

Only the Suffering God Can Help

Job 1:1-2:10

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

“It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.”

Today God’s people are gathering around the Lord’s Table in the Evangelical Church of Homs Syria, Russian bombs falling; in the refugee camps of Lebanon and Jordan and Austria and Germany, families eating the crumbs off the world’s table; in Churches of the Province of West Africa where Ebola is still stalking God’s children; in what is left of Hidden Valley Assemblies of God Church in California, the sanctuary reduced to ashes by wild fires; in the Church of the Living God on West 58th where poverty plagues this poorest of cities; in the First Presbyterian Church of Roseburg Oregon, hearts breaking with the grief that has overtaken more communities than there are days in the year. “Take. Eat. This is my body broken for you,” the priest says. “The blood of Christ. The cup of salvation,” the minister declares. What sort of God can help the lives of God’s children suffering at the hands of tyrants and terrorists, in the clutches of disease or natural disasters, at the mercy of society’s scorn or the barrel of a gun brandished by yet another deranged young man?

Consider, in the first place, the sort of God we meet in the book of Job. On one hand, God exists at a remove from God’s creatures; on the other hand, God is interested in God’s creatures. But if we are asking whether God is the sort of God who can help, we need to look at the way God acts in response to human suffering. The story of Job is a story told to upend the tidy wisdom of Proverbs. If you want to be blessed by God in this life, Proverbs counsels, “Fear God and turn away from evil.” Job does just that; but then, inexplicably from Job’s perspective, he is given more than any human being can bear, pious platitudes notwithstanding. Granted, God does not personally inflict loss and grief and pain and isolation on this blameless and upright man. God simply permits these things to befall him. A member of the divine council, known as “the accuser” or “the adversary,” asks if he may “touch all that Job has”; and the Lord responds, “Very well, all that he has (and eventually even his bone and his flesh) is in your power.” God asks only that his life be spared. Then for thirty-five chapters, God watches in silence. Finally, from out of the whirlwind, God speaks and says, in so many words, “My thoughts are not your thoughts; neither are your ways my ways.” What are the thoughts and the ways of the God we meet in the story of Job? In what sense can this God help?

The sort of God is the God whose attributes coincide with the ideals of Greek philosophers. To quote our own Scots Confession, this God is “eternal, infinite, immeasurable, incomprehensible, omnipotent, invisible” and impassible, that is, incapable of suffering. For God to be God, said the classical theologians, God cannot be affected by God’s creatures, because God is self-sufficient, self-determining, not subject to change or time or feelings or matter.

Paradoxically, it seems to me, because this sort of God is the default setting in our minds for what we mean when we say God, we rail at God in the face of human suffering because we believe this God, removed though God is, is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving and so could choose to stop tyrants and terrorists, diseases and natural disasters, could choose to stop even deranged young men with guns. But like the God of Job, evidence leads us to conclude that God chooses to permit such things for reasons beyond our comprehension. At best we say we may understand, by and by. At worst, we say to the grieving, “Your child’s death, your friend’s cancer, your terrible misfortune must be God’s will.”

If I believed in that God, then every Sunday morning, as well as during each visit I made to you in the hospital or at time of death, I would have to find some way to convince you to bow down before a monster and cry out to a God who has the power to help but, most of the time, chooses not to help. There is only one reason I do not believe God is a God who can help and chooses not to. The reason is Jesus. It is the same reason offered by another preacher to his congregation, in the latter half of the first century, who were doing their best to endure persecution and torture at the hands of Rome. What is a preacher to say to a people who are at the end of what they can bear? The preacher of Hebrews first acknowledges that they do not yet see everything under God’s control—any fool could see that; but then he reminds them that they do see Jesus. And what they see in Jesus, he says, is the God who has taken suffering and death into God’s very being, a God whose Son made perfect through sufferings is the pioneer of the same faith they are holding onto by their toenails. The only reason I do not believe

in the God who can help, and chooses not to, is Jesus; because through him, I see the suffering of passionate love that God is.

