

Our Keeper

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Psalm 139; Mark 15:33-39

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This morning we continue our Stump the Pastor sermon series with a question from Unmi Song: How do we reconcile a God who “keeps” some of us, but does not keep the majority of the world from evil, suffering or injustice?” This question is a response to the assertion made in Psalm 121 that I preached on last month: God keeps us, God does not let our foot slip; God keeps us now and forever. It is a good question, one many of us grapple with time and time again as we hear of atrocities world-wide and millions of innocent suffering people.

This question is also a prayer, not unlike the one we heard a moment ago from Mark’s gospel, when Jesus was on the cross: “O God My God, why have you forsaken me?” (15:33) Both questions acknowledge a seeming absence of God and a desire to know God’s place in the suffering. Both illustrate what St. Anselm of Canterbury, the great ninth century theologian described as “faith seeking understanding”. It is our faith and our love for God which enables us to a deeper understanding of God and God’s ways.

Ours is faith seeking understanding, and our quest this day to answer the question of evil and suffering in the world is well guided by Anselm’s prayer: “Where are you, Lord?”

How do we reconcile a God who “keeps” some of us, but does not keep the majority of the world from evil, suffering or injustice?” Friends, this, in one sentence, is the theodicy problem. Thomas Long, Bandy Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology at Emory University offers this definition of theodicy: “...how believers can hold together faith claims that seem, on the surface anyhow, to be incompatible: that there is a God, that God is loving and just, that God is powerful and that there is undeserved suffering in the world.” He continues: “theodicy is not about coming up for excuses for God’s behavior in a world of evil but how faith in a loving God is plausible, given what we know and experience about suffering.” (Long 2011 xii)

This problem of suffering in the world became a concern for theologians when modern science led to new, enlightened ways of thinking about how the universe was created and how and why natural disasters occur within it. All of this information replaced the uneducated answer of “God’s divine punishment” with a scientific one. As science came to out-reason God time and time again, post-enlightenment thinkers quickly went from the prayer “Why doesn’t got stop this suffering?” to the prayer “Is there a God at all?”

For Bart Ehrman, questioning God’s existence was unthinkable. Raised Episcopalian, Ehrman had a “born again” experience at a Youth for Christ gathering. Following this experience Ehrman became devoted to Jesus and to knowing him more. His faith was both deep and intellectually rigorous. Upon high school graduation he attended Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and from there went to Wheaton College. As his knowledge grew so too did his faith...up to a point. As he did his graduate studies and began to travel more and see the world his faith began to waver. He knew the Bible and through that knowledge knew God, but his

belief in the God of the Bible could not withstand the magnitude of suffering in the world. As he writes in his book chronicling his loss of faith: *How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why we suffer*:

I realized that I could no longer reconcile the claims of faith with the facts of life. In particular, I could no longer explain how there could be a good and all-powerful God actively involved with this world, given the state of things. For many people who inhabit this planet, life is a cesspool of misery and suffering. I came to a point where I simply could not believe that there is a good and kindly disposed Ruler who is in charge of it (Long 2011 20-21).

If we are honest, Ehrman's conclusion probably resonates with many of us, even if we aren't so bold or so certain to stop believing because of such thoughts. The question before us- the issue of innocent suffering in the world and much of humanity seemingly not "kept" by God- is a problem.

A big one. For Ehrman and many others the suffering in the world makes it impossible for all 4 of these statements- obvious truths, givens for people of faith, to be held together.

1. There is a God
2. God is all-powerful
3. God is loving and good.
4. There is innocent suffering. (Long 2011 23)

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his best-selling book *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, ultimately decides that statement two- God is all-powerful, is not true. Evil is the enemy of God, and sometimes Evil is more powerful. As he shares about the illness and death of his son Aaron, who suffered from progeria, a rare and fatal genetic disease that presents physically as rapid aging, Kushner keeps his faith by limiting God; by sacrificing God's omnipotence. He writes:

I no longer hold God responsible for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters, because I realize that I gain little and I lose so much when I blame God for those things. I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason (Long 2011 66)

A thoughtful pastoral response in the time of a tragedy perhaps, but in the end, not very satisfying conclusion, nor one that is Biblically sound. From the Psalms: "Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit." (147:5) And the prophet Jeremiah "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. There is nothing too hard for You." (32:17) According to the Scriptures, our God *is* all-powerful.

Which brings us back to our problem of suffering.

Another popular response is what theologians call the "Free Will defense". This is one that resonated with me...a way to "get God off the hook", so to speak. This defense was first

articulated by St. Augustine way back in the three hundreds. Simply put, which Augustine tells in detail in his *City of God*, God created for us and other humans a perfect paradise. For reasons unknown humans turned away from this goodness and from God-humans sinned-and acted on their desires rather than God's highest good. It is this turning away from God that changed God's plans. This argument sounds good on the surface but doesn't hold up either. Let us hear again the words of Psalm 139:

“O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.”(Psalm 139: 1-4)

This Psalm beautifully describes that we are known by God *in all ways*- which would include knowing those ways in which we will turn away from God. And it affirms that no matter where we go, how far we turn, God is there with us: Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.(Psalm 139: 7-10)

Friends, part of our fearfully and wonderfully made creature selves, made in God's image, is our imperfection and our turning away from God to our desires. God knows this, and God loves us still.

