11.13.16

When I worked as a member of the staff of the Episcopal diocese of Maryland, one of the churches in the diocese experienced a tragedy. The church, like some in our community, housed a food pantry where needy people were able to come and obtain food to help feed their families. A regular customer of the food pantry had been a homeless man who lived in the woods behind the church. On May 3, 2012, that homeless man came into the parish office and shot and killed the priest and the parish administrator and then killed himself. The church, and all in the diocese, were in deep pain. But God created anew from that tragedy. The church determined to bring redemption from this tragedy – to create anew – to demonstrate what it means to be a Resurrection people . On the Monday following the tragedy, the church opened its doors to provide hot meals to the homeless, just as it had every first Monday for years before. And the church created even more outreach ministries to feed and care for those in need around it. They created low-cost housing on their property so that some of those homeless people could have homes. And they turned the space where the tragedy occurred into a sacred space of prayer and contemplation.

Most of us, thankfully, have never experienced the trauma of having loved ones violently killed. Yet we all have times in our lives that have been difficult or traumatic. Although it is often hard to see clearly in the middle of that difficult or traumatic time, we know that God always creates something new from the rubble. We participate with God in re-creation. Sometimes we have been the ones to suffer the tragedy and experience that re-creation firsthand. Other times we become part of the means through which God creates something new out of tragedies that happen to others.

Isaiah writes about how God will restore the remnant of the exiled Israelites to their homeland and create a new Jerusalem, which will function as the spiritual center of the world – the place where all the world will come to worship. Isaiah prophesies that God will renew again the covenant of faith with God’s people. And we know from history that God did this. God created a new life for them from a situation in which Israel had been defeated and many of its best and brightest exiled, taken away from their home and even, away from where they worshiped God.

The reference to the New Jerusalem in Isaiah refers to God’s planned restoration and renewal of Israel in the near future. But it also refers to what God does in our lives regularly after each disappointment or tragedy or trauma. God creates anew.

In fact, the God who created the world and declared each element of that world good never stops recreating anew when tragedy or sickness or trauma happens. Lutheran minister and theologian Richard Lischer has said: “The bad news is God doesn’t promise to make anybody young. The good news is that God promises to make all things new.” Lischer has experienced that firsthand; he lost a son to cancer, but in doing so he was renewed by the blessings experienced on the journey with his son as they said goodbye to each other. Lischer and his son experienced God’s re-creation.

All things work together for good for those who love God and who are called to God’s purpose. That’s because God finds a way – whether through nature, or transformation of the heart, or through the help of disciples such as us when we participate in renewal ministries to create something good anew. So while God sometimes allows the world to run its course (meaning that sometimes bad things happen) God doesn’t let those bad things have the last word.

God also renews and restores us through the saving blood of Christ. Jesus died so that nothing we did could ever separate us from the love of God – there is no exile from God in the post-Christ world. Christ died once and for all, yet we are continually whenever we ask for forgiveness. We are renewed every time we come to Christ’s table. When we die, we are restored and renewed to abide continually with Christ.

God also will renew the entire cosmos in the future. All the earth will be joined in its worship of Christ. Everyone will live together in peace; sorrow and tragedy and sickness and trauma will be banished.

God who created the world, continually makes all things new. God calls us to participate in that re-creating process through ministries such as the community store or the Thanksgiving families, which transform our lives and the lives of others. Jesus died so that, despite our own shortcomings, we could be renewed in Christ. God also calls us to renewal each Sunday as we come to His table and creates us anew after death so that we become perfect in resurrection as we spend eternity with him. Tragedy and sadness are temporary; God re-creates continually and ultimately will re-create the whole world.

Amen