

Luke 13:1-5

What **Not** to Believe: God Causes Cancer & Catastrophes

January 22, 2012      Maple Grove UMC

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Here's the moral of the story: God gets blamed for a lot of things God didn't do.

That's the opening story from Martin Thielen's book, *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* The idea for this sermon series came from reading that book in which Thielen—a former Southern Baptist but now a United Methodist pastor—writes about "Ten Things Christians *Don't* Need to Believe." Please note: Thielen and I aren't saying you *can't*

believe these things—we don't all have to agree on everything. We're just saying that you don't *have* to believe these things to be a Christian.

The title of his book came from a young man named Danny who was kind of attracted to Thielen's church but couldn't bring himself to believe everything he thought Christians were supposed to believe. Danny stuck with it, though, and after many conversations with the pastor and other church members he finally said: I've had an epiphany. I don't reject Christianity. I reject the way intolerant Christians *package* Christianity."<sup>ii</sup>

There are thousands of Danny's out there. In fact, there are a lot of Danny's right here in the church, people who think that what it means to be a *real* Christian is to oppose homosexuality and check your brain at the door. That's not true, of course, but it's what people think.

A few years ago David Kinnaman did a national survey of what people—especially young people—think about the church. You can read the whole survey in his book called *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters*.<sup>iii</sup> Kinnamon found that the three most common perceptions of present-day Christians are that we are 1. antihomosexual (an image held by 91% young adults who don't go to church), 2. judgmental (87%), and 3. hypocritical (85%). My friends, if

we are not those things—and I don't believe we are—then we've got to tell people, starting with our own youth.

A pastor friend told me of a conversation she had recently with a young adult who'd been in her youth group a few years before. He told her about a religion class he was taking in college that he was really excited about. "Why didn't you tell me not everyone takes the Bible literally?" he asked her. "If I'd known that, maybe I wouldn't have become an atheist!"

Well, I'm telling you now, my friends. There are lots of things you don't have to believe, starting with this idea that God causes cancer, car wrecks and other catastrophes. I start with this in part because that's where Thielen starts his book, but more importantly I start with this because this belief can be so terribly hurtful. Believing that God causes bad things can turn people away from God forever.

For example, here are some things I've heard at funerals. A child dies and someone tells the parents, "God wanted another angel in heaven." Or a child's parent dies and someone says, "God must have needed her more than you do." A drunk driver hit the car my teenage cousin was riding in and put her in a coma, and someone said to me, "I guess it was just God's will." Back in 2010 TV preacher Pat Robertson announced that Haiti

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One question I have is this: How do they know those things? How do they know that God made this car slip on the ice or this group of cells to grow malignant? How do they know God caused this hurricane for this reason instead of that hurricane for some other reason? I certainly don’t have that kind of inside track into the workings of God.

But my bigger question is this: If God did will this car crash or send that tornado, how could we worship such a God? You might fear or even respect such a God, but how could you ever love a God like that? After his wife died tragically young, theologian C.S. Lewis wrote, “Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God's really like.’”<sup>iv</sup>

But that’s *not* what God is really like! Remember—God gets blamed for a lot of things God didn’t do. You don’t have to believe that God caused C.S. Lewis’ wife to die, or anyone else for that matter. Just because bad things happen doesn’t mean God made them happen. Jesus knew that. In

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Again in Matthew Jesus insists that God makes the sun rise for good people and bad people just the same, and rain falls just as much on the wicked as on the righteous.

Here’s what I believe: *some things just happen*. Oh, human beings are responsible for some things. On the grand scale, I don’t believe God willed the Holocaust, but the Nazis still did it. And on the personal level, I don’t believe God wants people to die from emphysema, but smoking can kill you if you do it enough. Don’t blame God.

And what about plane crashes and tornadoes? Why do some people get killed and not others? Why did my friends’ daughter get a brain tumor

and die and my daughters didn't? I have absolutely no idea, but I'm not going to blame God. Some things just happen.

Now I don't mean God bears *no* responsibility at all for bad things. God did create the universe and everything in it, after all. If God hadn't put a serpent in the Garden, maybe Adam and Eve never would have sinned. If God had set up the laws of physics a little different, maybe there wouldn't be hurricanes or earthquakes. I don't mean God isn't ultimately responsible for suffering in the world. I just mean I don't think God is up in heaven directing this person to have MS and giving that person Alzheimer's.

