

:// January 19, 2010



:// YOUTH . CONNECTING \_ FAITH / AND . LIFE

## :// Why, O God?

On January 12 a magnitude 7.0 earthquake centered near Port-au-Prince, the capital and largest city of the Caribbean nation of Haiti, devastated the small nation—killing tens (and possibly hundreds) of thousands of people, destroying or badly damaging important government buildings such as the Presidential Palace and National Assembly building, and wiping out major hospitals and medical facilities. All three of the hospitals operated by the international aid organization Doctors Without Borders were at least temporarily out of commission. And the daunting rebuilding process has been hampered by a lack of infrastructure and an airport that is not equipped to handle the number of planes flying into the country with relief supplies.

People around the world have been taken aback by images of corpses piled on the street, crying children,

desperate parents, and other horrific scenes of human suffering. And many are asking: Where was God in this earthquake? How could God allow something so terrible to happen?

For believers in an all-loving, all-powerful God, the existence of tragedy and suffering is an age-old problem. Theologians have given this problem a special name: *theodicy*. People have often concluded that, if God is both all-loving and all-powerful, nothing bad should ever happen—or, at least, nothing bad should happen to good people. The Haitian earthquake obviously didn't discriminate between good and bad, and good people are not immune to suffering.

Youth and adults alike will struggle to explain or understand the problem of theodicy. We know that disease and death are necessary to continue the cycle of life, but why would God allow suffering on such a grand scale? How could God allow a natural disaster to take the lives of so many young people who had their entire lives ahead of them? How could God allow so many impoverished people to end up homeless and heartbroken?

Many youth have experienced theodicy closer to home. Maybe they have lost a parent to death or divorce; maybe a beloved classmate has died suddenly or become unexpectedly ill. Maybe they have been falsely accused of wrongdoing; or maybe their homes have been destroyed by a tornado, hurricane, flood, or fire.

While many of us have pondered "Why do bad things happen?"—fewer stop to ask, "Why do good

things happen?" After all, we live in a world broken by sin, and all of us are equally guilty. Why should any of us enjoy peace, happiness, or good health? Questioning God in the face of suffering is OK, but we should also be sure to thank God for all of our blessings. We should also remember that often God is revealed through people's responses to tragedy. Some of Christianity's most revered saints were those who selflessly responded to the cry of the needy.

Still, in our lifetimes we likely will see few disasters as deadly as the recent earthquake. On the surface, the blessings in Haiti seem insignificant compared to the death and destruction. Looking for God amid the suffering may be frustrating; for those close to the tragedy, it surely is infuriating. But even when we don't understand God's ways, we are still God's people, and God calls us to bring hope and healing in the midst of pain and suffering. Youth on the other side of the world may feel powerless, as though they have nothing to contribute to the recovery effort. But youth can raise or donate money, write elected representatives about what the government is doing in response to the tragedy, and, most importantly, pray.

This issue of LINC will look at how God is at work in times of devastation and despair. Program A, "Looking for God," will help youth find God in the midst of suffering. In Program B, "A Christian Response," we ask the question: How should Christians respond to tragedy?



what's  
inside?



### :// BIBLE\_TALK /

#### Who's Sin Caused This?

John 9:1-12

#### Jesus, Where Were You?

John 11:1-5, 28-40

#### Our Refuge and Strength

Psalms 46

### :// PROGRAMMING \_

#### Program A\_Juiced Up!: Looking for God

**Purpose:** To help youth find God in the midst of suffering.

#### Program B\_Coffee Talk: A Christian Response

**Question of the Day:** How should Christians respond to tragedy?

**Devotion:** // Weep With Those Who Weep

### YOUTH\_PAGES /

Where Was God?

Psalms 40:1-2

Romans 12:15

Top Ten List

Next in LINC

What Do You Think?

In the Bible

**New!!:** *Inherit the Mirth*

**Whose Sin Caused This?**

**John 9:1-12**

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

—John 9:1-2

**Commentary:** What is the relationship between our sins and our behavior? Throughout history, many people have considered disasters, calamities, and illnesses to be God's punishment for sins. Some of the Old Testament prophets and books of history suggested that Israel's well-being and security as a nation depended on the people's faithfulness to God and treatment of the poor.

While failure to be faithful to God or to insure justice has negative consequences, Jesus makes clear to his disciples that disease and tragedy cannot simply be credited to the victims' sins (or their ancestors' sins).

Only God can truly understand human suffering; however, God also works through each of us to relieve the pain felt by God's people—"so that God's works might be revealed" in them (verse 3b).

