

In the mesopelagic and bathypelagic zones of the world’s seas, at a depth of between 1,000 and 7,200 feet, the brownsnout spookfish makes its home. This spookfish, like so many other species that reside out of the world’s sight, is truly incredible. It has mirrors for eyes. Actually, it has both a lens and a mirror, working in conjunction so that it can see up and down and left and right simultaneously. Moreover, the lens is said to see objects silhouetted northward against the sunlight, while the mirror is able to detect bioluminescence from the sides and below.¹ Bioluminescence, as we may remember, is the production and emission of light by a living organism.² Thus, in a loose but compelling sense, this fish has the eyes of God, seeing everything around it, while searching for the Light emanating from all of creation.

Now wouldn’t it be amazing if we too had mirrors for eyes, or better yet, if we were able to see as God sees? Or perhaps would it not be so amazing? For as many of our theologies dictate God sees everything, and if everything then God must watch over every species on Earth, every planetary rock to the farthest reaches of our potentially holographic universe, as well as the daily minutiae of all of our lives, such as Ken eating a pizza, the Phillies losing another game, or even when I pick up and bag Vincent’s poop. Is God then really blessed to see everything, simultaneously, or can God choose to focus on only that which is most important – like the massacres in Syria or the financial and political chaos emanating from Greece and spreading throughout Europe?

As many of you have asked in your Big Questions to us³: if God does in fact see everything, especially that which is happening in those places of brutality and distress, then why is there still brutality and distress, and depression and disease and suffering and death? Why, you’ve asked, do bad things happen to good people? Why does evil persist under the reign of a benevolent, omnipotent, and omnipresent God? Why doesn’t God do anything about the horrors God sees?

In truth, this has been your most frequently asked Big Question, and we did promise you that we would try to preach on everything you asked, and not necessarily the spookfish (but I promise, they are related). As such, here then is my less-than-authoritative, B-team answer: there is no answer, which in itself is the answer.

You see, there are uncertainty principles, chaos theories, and endless other scientific, mathematic and theological paradigms trying to make sense of our world and our universe, but as of this morning, we still can’t fully grasp it. There is still a void between general relativity and quantum mechanics, just as there is still a deep chasm between good and evil. And lest we be fooled, just because we saw Venus in transit across the face of our sun, that doesn’t mean we can also see into the mind of God, nor the elusive Higgs-boson. This big question, *why does evil exist*: it’s the

¹ Wagner, H.J.; et al. "A Novel Vertebrate Eye Using Both Refractive and Reflective Optics". *Current Biology*, Vol. 19, 2009.

² Science, 101

³ Big Questions: We asked everyone in the congregation to submit “Big [theological] Questions” to us; questions that we would address in our sermons throughout the year. This particular question: on *why is their evil/why do bad things happen to good people* was somewhat lacking in interest to Cindy, as she’s had to tackle this inquiry ad infinitum throughout her ministry. So, I figured I’d give it a go.

mystery of our mortal life. But as Dostoevsky said, it is the mystery perhaps worth the *wasting* of our time.⁴

Now, if all of that's not particularly satisfying to you, there is always the popular Free Will Theodicy to consider. It argues that evil exists because (you guessed it) we have complete freedom of will, and since we are mortal and sinful creatures, evil persists. But if one takes this concept of free will seriously, then God simply becomes like Dr. T.J. Eckleburg out of *The Great Gatsby*, an inanimate billboard of the past, watching his creation both succeed and unravel depending upon our personal choices toward right and wrong. Moreover, if one supports this claim, that our impulses are absolutely liberated from divine intervention, then charges must be filed against the very essence of God's quality. For if God was always truly omniscient, then logic dictates that God should have seen into the future and known what our free will would cost -- rape, genocide, The Holocaust; pick your barbarism -- costs that ultimately would weigh too much when attempting to also trust in God's complete benevolence.

Thus in my most humble of opinions, there really is no perfect answer to this Big Question of yours, at least none that I know of that neither limits God's abilities or altogether condemns the Divine Counsel as guilty from the beginning of creation.

But... that doesn't mean we should despair! Not at all! For if there is one thing we can put our faith in this morning, it is that God sees us. More, that God even became us, and died a mortal death for us. And granted, God might not always do for us as we hope -- answering our every prayer and all of our knocks on the Heavenly door -- but God does see us and God is with us. And our text from Genesis, from the beginning of the Word, only confirms that.

But before we get to that hopeful word, let us first remember its difficult backstory. Hagar, whose name literally translates as "stranger" was Egyptian, and either for personal means of survival, or forced coercion⁵, she became Sarah's⁶ slave-girl. At some point during this arrangement, it became clear to Sarah that her womb was infertile and desiring a child (as promised by God) so greatly, she "gave" Hagar to Abraham so that he could reproduce through her. Hagar, of course, had no choice or say in the matter. She was to be their vessel, for she was after all just an object.

And as such, Hagar then accomplishes what Sarah could not -- she conceives -- and afterward looks with contempt upon her master, which personally, I think to be rather fair, don't you? Sarah of course though doesn't see it our way, but rather responds "harshly" to Hagar's contempt and throws her out of the house into the wilderness. The Hebrew word used here for "harshly" by the way is also employed in other Old Testament texts, meaning in those cases either "oppressed" or "raped."