God knew how humans experienced life long before Jesus was born. God came to us incarnate for our benefit, not for God's, even and especially sending Jesus to the cross.

Through Jesus suffering with us, we know were shown God's ability to suffer with us, in a way that we, who shared our bodily form with Jesus, could connect with unlike any other. Our hearts break with understanding as we hear Jesus' cry of abandonment: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” It makes us wonder a bit about God- how God could forsake God's son. But we must look at the totality of Psalm 22 that Jesus was reciting. The Psalm begins: “My God, my God, why have your forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? But then, in verse 24 the psalmist admits: “For he did not despise or abhor the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.” On the cross Jesus felt the loneliness of the psalmist, but so too did he know the end of the psalm. God may have seemed absent in the tragic moment, but God was there still: “even the darkness was not dark to God”.

God is all-knowing, and God is all-powerful. God does keep *all* of us. Evil is an enemy of God. But yet the question remains, why are so many kept by God in the midst of a “cesspool of misery and suffering?” Why doesn't God stop evil?

Clearly, there is no quick or easy question to this. I offer now one, suggested by Professor Long, that I believe to faithful, even if it may not, at first be satisfying. It is this: God does not stop evil *in the way we want God to* because to do so would go against God's character. We wonder why God can't wipe out every disease, disaster and disquiet caused by evil...but if God did really wipe it all out, what would be left? Are we not all entangled in this world's sins in some way? How many billions of people would God wipe out too? (Long 2011 139-142)

Those of you who recall the Vietnam War may remember this notorious quote said about one of its battles: “It became necessary to destroy the town to save it.” (Long 2011 142) Perhaps we should be grateful for God’s grace to *not* wipe the suffering and evil out as we think we want.

As Professor Long surmises, “...If God exercised some hypothetical power option and were to blow through the walls of creation wielding a sword of conventional power and bringing down the hand of the divine wrath against evil, then God wouldn’t be God we know in Christ. God wouldn’t be *God*...people are healing...through the wounds of Jesus. God is at work battling the enemy, not with the power of the sword but with the “weak” power of the crucifixion (2011 142-143).”

Friends, God’s power doesn’t always look like power- at least not the way we understand it in the world today. The suffering, evil and injustice in the world are real and their reality is tragic. But that does not mean God is not present. We are resurrection people. Just as death does not have final victory, nor does evil, as Jesus affirms at the end of his parable about the Wheat and the Weeds in Matthew: “the Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evil doers, and they will throw them in the furnace of fire.” The righteous, on the other hand, “will shine like the sun.” (13:41-43).

In the meantime though, the suffering is still overwhelming. It hurts us. We are healed and reminded of our hope as Christians when we share those cries with God openly and honestly, just as Jesus did when he was on the cross. Such lament doesn’t end the evil, suffering or injustice, but it does bring us closer to the one who keeps us. We trust and believe in our Keeper, God, even as we cannot know God fully. God is God of all time and places. We have arrived in the middle of time- there is much mystery to all that surrounds us that we have no way of understanding.

And yet, we trust. We trust in the power of God we know through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. We trust in power that came in loving weakness. As Professor Long wisely reflects, this power is “seemingly weak, insignificant, and hidden, and yet this power of love works inexorably to vanquish all evil....It is so unlike human exercises of power that we don’t know how to see it, can hardly recognize it. God’s power is so hidden, so disguised in weakness, that we despair that God is at work to combat evil at all. We lose faith in God because we have forgotten that, as the apostle Paul proclaims, ‘power is made perfect in weakness.’” (2011 159).

Yes, there is evil, suffering and injustice in the world. Too much of it. Every minute, every day, every weekend evil, suffering and injustice plague a community somewhere. This weekend Charlottesville, Virginia and much of the rest of the country continue to reel after a White Nationalist rally turned violent both in word and action. Long after the physical wounds heal, the walls of mistrust and hatred reinforced by disrespect and meanness will remain strong. But even now, especially now, God keeps us, and loves us all. Always.

Friends, There is a God. God is all-powerful. God is loving and good. There is innocent suffering.

And evil does not have final victory.

The psalmist sings: And even darkness is not dark to God, the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to God.

Let us conclude with another prayer from the St. Anselm, one who studied God so long ago and whose wisdom and prayers remain with us now and forever: “I pray O God, to know thee, to love thee, that I may rejoice in thee” (Long 2011 128) Thanks be to God. Amen.

Work Cited

Long, Thomas G. 2011. *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering and the Crisis of Faith*.

Grand Rapids: Erdmanns Publishing Group.