For the next few minutes, try taking off the spectacles of classic theology and, through the eyes of love made flesh at the turning point of human history, open the Bible as if for the first time. There you will be met by the God whose pathos is on every page: God's disappointment and distress in the face of people's faithlessness; God's pain occasioned by Israel's turning from God's love and toward other gods; God's grief in Hosea as the beloved spurns the lover; God's suffering as a parent suffers when disciplining a wayward child; God's pathos poured into the words of the prophets. "My pathos is not your pathos," God says in Abraham Heschel's translation of Isaiah, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my pathos than your pathos."

At the beginning of the last century, there was a turn in theological thinking about God that has yet to make it into most pulpits. The turn was from the omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, impassible God of Greek philosophers to a God intimately affected by human suffering, a God characterized by the suffering of a passionate lover. Not by chance, I think, the theologians who made the turn were wrestling with God from out of the depths: British theologians began the movement in the face of the unparalleled carnage in World War I; Miguel Unamuno wrote of the infinite suffering of God in the midst political repression in Spain; Nicolas Berdyaev struggled with tragedy in the divine life as the Russian revolution commenced; Barth and Bonhoeffer and Brunner did their theology from out of the Holocaust, the only credible theology for Auschwitz being a theology that makes God an inmate; Kozoh Kitamori wrote a theology of the pain of God in the aftermath of Hiroshima; for me, the visit of Black theologian James Cone to my college campus confronted me and opened my eyes to God's solidarity with the oppressed; and Jurgen Moltmann's *Crucified God*, written out of his own experience as a prisoner of war and out of his unbearable grief at the death of his four-year old son, turned me from a seminarian struggling with my ideas about a distant God to a chaplain on a cancer ward whose only clue God might be with and for the dying patients I visited was God's Son: he took on their infirmities and suffered death that he might taste death precisely for them.

At the heart of this understanding of God is the cross where human suffering and divine suffering are one. There the suffering of those who must die is taken into the life of God; and there the suffering of God from the beginning of creation until its consummation is revealed in human history. "God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross," Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from prison. "He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. [When Matthew borrows Isaiah's words to identify Jesus, saying, "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases"], he makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering." Then Bonhoeffer goes on to say that religiosity makes people "look in distress to the power of God in the world....The Bible directs [us instead] to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help," he tells us and tells us not only with his words, but with his life. Only by living "unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities," he counsels, "[do we] throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world." Prose cannot contain the news, so he writes:

Men go to God when they are sore bestead
Pray to him for succour, for his peace, for bread,
For mercy for them sick, sinning, or dead;
All men do so, Christian and unbelieving.

Men go to God when [God] is sore bestead
Find him poor and scorned, without shelter or bread,
Whelmed under weight of the wicked, the weak, the dead,
Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving.

God goes to every man when sore bestead
Feeds body and spirit with his bread;
For Christians, pagans alike he hangs dead,
And both alike forgiving.

At this table, all over the world, suffering human beings are taking the sufferings of God in the world seriously as their own. We do not see everything in submission to God's reign, the preacher said to his beleaguered congregation, but we do see Jesus, see him who not only tasted death but triumphed over death for us all. He did this not by omnipotent might but through the almighty powerlessness of self-emptying love. Self-emptying love is all Christ's body has in the world still; and, until he comes again, it is enough: the suffering power of weakness over against the blustering weakness of power. So Christ's body visibly assembles around the world as Christians defy falling bombs in Homs to come to the table, as refugees are given succor at the table set by him who still has no place to lay his head, as relatives of the sick and dying, the poor and despised, come to him who bears our infirmities; as a congregation remembers in the ashes the sign of the cross on their foreheads, marking them as Christ's own, as a town heaves in the grief that they now share with those who have gone before them in Charleston, Aurora, the Washington Naval Yard, Newtown, Virginia Tech, Fort Hood, in the 294 other towns and cities where death has seemed to reign since the beginning of this year.

Like the preacher of Hebrews, I can only acknowledge that we do not yet see everything in subjection to God, but we do see Jesus. See, in him, the suffering of God in the world; taste in bread broken and wine poured out the almighty powerless love that continues to send Christ's body, the church, into the world of tyrants and terrorists, of disease and natural disasters and poverty, into the never-changing world of lonely, violent men, with the great good news that only the suffering God can help.