like all happiness—is imperfect, partial, and finite. Even the worst possible human life, spread over the longest spans, comes to an end. Hell does not. It lasts forever. In comparison to the pains of hell, the worst human suffering on earth pales. Jesus saves his people from hell. Jesus saves us from the suffering by entering into it. The physical pain endured by Christ is well beyond what most of us have personally experienced: beaten by soldiers, imprisoned, scourged at the pillar, crowned with thorns, forced to carry the cross, and finally dying by crucifixion. Plus of course the emotional pain of so many abandoning Him. Because of this, we can now say God is not at a distance, but in the trenches with us. He knows what it is like to suffer, but in Jesus we not only see God has a plan, but we also see how God heals us and stands in solidarity with us.

Third, we must remember too that God respects free will. God has given us the ability to make choices. Tiffany certainly did not deserve to die, but

ultimately her boyfriend made the choice to drink and she made a choice to ride in the car. People make tragic decisions all the time, and while we would like to see no tragedy at all, God ultimately does not make us a robot. If God were to always intervene in our decisions, then would not wrong actions be impossible and our ability to make decisions be meaningless? So much suffering in the world is a part of our own choices, and sometimes God can make an easy scapegoat.

Fourth, might it not also be the case that on some level, suffering can help us grow in faith and mercy in some instances? In some cases, people can drift from despair to self-pity, saying they led a good life and that their suffering is not fair; others try to ignore suffering in their lives and the lives of others by not thinking about it; and others look to God as they might look to the fire extinguisher behind the “break glass in case of emergency” door, but maybe on some level the fact that all of us suffer at various points can deepen our bond to one another. It’s understandable as I said why we might be upset or angry at God, but once we get past emotion, suffering can help us do something, as it did for Sandra. Wanda Poltawska is a Polish woman who was medically experimented on by the SS in World War II, left to die and rescued by friends. Hidden in a bunker by the hourly

searches of the Gestapo, all fear left her, and she felt sure she was not going to die. In fact, she began to see a purpose in her sufferings, and determined that if she ever got out alive she would use her new insights and compassion to help heal the minds of others. She went on to become a psychiatrist and do just that. When we see suffering, a person has a choice: they can ignore it, complain about it, or like Sandra, do something about it. We're seeing this now in the outpouring of support for the Ukrainian people; they see the suffering of the innocent, and are compelled to act. The late Archbishop Helder Camara of Brazil said: "***If I know that there are human beings like me in some part world...children of God, who have neither house nor clothing, neither food nor education, then I must do everything I can to help them ... For Christians, the Incarnation of Christ is a living lesson in commitment. We must do what we can, however little it may be. It is indifference, not hatred, which is the true enemy of love -- indifference which keeps the silent majority silent. For evil to triumph, the good have only to remain silent.***" Because we know what suffering is like and experience it ourselves, perhaps on some level it helps to spur us on to help others in need and not be indifferent. Once she worked through her emotions,

Sandra went on to help others who were hurting too and do so much out of love and empathy.

Suffering is certainly hard to see in our world, and so often it does not make sense. Even our Lord asks for the cup to be taken from Him, and will cry out “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” I wish as a priest I could have all the answers when I hear what people are going through and when I visit nursing homes, hospitals, and minister to hurting families who have suffered loss. Nothing I can ever say or do will take away their pain. But as a Christian, I do not look on suffering as without meaning. I look to the Cross and remember that my God stands by me, and knows exactly what suffering is like for He endured it Himself. I look at those who are hurting and am challenged that I cannot ignore those who are in need but need to do what I can to act. I have faith, and while suffering and seeing those who suffer certainly puts it to the test, it also helps in some way to increase it, and challenges me to live out the virtue of hope, to make this world a better place. God created us and put us in the world for a reason. Right now people are suffering in the Ukraine and in many parts of the world. Maybe it's your child who is having a hard time at school, or your spouse having a hard time at work, or your neighbor or aging relative who

could just use some company, or a loved one battling an addiction. We might not be able to solve the worlds problems, but when you get involved, when you do what we can as Archbishop Camara challenged people to do and refuse to be indifferent, we can truly do so much. We are God's servants, and what we are commanded to do is to assist at Mass on Sundays and avoid mortal sin. But Jesus reminds us that we need to take it up a notch and not just do what we are obliged to do, but use what God has given us to help our brothers and sisters who are hurting. There will always be suffering, but may we never for a second doubt that God is alive and present in our world and with us when we are hurting, and strive each day to be His hands and face to those who most need to see it by being there for them in their darkest moments, knowing that our God is with us in ours to dispel them with his love and mercy.