There is a reason, however, why people hang on to the belief that God causes bad things to happen. Barbara Taylor tells about a woman she visited in the hospital who believed God was punishing her for smoking by striking her daughter with blindness. Barbara tried to talk her out of that belief, but couldn't. "However miserable it made her," Barbara writes, "she preferred a punishing God to an absent or capricious one. . . . If there was something wrong with her daughter, there had to be some reason."<sup>v</sup>

I sympathize with that. But if I really believed that was true, I'm not sure I could worship God any more. Here's what I believe: *some things*

*just happen*. That may mean God isn't in complete control of everything that happens. It may mean God isn't all-powerful, at least not in the way we usually think of power. So you might ask, "If God isn't in control of things, what good is God?" Well, God can leave room in the world for both wonderful and awful things to happen, and still be at work in all of them. Years ago Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a famous book called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.<sup>vi</sup> I love one of the chapter titles: "God Can't Do Everything, But He Can Do Some Important Things." God may not cause cancer, may not even be able to prevent every cancer, but God can still mobilize healing for cancer and strength for those who suffer it. God may not cause car wrecks, but God can turn one mother's grief into an organization like Mothers Against Drunk Driving. God may not direct tornadoes, but God can comfort those who suffer them and inspire the rest of us to help the victims. God may not cause suffering, but God is always working to redeem suffering and move the world towards wholeness.

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“Thanks for the invitation,” he replied, “But I don’t believe in God any more.”

“Tell me about the God you don’t believe in,” Thielen said.

Years earlier, the man said, his wife and their two young children came to church every Sunday. But then his wife developed breast cancer. In spite of all their prayers and the best medical treatment available, she only got worse. He begged God to save her, but she died anyway. he told the pastor, “When I buried my wife, I also buried my faith. I don’t believe in a God who kills twenty-eight year-old mothers with cancer.”

Thielen replied, “I don’t believe in that kind of God either.”<sup>vii</sup>

Some things just happen. And faith is about coming to terms with those things. You can say God causes bad things if you need to. But you don’t have to. Life is a mystery, and death and beauty and suffering . . . unrevealed until their season. God doesn’t cause it all, but God is with us through it all.

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The title of his book came from a young man named Danny who was kind of attracted to Thielen's church but couldn't bring himself to believe everything he thought Christians were supposed to believe. Danny stuck with it, though, and after many conversations with the pastor and other church members he finally said: I've had an epiphany. I don't reject Christianity. I reject the way intolerant Christians *package* Christianity."<sup>ii</sup>

There are thousands of Danny's out there. In fact, there are a lot of Danny's right here in the church, people who think that what it means to be a *real* Christian is to oppose homosexuality and check your brain at the door. That's not true, of course, but it's what people think.

A few years ago David Kinnaman did a national survey of what people—especially young people—think about the church. You can read the whole survey in his book called *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters*.<sup>iii</sup> Kinnamon found that the three most common perceptions of present-day Christians are that we are 1. antihomosexual (an image held by 91% young adults who don't go to church), 2. judgmental (87%), and 3. hypocritical (85%). My friends, if

we are not those things—and I don't believe we are—then we've got to tell people, starting with our own youth.

A pastor friend told me of a conversation she had recently with a young adult who'd been in her youth group a few years before. He told her about a religion class he was taking in college that he was really excited about. "Why didn't you tell me not everyone takes the Bible literally?" he asked her. "If I'd known that, maybe I wouldn't have become an atheist!"

Well, I'm telling you now, my friends. There are lots of things you don't have to believe, starting with this idea that God causes cancer, car wrecks and other catastrophes. I start with this in part because that's where Thielen starts his book, but more importantly I start with this because this belief can be so terribly hurtful. Believing that God causes bad things can turn people away from God forever.

For example, here are some things I've heard at funerals. A child dies and someone tells the parents, "God wanted another angel in heaven." Or a child's parent dies and someone says, "God must have needed her more than you do." A drunk driver hit the car my teenage cousin was riding in and put her in a coma, and someone said to me, "I guess it was just God's will." Back in 2010 TV preacher Pat Robertson announced that Haiti

had been ravaged by that terrible earthquake because as he put it Haiti “made a pact with the devil.” And two days after 9/11 Jerry Falwell claimed that God had allowed the US to be attacked because of “the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians.”

One question I have is this: How do they know those things? How do they know that God made this car slip on the ice or this group of cells to grow malignant? How do they know God caused this hurricane for this reason instead of that hurricane for some other reason? I certainly don’t have that kind of inside track into the workings of God.

