

God with us

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I think all of us will remember a time when we've asked the "big question": *If there is a loving God of the universe, why is suffering allowed to happen?* That's the "big question". People have always asked it, ever since we were told that God loves us. *If there is a loving God of the universe, why is suffering allowed to happen?*

We're not the first to ask the big question. The Hebrew people had plenty of reasons to ask it. Years of slavery, countless wars, famines, colonization, exile. They asked the big question, and all through Advent, we've been reading about the answer they received. It was a promise that they heard again and again; God would raise up someone extraordinary who would set things right; the anointed one – the Messiah. The Hebrews had huge expectations of this Messiah. They waited for this prince of peace to be born; they waited and waited. They waited so long that they started to ask another question; "How long!" ^{Hab 1.2} They had huge expectations. But I don't think they ever imagined who would eventually come.

Jesus was greater than the prophets ever expected. And yet he didn't come in power as some invincible tribal warrior. He came in the most scandalous, defenceless way imaginable. Just before he was born, his unmarried parents had to beg for lodgings one hundred kilometres from home. Jesus' first bed was a farm animal's feed trough. The first visitors to come and witness his arrival were scruffy strangers; shepherds. Apparently they turned up in the middle of the night. And shortly, this baby's family would be on the road again as refugees.

Why in the world must any family endure such humiliation? If this baby *is* God's answer to the "big question", then that question needs to go under the microscope. *If there is a loving God of the universe, why is suffering allowed to happen?* This question has a built in assumption; that we expect a *loving* God should prevent tragedies. Is this true? And if it is, how should a loving God do this?

Should a loving God stop all wars; turn all weapons into farming tools? Would that fix relations between nations? Well, no. Should a loving God fuse the world's tectonic plates together; stop all storms; get rid of mosquitoes? Would that make Earth a suffering-free zone? Well, no. Should a loving God abolish all disease and injury; even our mortality? Well, no. Should a loving God put a force-field round all vulnerable people; make every bully behave? Would all that stop us suffering? No; that wouldn't address the human heart. ... So what's a loving God to do?

God did something beyond all expectation. One day, the God of the universe was born a tiny, helpless baby; vulnerable to all the hazards of this dangerous world.

Jesus was born one of the colonised, bullied people – so oppressed peoples of this and every land have God with *them*. Jesus was born one of the people who'd have to depend on the kindness of others just to survive – so today 114 million displaced persons have God with *them*. Jesus was born among animals and insects in a stable – so non-human beings have God with *them*. Shepherds were the ancient world's equivalent of street people. So they have God with *them*. Jesus grew up to love and care for any people he met who were sick in mind or body, or hungry. So they have God with *them*. Jesus was arrested, tried and executed by the state. So prisoners and those on death row have God with *them*. All these outsiders can be told with confidence that Jesus is their Emmanuel – God with *them*. And the rest of us? God was born, a living, mortal organism on planet Earth. So every creature, the air we

breathe and the land we walk on, *we all* have God with us. In every place, Jesus revealed God; he was – he is – God with us.

And the question of suffering? It hasn't been forgotten. At the end of his ministry, Jesus would take it all to the Cross – he'd willingly have all wrong and all evil crucified in his own body, and he'd take it to the grave where it belongs. And on the third day after his death, when he rose, alive again from the grave, all the suffering of the world – even death itself – lay defeated at his feet.

Yes, we still experience suffering. We're still not at the end times. But the Good News is that while suffering has an end, we do not. Just as Jesus came to be with us in our suffering, he promises that when we die, he will come and take us to be with him. ^{Jn 14} And we're also promised that after the last days, in a renewed heaven and earth, God will again make a home with us and wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. ^{Rev 21}

One day, the God of the universe was born a tiny, helpless baby; vulnerable to all the hazards of a dangerous world. He came to give meaning to our life, to rescue us all, good and bad, and to let us know we have *God with us* in every moment.
Amen