**Questions to talk about:**

- ➔ How, do you think, is personal behavior related to suffering or tragedy? When do people have no control over the pain they're experiencing?
- ➔ Why would God allow large-scale disasters (such as the recent earthquake) to affect good people, bad people, and everyone in between? What does Jesus have to say about this?

➔ How are God's works revealed in our responses to tragedy?

**Jesus, Where Were You?**

**John 11:1-5, 28-40**

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

—John 11:32

**Commentary:** One of the most disillusioning reactions to tragedy is feeling that God could have done something to prevent it, but did not. Asking why God didn't contain the quake or settle the sea is normal. (After all, Jesus stills the storm in **Matthew 8:23-27**.)

In this passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus receives such criticism from Mary. Instead of rushing to Lazarus' side upon learning he was ill, Jesus stays where he was for two days. But when Mary confronts him, Jesus does not offer a defense, or even try to explain. Instead he weeps with the mourners. In Jesus, God suffers with us. And at the end of the story, as he does with Lazarus, Christ restores us to life.

**Questions to talk about:**

- ➔ When have you questioned or been angry with God for not intervening to stop a tragedy?
- ➔ How does God offer life and hope amid death and destruction?
- ➔ How does it feel to know that God suffers with you?

United Methodist Communications has been providing news coverage of the Haitian earthquake and its aftermath at [www.umc.org/haiti](http://www.umc.org/haiti).

**Our Refuge and Strength**

**Psalms 46**

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

—Psalm 46:1

**Commentary:** During times of peace, calm, and comfort, it is easy for us to affirm that "God is our refuge and strength." During times of turmoil and tragedy, it is more difficult.

Right now millions of people in Haiti are grieving the loss of loved ones; suffering from painful and life-altering injuries; and surveying the damage done to their homes, churches, and workplaces. One cannot fault any of these persons for struggling to see how God is present with them at such a time.

Yet we can be confident that God is present with the people of Haiti, that God is their "refuge and strength" even after the death, devastation, and destruction of the past week. God will continue to be present with them in their hearts as they find the strength to rebuild their communities and nation; in the aid of workers who bring food, clothing, and medical supplies; and in the prayers of people around the world.

**Questions to talk about:**

- ➔ When is it most difficult to see that God is present?
- ➔ When, if ever, have you doubted that God was present in a certain situation?
- ➔ In what ways is God present with the people of Haiti? How is God their "refuge" and "strength"?

The purpose of LINC is to help youth develop Christian identity and live the Christian faith in their contemporary culture.

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*Inherit the Mirth* by Cuyler Black

://PROGRAM  
A: \_JUICED UP! :  
LOOKING FOR GOD

**Purpose: To help youth find God in the midst of suffering.**

**Getting Ready: You will need Bibles, copies of the Youth Pages, a markerboard, markers, hymnals or songbooks, and pictures of the recent tragedy in Haiti.**

**Images of Tragedy (10–15 minutes)**

Collect several pictures of the disaster in Haiti from the Internet, magazines, or newspapers. As youth arrive, give each youth a picture or allow each youth to select a picture.

Instruct youth to silently look at their pictures and reflect on the emotions triggered by these images. After a few minutes, ask each youth to say aloud one word that describes his or her feelings toward the situation depicted in his or her picture.

Then ask:

- ➔ What do you know about the earthquake in Haiti? What questions do you have? (Add to the youths' responses using information from Page 1 and the resources listed on Pages 2 and 3.)
- ➔ If you could be God for a day, what would you do to help the people most affected by the earthquake?

**Where Was God? (15 minutes)**

Divide youth into teams of three or four. Ask each team to work together to list on Youth Page 5 the most devastating tragedies they can remember happening in their lifetimes. (For example, youth might list September 11th, Columbine, the 2004 Asian Tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, recent tornados, floods, or fires that have affected your community, and so forth.)

Invite teams to name aloud some of the examples they have listed. Then say: "Tragic events such as these often cause people to ask, 'How could an all-loving, all-powerful God allow this to happen?' As humans, we can never truly understand God's ways. But if we look closely, we can see God at work in even the most devastating situations."

Ask a youth to read aloud **John 9:1-4**. Then say: "Jesus tells his disciples that victims of tragedies are not being punished by God. Rather, God's work is revealed in them."

Instruct teams to think of one way that God's work was revealed in each of the tragedies they listed and to list these ideas in the appropriate column on Youth Page 5. (For example: God was at work in the volunteers who helped rebuild after the hurricane.) Invite teams to read aloud their ideas.

**What Can I Do? (5–10 minutes)**

Say: "We can see God at work in the volunteers, missionaries, and aid workers who help people rebuild their lives following a natural disaster. But God can also work through each of us. What can we do to help with the relief effort?"