But my bigger question is this: If God did will this car crash or send that tornado, how could we worship such a God? You might fear or even respect such a God, but how could you ever love a God like that? After his wife died tragically young, theologian C.S. Lewis wrote, “Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God's really like.’”<sup>iv</sup>

But that’s *not* what God is really like! Remember—God gets blamed for a lot of things God didn’t do. You don’t have to believe that God caused C.S. Lewis’ wife to die, or anyone else for that matter. Just because bad things happen doesn’t mean God made them happen. Jesus knew that. In

Luke 13:1-5 we learn that some people got killed when a tower fell on them. Many people assumed that God caused the accident, to punish certain people for their sins. But Jesus said, “Those eighteen who got killed—do you think they were worse than everyone else?” No, he says, they weren’t. The same with some Galileans who got murdered by the Romans. Were they worse than everyone else? No, Jesus says, instead of worrying about what God’s doing to whom, why don’t you just look at your own life and how you’re doing?

Again in Matthew Jesus insists that God makes the sun rise for good people and bad people just the same, and rain falls just as much on the wicked as on the righteous.

Here’s what I believe: *some things just happen*. Oh, human beings are responsible for some things. On the grand scale, I don’t believe God willed the Holocaust, but the Nazis still did it. And on the personal level, I don’t believe God wants people to die from emphysema, but smoking can kill you if you do it enough. Don’t blame God.

And what about plane crashes and tornadoes? Why do some people get killed and not others? Why did my friends’ daughter get a brain tumor

and die and my daughters didn't? I have absolutely no idea, but I'm not going to blame God. Some things just happen.

Now I don't mean God bears *no* responsibility at all for bad things. God did create the universe and everything in it, after all. If God hadn't put a serpent in the Garden, maybe Adam and Eve never would have sinned. If God had set up the laws of physics a little different, maybe there wouldn't be hurricanes or earthquakes. I don't mean God isn't ultimately responsible for suffering in the world. I just mean I don't think God is up in heaven directing this person to have MS and giving that person Alzheimer's.

There is a reason, however, why people hang on to the belief that God causes bad things to happen. Barbara Taylor tells about a woman she visited in the hospital who believed God was punishing her for smoking by striking her daughter with blindness. Barbara tried to talk her out of that belief, but couldn't. "However miserable it made her," Barbara writes, "she preferred a punishing God to an absent or capricious one. . . . If there was something wrong with her daughter, there had to be some reason."<sup>v</sup>

I sympathize with that. But if I really believed that was true, I'm not sure I could worship God any more. Here's what I believe: *some things*

*just happen*. That may mean God isn't in complete control of everything that happens. It may mean God isn't all-powerful, at least not in the way we usually think of power. So you might ask, "If God isn't in control of things, what good is God?" Well, God can leave room in the world for both wonderful and awful things to happen, and still be at work in all of them. Years ago Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a famous book called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.<sup>vi</sup> I love one of the chapter titles: "God Can't Do Everything, But He Can Do Some Important Things." God may not cause cancer, may not even be able to prevent every cancer, but God can still mobilize healing for cancer and strength for those who suffer it. God may not cause car wrecks, but God can turn one mother's grief into an organization like Mothers Against Drunk Driving. God may not direct tornadoes, but God can comfort those who suffer them and inspire the rest of us to help the victims. God may not cause suffering, but God is always working to redeem suffering and move the world towards wholeness.

Thielen tells this story. When he first arrived at a new church, he went to visit a member who, he was told, used to attend regularly but quit coming after his wife died. During his visit he said, "The congregation and I would love for you and your children to return to church."

“Thanks for the invitation,” he replied, “But I don’t believe in God any more.”

“Tell me about the God you don’t believe in,” Thielen said.

Years earlier, the man said, his wife and their two young children came to church every Sunday. But then his wife developed breast cancer. In spite of all their prayers and the best medical treatment available, she only got worse. He begged God to save her, but she died anyway. he told the pastor, “When I buried my wife, I also buried my faith. I don’t believe in a God who kills twenty-eight year-old mothers with cancer.”

Thielen replied, “I don’t believe in that kind of God either.”<sup>vii</sup>

Some things just happen. And faith is about coming to terms with those things. You can say God causes bad things if you need to. But you don’t have to. Life is a mystery, and death and beauty and suffering . . . unrevealed until their season. God doesn’t cause it all, but God is with us through it all.

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<sup>i</sup> Martin Thielen, *What’s the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>ii</sup> Thielen, ix.

<sup>iii</sup> Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2007.

<sup>iv</sup> C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 5.

<sup>v</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1999), 69-70.

<sup>vi</sup> New York: Avon Books, 1981.

<sup>vii</sup> Thielen, 7-8.