

How could God let this happen? That's the number one religious question ever since September 11. But of course this is not a new question. And if September 12 was the first day you asked yourself, "Where was God?" God would probably like to ask, "Where have you been?"

People have always struggled to reconcile the goodness of God with human evil or natural tragedy. Any day we watch the news or pick up the paper we learn about loss. Third world countries suffer lack of nutrition, impure water, and the spread of disease. Untold numbers have lost their lives in hurricanes, tornadoes and earthquakes. Individuals and groups are marked out for murder every day. Yet many of us read or watch these news stories and remain strangely unmoved by them – until they touch our lives.

The question about God's goodness is old news. It even came up at the crucifixion of Jesus. Several people realized that the event didn't connect with the titles of Jesus. The rulers say, "If Jesus is God's chosen one, let him save himself." The soldiers say, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself." The first criminal says, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself, and us," while you're at it. They could not figure this out. Why would God let something terrible happen?

There are two answers. One concerns us, and the other concerns God. Concerning us, we have free will to choose right or wrong. Apparently in God's mind, it is more important to give us freedom than to preserve us from every calamity. Parents, you probably know this with regard to your children. Sometimes giving them the choice, complete with its consequences, is better than intervening. God gave us freedom and invites us to use it wisely and well. Sometimes we don't. Sometimes we sin. But without freedom we would be robots, not humans.

The other answer concerns God. God saves. Evil does not strip God's ability to save. When Luke describes the crucifixion, he points out again and again that Jesus is the savior. When the rulers, the soldiers and the first criminal taunt Jesus, they have doubts about him as the chosen one, the King of the Jews or the Christ. But they seem not to have doubts about his ability to save. After all, time and again, Jesus had healed the sick as a sign he could save the soul. When the good thief finally addresses him, he uses no title at all. He just calls him Jesus. "Jesus, remember me," he says. Believe it or not, this is very rare in the gospels. Almost no one calls Jesus Jesus except a few people possessed by demons. But the second criminal cuts through the formalities and calls Jesus by name, a name whose meaning we learned clear back at the beginning of the gospel in the Christmas story. The word Jesus means savior.

How could God let September 11 happen? How could God not let it happen? It fits perfectly with the way God made the world. God made people free to choose right or wrong. And God made Jesus the savior. Even if people abuse their freedom, even if people sin, Jesus saves.