Work with the youth to identify ways they can help the victims of natural disasters (including the recent earthquake, as well as hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, fires, and other disasters). List ideas on a markerboard or large sheet of paper.

Donating money is the obvious answer, but press youth to think of ways they can use their gifts or talents to raise money. Also remind youth that the recovery effort is a long-term process. Even after persons' immediate needs are met, supplies will be needed to rebuild schools and other facilities. Also make sure that youth include "prayer" on their list.

**Option:** Invite a member of your congregation who has survived a natural disaster or been involved in relief efforts to speak to your youth. Ask this person to describe the disaster, how he or she saw God at work in its aftermath, and how the

disaster affected the faith of the victims. Allow youth time to ask questions.

**Putting It in Perspective (10 minutes)**

To lighten the mood, ask for volunteers to read aloud the "Top Ten Things That Don't Seem So Tragic Anymore" on Youth Page 6. Allow youth time to add to the list and send their ideas to LINC.

Then say: Though we all face difficulties and challenges in life, events like the Haitian earthquake remind us that many of the things we get worked up about aren't really that important. In the wake of such a tragedy, we should thank God for all the ways we are blessed; pray that God will bring strength, comfort, and hope to everyone affected by this disaster; and focus on what truly matters in life."

**Be Still, My Soul (10 minutes)**

Divide youth into pairs or small teams and give each a hymnal or song book that includes "Be Still, My Soul" (No. 534 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*). Ask teams to rewrite the first verse in their own words, either as a poem, in paragraph form, or set to the tune of another song.

Say: "This hymn reminds us that God is present with us regardless of the situation. We may question God; we may not understand God's ways; but God continues walking alongside us, leading us 'to a joyful end.'"

Invite pairs or teams to read aloud or sing their versions of "Be Still, My Soul." Then ask a volunteer to read aloud **Psalms 40:1-3** as a closing prayer.

Currently, the best way to help with the relief effort is by donating money. You can donate through UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief) at [www.umcor.org](http://www.umcor.org), by placing a check in the offering plate, or by sending a check to UMCOR, P.O. Box 9068, New York, NY 10087. Checks should indicate "Advance #418325."

**://PROGRAM B: \_  
COFFEE TALK!:  
CHRISTIAN RESPONSE**

**Question of the Day: How should Christians respond to tragedy?**

**Cultural Connection: The Haitian Earthquake**

**Topic: How God Is Present Amid Suffering**

Use the information on Page 1 to relate the cultural connection to the topic of how God is present amid suffering and to introduce the individual talk topics you choose.

**Questions to Get You Started:**

- ➔ How much attention have you paid to the recent earthquake in Haiti?
- ➔ What images of the earthquake's aftermath have had the biggest impact on you? Which images have been most difficult for you to process?
- ➔ What questions do tragedies such as the recent Haitian earthquake (along with Hurricane Katrina, the 2004 Asian tsunami, and earthquakes earlier this century that killed tens of thousands in China and Pakistan) raise about God and how God is present amid suffering?
- ➔ What is our congregation doing to help the survivors of the Haitian earthquake?

**For each Talk Topic, ask:**

- ➔ How do the "Read More" Scriptures add to this discussion?

**Talk Topic #1: God and Tragedy**

**KEY POINT:** Only God truly understands the meaning of human suffering.

Ask:

- ➔ Since God is all-loving and all-powerful, why, do you think, do many people—including good people and children—suffer?
- ➔ On the other hand, since we live in a world tainted by sin, why, do

you think, do good things happen?

- ➔ How does God intervene to prevent suffering or to ease the pain of suffering?

**Read More:** Job 2:1-10; 38:1-11; Psalm 24:1-2; Isaiah 40:27-31; John 9:1-12; Revelation 21:1-5.

**Talk Topic #2: Jesus Wept**

**KEY POINT:** Jesus understands human pain and even shares in our suffering.

Ask:

- ➔ How can God understand the pain humans feel when we suffer?
- ➔ Read **John 11:28-37**. Why do you think Jesus wept? Why didn't he just go ahead and raise Lazarus from the dead? Why didn't he prevent the death in the first place?
- ➔ How do you think God feels when people experience tragedies?
- ➔ How might it be comforting to picture Christ weeping when tragedy strikes?

