

The world was still very new when an angel and a demon reflected on their roles in God's plan for the world. The angel had given away his flaming sword to the man and woman who had just been banished from the paradise and security of the Garden of Eden. He hoped the sword would be a helpful tool for them as they figured out their place in the wide world. It seemed like the right thing to do. But the angel wondered, was it really? The demon comforted the angel by saying he doubted an angel could do anything wrong, because, after all, he is an angel. The demon then chuckled and pondered, wouldn't it be funny if he, the demon, had done the right thing by tempting humanity to eat the forbidden fruit, and the angel had done the wrong thing. The angel nervously replied, it would not be funny at all, especially if it was against God's plan.

This is how one of my favorite fictional books and television series on Amazon Prime *Good Omens* by Neil Gaiman and the late Terry Pratchett begins: two eternal beings trying to figure out their place in God's plan for the world. Who did the right thing? Who did the wrong? What if they both got it wrong? What would be the repercussions? Their conversation ran out of steam when they both realized God's plan is ineffable – a very religious word that means beyond knowing – so their speculation was pointless. As the story progresses, both angel and demon find themselves falling in love with the world and the people in it, so much they try to save the world when it was threatened. When those plans failed, they learned that God's ineffable plan involves trusting in the most powerful thing of all, the very thing God is, love. It's a beautiful story, one that has gotten many a person religious or not through some difficult times. Because *Good Omens* reminds us of what today's Gospel also states: that we live in a world where much is beyond our control, and one of our deep longings is to know why things, especially tragedies happen.

That longing for a satisfying answer to the question of *why* sometimes leads to the statement "it must be part of God's plan." But God's plan is ineffable, not because of what Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett wrote, but because that is the truth we find in the Bible. We can see this in today's Gospel when Jesus addressed the people who brought up a violent tragedy where people died at the hand of a political leader who used his power to keep people in fear. Some historians like to point out the specific event mentioned in Luke's Gospel is not recorded in any

known historical document as a caution to us readers of scripture about taking the story literally. Other historians and biblical scholars like to remind us there are plenty of other events much like the one in today's Gospel that Pilot was responsible for that are recorded. Perhaps the point is: there are leaders who will intentionally use their power to cause harm and destruction and there is little many of us can do to stop it. This can create a feeling of powerlessness and might prompt the question of why such a horrible thing happened, and why it happened to those particular people. In that longing for a satisfying answer, it becomes all too easy to blame the people themselves as deserving their suffering.

This tendency is what Jesus is addressing in the Gospel when he compared Pilot's act of violence with another tragedy, one no one saw coming, a building fell on innocent people. In either case, no one deserved what happened to them. Those events prove we live in world where it is difficult to predict much less control what happens. Instead of judging people as being bad and their fate as God's punishment, which also can suggest those who don't suffer are somehow favored by God or are sinless, Jesus told a parable that highlighted a different approach, the one he was calling the people listening to him and is calling all of us listening today to do.

Repent.

Repentance or repent is another very religious word like ineffable. It means to turn around, to go back. To the beginning, to home in the best sense of the word, to God's nurturing love described as the paradise of a garden that meets all needs.

Several years ago, the Episcopal Church published it's 7 Ways of Love practices for following Jesus. The 7 Ways are: Worship, Learn, Rest, Pray, Go, Bless, and Turn. The practice of turn is described as the reminder that the location of the earth's axis has nothing whatsoever to do with where any of us happen to be standing or sitting at any given moment in time. In other words: the earth does not revolve around us. There is much we cannot control, but there is still hope and there something we can control: the choices we make. We can turn away from the influences that try to tempt us into following anything other than God, putting other priorities before loving God and our neighbors. We all know the type of thing I am referring to: climbing the ladder of success, using wealth or people for personal gain, even focusing on the transgressions or sins of others in order to feel better about ourselves.

I'm not saying success is bad in and of itself, or wealth. It is when they take precedence over God and our neighbors in our lives that can be problematic. And it is easy for all of us to slip, it is easy to forget the world does not revolve around us. That is why the practice of repentance, to turn, is one of the 7 Ways of Love. Turning from the selfishness of sin to the love of God is what is at the heart of the season of Lent, a season the church observes every year because turning is a practice we all need to do over and over again.

This is why we have the practice of confession in our worship services on Sundays, not to feel bad about ourselves, but for the reminder to turn to God. To receive forgiveness not so we can go out and sin all over again without consequence. The purpose of forgiveness is to reorient ourselves toward God, to pay attention not just to the evil and suffering in the world, but to where God is present with us, and to embody God's love as best we can wherever we happen to be. That is the fruit Jesus was talking about in his parable about the fig tree in the vineyard. Turning to God, repenting, produces the fruit of healing and restoration, restoring relationships between people, groups, even people and God.

If an angel and a demon cannot know God's plan, then it stands to reason neither can we. Yet we can find hope and comfort in today's Gospel, where Jesus reminds us, knowing God's plan isn't important. What is important, what Jesus longs for, what God longs for, is our turning to God again and again, turning toward that ineffable, powerful love that gives us what we need to live lives that embody God's love in a world beyond our control.