

Last week after the kidnapping and murder of a child in our area one of my brothers called and asked, "Are you going to preach about Pamela Butler this weekend?" I said no, the deacons were preaching that weekend. He said, "Well, people are going to want some answers." I said, "Answers? You mean like if you believe in a benevolent God, why does a tragedy like this happen?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "That's a difficult question." He said, "But that's why people go to church. To get some answers." I'm like, "Thanks a lot."

If I'm counting right, six children were killed in the Kansas City area last week, two of them by starvation and boiling. If we lived in Kosovo, East Timor, El Salvador, or Chechnya, I'm sure we'd have many more stories to tell. The world has bad news every day. We don't know the half of it. Christianity has never explained away evil. We have always had to deal with it.

Take, for example, the situation in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Actually the letter comes from three apostles: Paul, Silvanus and Timothy. Scripture scholars think they wrote this letter about the year 50, only 15 or 20 years after Jesus died. That makes it the first book ever to be written for the New Testament. The three of them had been preaching the gospel in Thessalonika, and now they were on the road again but decided to send a letter back to the people they'd come to know. At first glance, everything seems hunky-dory. They write, "You know what sort of people we were among you. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord. You became a model for all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia." In other words there were already several generations of model Christian behavior. This behavior started with Jesus. Then the apostles imitated it. Then the Thessalonians took it up. And now everybody in Macedonia and Achaia was imitating the same behavior. Sounds great -- until you realize what that behavior is. The behavior in question is not faith, not charity, not kindness, but suffering: The letter says, "You received the word in great affliction, with joy from the Holy Spirit." Their conversion to Christ came in the midst of affliction; the Holy Spirit gave them joy because apparently they weren't getting joy anywhere else. Generation after generation of Christianity has had to put up with affliction, persecution, suffering, and evil. Joy comes not from this world, but from the Holy Spirit.

We all face our share of bad news. Christianity has never explained it away. Instead, we incorporate bad news into our belief. We acknowledge the presence of evil in the world. We know it's there. But with our eyes fixed on the age to come we know that the power of God is there as well, a power which raised Jesus from the dead. That power will deliver us from evil. In the face of tragedy we answer the question, "Where is God?" very simply. God is here. God just isn't done yet.