**Read More:** Psalm 23; Lamentations 3:19-24; Mark 1:40-45; Romans 8:14-17; Hebrews 4:14-18.

**Talk Topic #3: We Suffer Together**

**KEY POINT:** As Christians, we are called to reach out to those who suffer.

Ask:

- ➔ When have you experienced tragedy? How did Christian

**Using This Program**

- Use Coffee Talk as a discussion starter. Focus the lesson on one section or hit several issues, depending on the interests of your group.
- Challenge students to an in-depth Bible study on one section, using the Scripture verses listed under "Read More."
- Make photocopies of Bible Talk on page 2 and use the commentary and discussion questions for a theological complement to your Coffee Talk discussion.
- Begin or end the session with the Devotion.
- Ask students to think about the Question of the Day and cut out In the Bible (both on page 6) for reflection and independent Bible study during the coming week.
- These topics and questions may be somewhat controversial. Challenge youth to engage in meaningful discussion, realizing that your talk may address sensitive issues. Prayerfully explore these points, asking for pastoral or professional assistance when necessary.

friends and family members reach out to you?

- ➔ How have you seen God at work in people who assist the victims of natural disasters or other tragedies?
- ➔ What can we do to reach out to victims of the recent earthquake in Haiti?
- ➔ How can we make a habit out of helping those who suffer?

**Read More:** Exodus 1:15-22; Job 2:11-13; Luke 10:29-37; Romans 12:15-16.

**://Devotion: Weep With Those Who Weep (5 minutes)**

**Getting Ready:** You will need Bibles, slips of paper, and pens or pencils.

Instruct youth to spend a few minutes in silence, thinking about the victims of the Haitian earthquake—those who have lost their lives, their loved ones, their homes, and so on. Bring youth out of the silence by reading aloud **Romans 12:15-16**. Say: "We may never understand what the victims of the earthquake are going through, but their experiences should prompt us to think about what is truly important in life."

Distribute slips of paper and pens or pencils, then say: "Think of items you buy that you don't really need: snacks, mp3s or CDs, clothes you don't need, and so on; write the items on your slip of paper. Keep this slip of paper with you all week. Whenever you feel the urge to make an unnecessary purchase, stop yourself and write on the slip of paper the dollar amount you would have spent. At the end of the week, total the money you've saved and donate it to the relief effort." Close in a prayer for the earthquake victims and the Christians around the world who are called to help them.



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I waited and waited and waited for God.  
At last he looked; finally he listened.  
He lifted me out of the ditch,  
pulled me from deep mud.  
He stood me up on a solid rock to make sure I wouldn't slip.

—Psalm 40:1-2 (THE MESSAGE)\*

### Where Was God?

Most Devastating Tragedies of Our Lifetimes	how god was at work
1.	
2.	
3.	
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8.	
9.	
10.	

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.  
—Romans 12:15

—\*Scripture taken from *THE MESSAGE*.  
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NEXT WEEK

://TOP TEN LIST

TOP TEN THINGS THAT DON'T SEEM SO TRAGIC ANYMORE

10. Having a curfew that's earlier than all of your friends' curfews
9. Sharing a room with an irritating sibling
8. Having to take out the trash when it's not your turn
7. Being benched by the basketball coach
6. Tearing a hole in your favorite sweater
5. Not getting that iPod Touch for Christmas
4. Breaking a fingernail
3. Watching your team lose a championship game in overtime
2. Taking that history essay test that you still haven't studied for
1. Waking up early on a weekend to come to Sunday school

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What are the Top Ten things that don't seem so tragic anymore?

Please e-mail your response to us at [pshepherd@umpublishing.org](mailto:pshepherd@umpublishing.org) or snail mail us at:

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The angel Castiel has become a fixture on the popular CW show *Supernatural*; the plot of the new movie *Legion* involves God sending angels to earth to destroy humankind; popular author Anne Rice has made angels the centerpiece of her latest series of novels. Angels have become so prevalent in American pop culture that some have wondered if angels are the new vampires. But how do these cultural portrayals of God's messengers stack up against the angels we read about in Scripture? Next week we'll look at what the Bible says about angels and what that means for how we live our lives as Christians.

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:// IN THE BIBLE

- MONDAY:** Read John 9:1-3. We should never assume that the victims of natural disasters or other such tragedies are being punished by God.
- TUESDAY:** Read John 11:20-21, 28-32. In the wake of a tragedy, it is natural to ask why God did not intervene.
- WEDNESDAY:** Read Job 38:1-12. As God reminds Job, God's ways are beyond our comprehension.
- THURSDAY:** Read John 11:33-37. Though we often do not understand how God works, in Christ, God shares our pain and is with us when we suffer.
- FRIDAY:** Read Psalm 23. Those who "walk through the darkest valley" need to be reminded of God's presence.
- SATURDAY:** Read Romans 12:15-16. We can reveal God to others when we "rejoice with those who rejoice" and "weep with those who weep."

✂ Cut out and tuck in your Bible for your personal reflection and study this week.