⁴ Actual Quote: "To study the meaning of humanity of life -- I am making significant progress here. I have faith in myself. Human kind is a mystery: if you spend your entire life trying to puzzle it out, then do not say that you have wasted your time. I occupy myself with this mystery, because I want to be human."

⁵ There are scholarly debates about whether Hagar willfully enslaved herself to the house of Abram for means of survival (for shelter and food: a common practice for the poor in the Near East who lived outside of their own culture); or if Abram and Sarai purchased/took her for their own means.

⁶ Sarah was known as Sarai at this point, but for continuity we'll just use Sarah.

So I really don't think there's any way around it, folks. Hagar, we can say, was raped by the patriarch and matriarch of our old faith⁷; or perhaps more appropriately, the powers-that-be raped Hagar of her freedom and then of her livelihood. And yes, it is horrible, it is shocking and terrible. But that's just the way it was for Hagar, as well as for so many other countless strangers of foreign lands who were, and have been, and still are taken into physical and sexual bondage. There was and has been no moral rhyme or reason, no good theological rationale, no acceptable answer for why this has ever been allowed to occur. Hagar, like her equals, was simply dealt a sucky deck of cards and that's unfortunately all there is to it.

And thus it came to pass that Hagar was now pregnant, with no employment, and alone in the wilderness. That is, until God found her there. Now, at first, it seemed that God was only making things worse. For God said to Hagar that she must return and submit to her mistress. Jesus, God. Worse even, pastors throughout time have used this command to "counsel" battered wives to return to their abusive husbands, reciting that it's the word of god... talk about evil. My personal conviction is that God said this to Hagar because there was simply nothing He could do; he couldn't reverse time and switch the deck of cards that she was given. The randomness of fate which once determined Hagar's path had played out, sovereignly and independently.

However, that did not render God completely impotent, for God did do something... God **saw** Hagar. God **heard** Hagar. And God was **present** with Hagar. God told Hagar that her son would be named Ishmael, which meant "God hears." God told and indeed showed Hagar that she was not alone, nor that she would ever be. God found her in the barren wilderness and heard her cries. And when God found her there, she did not ask for retribution against Sarah nor the redemption of her body, for it's as if she already knew that's what happened, happened, and whatever happens, happens. Rather, Hagar merely praised God for being present with her. And in doing so even gave God a name (Hagar the slave-girl, is the only person in scripture to name God...), El-roi, which meant "The God Who Sees." You see, Hagar was comforted, not by God's action in her defense, for there was none, but rather by God's presence in her trouble. And for Hagar, God's presence, God's sight upon her and over her was enough to give her the peace that her chaotic and unfair life never allocated.

Now, some of you might be thinking... *come on, if I was Hagar, I'd want God to act. To intervene. To do something. God's presence, God's seeing me, simply wouldn't be enough.* Well, for Peggy Hermann it was enough. Peggy Hermann, a virtual stranger to this modern world and even to our own congregation (though a member of our congregation) suffered for the last 30-odd years from Paranoid-Schizophrenia.

Here was a woman who was a college graduate, an educator and a wife, and then, out of nowhere, she was taken into mental bondage. And when the "break" onset, it was too late. There was nothing that could be done, in fact, there was nothing that ever could have done. It was in her DNA. Her genetic map and the powers-that-be predestined her detachment both from her society and indeed her own mind.

⁷ The ancient world was truly different than our own. And though we can't affirm Abraham and Sarah's actions, we should try to understand them in their context – that often, it was common practice for a slave to be given over for means of reproduction in a preexisting case of their master's infertility. Yes, morally bankrupt... but contextual.

And yet, in all of my visits with her, she never once complained. Sure, she had her ups and downs, and sometimes her depressive isolation almost overcame her. But she never blamed God nor wondered why this was ever allowed to happen. And of course, she would have loved to have known why; of course she would have loved a cure; of course she would have wanted God to do something and intervene, to reverse the course of her complicated reality. But... none of that was ever spoken from her clean lips. For all that she ever said to me about God was how thankful she was: for God's watchful eye over her; for the visits from Jean and Lill and Barbara and even the youth who I would bring along with me. All she ever expressed was her deep gratitude for the Word that made her feel secure even when everything around her was ever so frightening.

My friends, do you see? Though a stranger to the eyes of society, Peggy was never abandoned by God's vision. God was present with her, watching her every move, listening to every cry. God was her El-roi. God saw her Light, the goodness of her soul and would not look away. And that was enough for her, enough to sustain her delightful disposition for her entire 27+ years locked away at Whitmarsh House and even right up to her death two weeks ago at Springfield Residences.

God sees us, especially in our distress. And if we truly aspire to see like God, then we must also set our eyes on the silhouettes lost in the wilderness, hearing their cries and being present in their luminescence. Knowing that we might not always bring with us their cure, the remedy to their suffering; knowing we might not always understand the why or the how's of their pain. But trusting that if we can be present with them, assuring that they have not disappeared completely from our sight, then just might be enough.

Thanks be to El-roi. Amen.