

## **Forget Why – Pent+19B**

Theodicy – The justice of God -- How can a benevolent Creator allow bad things to happen to good people? Some say this question is beyond our comprehension. And yet with various outrageous evils is our culture filled. Two basic answers are 1, that God is flippant, vindictive, cruel and unpredictable, flipping a coin between Nectar Mai Tais, or whatever they drink up there in Heaven, and condemning or preserving based on random selection; all to teach us a lesson in subservient acceptance. On this view, our fate is based on God's whims, and there is no apparent reason to pay any attention to the way of righteousness and compassion, because it won't do us a bit of good anyway.

The other answer says that all of Creation was set in motion by the Prime Mover, the original Force of Nature, The Lord of Hosts who made both Heaven and Earth, and who has vowed to interfere neither in human affairs nor in the Natural Order. Nature is what it is, and we have to deal with it. On this view, Humanity has been given consciousness in order to enjoy and engender righteousness (if we will) by walking the way of truth, compassion, justice and stewardship of the Earth and all its inhabitants. God will bring about perfection someday, but human history is about what happens in the meantime: how we relate to each other and to our environment in the face of natural forces and human

violence. God looks on, and laughs or cries, comforts or condemns based on how we do, but She does not interfere.

Some say the question is beyond our comprehension, because they don't like the second answer. They don't feel like walking the way of truth, so they declare the path unfit. But as the Wolof say, *Méré mandinj doc bu gaaw-a-ko gën*. "It's better to walk than to be angry at the road." Walking the way of truth means trying to understand what God wants, then staying true to that, come what may. We can forget about our righteousness, about our payoff, our personal feelings and preferences and simply remember what it felt like not to be connected. We have no reason to do good except that having been at the crossroads, we have perceived the more gracious way to be attractive, preferable, even irresistible for those who are really listening.

James Gustafson has written of the contrast between a "utilitarian" religion that justifies religious faith by its benefits for human persons and a genuinely "theocentric" fidelity and piety focused on serving God and God's purposes without reference to the self.

Some suffering is brought on ourselves, but some, if not most, is undeserved. There is only one set of directions to the path of truth, and that is to persist in seeking ways to the Good, no matter what our personal circumstances. Love God by loving Neighbor and, we

might add, by loving Neighborhood (as in the planet itself), and try to accept our immediate outcomes, especially when they involve suffering, as our own part of human history, subject to cosmic resolution on that great day when we all cross the Jordan together.

This is not to say that loving the Neighbor and the Neighborhood are purely mental and emotional undertakings. Loving the Neighbor also involves establishing governance and enforcing laws that seek to protect the powerless from the powerful. For example regulating and reducing the presence of guns, not because you can't handle them, but because we – as a society of – can't handle them. God is God and will not interfere, but we **must** interfere, and do something different when what we're doing isn't working. Shtuff happens, it's true, but when it comes to human shtuff, we are responsible for making **changes** in what happens.

Maia Kotrosits and Hal Taussig have observed in their provocative book *Rereading the Gospel of Mark Amidst Loss and Trauma* "Following Jesus turns out to have a quirky mix of joy, plot twists, disturbing events, inspiring people and harrowing challenges. Mark's story especially forces unpleasant and beautiful surprises on the reader, and following Jesus entails confronting all kinds of pain, reworking one's expectations, and being ambushed by goodness."

So they asked him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” He answered them, “The law says yes, because God knows you’re going to do it anyway. But when people marry, the two are no longer two, but one flesh, and therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. Which means whoever divorces a spouse commits adultery.” You don’t make a commitment, then dismiss it when you feel like it. Let no one separate them. But if, after prayerful consideration, mutual admission of realities, however painful, and with a true desire on the part of each to care for the spirit of the other, two people decide to forgive each other that commitment and create space in both of their lives for newly created commitments, then of no one can it be said that they are putting those people asunder. This is a whole lot less neat and tidy than, “No divorce, ever, period,” but it is also whole lot more realistic and redemptive. Perhaps God allows a do-over. God must allow do-overs, or how many of us would be sitting here.

We can talk about the intention and workings of God – in Nature, of Nature, indeed as Nature. The great thinker Spinoza came up with this way of thinking about God a long time ago. For his trouble, he was excommunicated from the synagogue for daring to broaden the conversation about God beyond accepted doctrines. Spinoza was saved from ignominy and supported wholeheartedly by a new community, and of course nowadays this way of thinking about God can be very helpful.

*Alah le bulu*, another proverb from West Africa – from the Mandinka. *Alah le bulu* means “God disposes.” It has been said that, “The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away.” Man proposes; God disposes, which means Nature runs her course. It is truly horrifying to think of God allowing one of his minions, Satan, in the story of Job, to goad him into endorsing torture just to prove his allegiance to The Name of the Lord. What can be stunning and sad and frightening, but not inexplicably horrifying, is the reality that Nature’s course involves human suffering.

That this is an unshakable truth means that we attribute to Nature’s course anything moral or situational or theological, at the peril of our spiritual lives. If the presence of guns in our culture is ruining too many lives, we can’t blame God – or Nature. If our behavior is ruining our climate, we can’t blame God – or the planet. And we can’t expect to live without suffering and pain, despite what the hospital billboards say. Like Job, we don’t have to like the pain, the tragedy, the betrayals and disappointments that life brings to us, along with our joys and pleasures, but also like Job, we can know that those agonies need not define our embrace of, and reliance upon the God of all Creation, any more than we can expect or even hope for a life free of pain. We can, instead recall that God is with us in the midst of all our sufferings, and that God’s plan is for us to have hopefulness and peace in our hearts no matter what the physical world and the people in it do to us. We can, like Job, know that our redeemer lives, who will

raise us up on the last day. And we can continue to try changing what we can change.

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made us little less than Gods, O Lord. It looks like you want us to be in charge. That’s what gets us so confused, that we are clearly supposed to be in charge, but there is so much we can’t control. And we have only ourselves to blame for the confusion. You don’t see members of any other species all worried about sin and death. Of course they may try hard to avoid death, but it doesn’t seem to confuse them any.

Now they say that in subjecting all things to humanity, God left nothing outside our control. But you and I both know that not everything is in subjection to us, least of all ourselves. But we do think about Jesus, who for a little while was made slightly lower than the angels, who was born and in tasting death for everyone’s sake, found it spineless. Through his sufferings, Jesus remained perfect; thus death had no dominion over him. Whether we celebrate or suffer, we too are saved when we remember how we belong in the arms of God and steer our lives in the direction of compassion and forbearance. Because we belong to God, we have the freedom to do what we can, while we can, to walk the way of truth, and to let go of the question: “Why?”

