

WHERE IS GOD IN OUR WORLD OF TROUBLE?

Luke 24: 13-35

It happened 16 years ago, in 2010. A massive earthquake struck the little Island nation of Haiti. With poor infrastructure and few resources for the vast majority of inhabitants, the earthquake caused historic devastation, killing hundreds of thousands of people and displacing many more. With massive corruption in government rule and armed gangs roaming the country, global aid was difficult to organize and execute effectively, and this meant that more died or have never recovered.

Haiti is also a Christian nation with a highly religious population. While many prayers for mercy and help were offered during and after the devastation, many also began praying the psalms of lament and anger crying out: why? Why God?... Where are you God?... I remember one full page spread in the newspaper with the heading quoting one survivor crying out: "Why are you so angry with us, O God?!" Another survivor was quoted questioning with tears: "Why have you forgotten us, O God?"...

Ok, but how many of us remember that horrific earthquake and all the aftermath of corruption, exploitation and violence that has been Haiti? The sad reality is that there has been so much of that which has also happened in many other places of the world over the past 16 years. Whether it's earthquakes, tsunamis, fires, floods or other storms, or whether it's wars and violence of all kinds, things have not improved on a large scale in any way we can honestly measure positively. While human rights and equality for many marginalized groups have become more front and centre over the past number of decades in many places of the world, the forces of resistance to progress have lashed out so that today we are faced with global instability on a whole new level.

So, like those brutalized and broken survivors of the Haiti earthquake and our psalmists, we too can question and pray in our more troubled moments of worry and fear: Where are you, O God? Have you forgotten us, O God? Are you angry with us, O God?...

If there ever was a time to ponder atheism, this is as good a time as any. What difference does faith in God make? Is such faith just a crutch? Is it just some imagined eternal insurance policy beyond the security we can buy and guarantee ourselves? Is the only meaningful option for faith in God one where God is in charge and in control of all that happens, and if so, doesn't this only encourage atheism if we are honest about the state of our world?

Well, let's review the options for God we have been given traditionally.

First and foremost there is God the judge. In this view, everything that happens in the world is somehow under the control and determination of God. This also means human behaviour collectively and individually has a direct correlation with God's concrete actions in the world to our benefit or harm. Our relationship to God is conditional on our behaviour. Do good and benefit comes. Do bad and be bad and punishment comes. Something like that anyway. So, this means when bad happens to us it must be God's doing and therefore it must be something wrong we have done or something right we have failed to do. It's up to us to get things right.

But this is also a way to manipulate God and make God an extension of our control, no? Our behaviour controls the actions of God for or against us. Isn't this God just an idol we have fabricated to help us make the world more in our imagined control? My behaviour will ultimately determine God's behaviour. This also means if I am good and better than my neighbour who may be my enemy or competitor, then my hope is that God rewards and protects me and punishes my neighbour. Is this a good way to think, believe and live? No!

OK, then, so here's a second way some have come to believe in God. God is still in charge of all that happens in the world, but God is not controlled by our behaviour. God's will is God's will and it's a mystery. Our proper place is to submit to God's will whatever happens. All is in God's hands. Our only hope is to worship God whatever happens in our lives good or bad. Many versions of religion have come to believe in God this way, including versions of Christianity. It's not our place to question God and God's motives if God is, indeed, behind all that happens in the world. Rather, our place is to bow down and worship, and rather than just making us meekly subservient, such worship of God no matter what, grounds us for living in the world with acceptance. We can't control what happens in the bigger things. We just accept it. Our hope is in a heaven where alone true abundance and freedom from harm will be ours.

OK, but this kind of faith is totally at odds with biblical faith. The biblical Job starts off with this kind of faith: "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" he says after his initial loss (Job 1:21). You praise God no matter what. And yet, Job breaks out of such a faith once his life and his world really fall apart. The injustice and pain of it all cannot be justified, and Job would rather reject God than submit to a God responsible for allowing it to happen. Like the psalmists and like the Jesus in the gospels, biblical faith calls us to cry out our tears and our calls for justice. But what good can our tears and our cries really do? Is God listening? And even if God is listening, what can God do if God cares?

This brings us to the wonderful story in our scripture reading this morning. To understand the biblical God, you have to understand Easter. There are 5 parts to this carefully crafted story.

1) It begins with two disciples. It is Easter Sunday. But they don't know it's Easter yet. They're full of Good Friday grief leaving Jerusalem and heading back to their hometown of Emmaus.

And while they're walking, we're told, they're totally absorbed commiserating about all that has happened over the past few days. But in the midst of all that commiserating and grieving, we're also told that a mysterious stranger appears out of nowhere and begins walking alongside them. We're told that it's Jesus, but we're also told that the two disciples do not recognize that it's Jesus. How come? Because "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." Does Jesus look different? He must have, given all that happened to him just days ago and dead on a cross. But is this the reason they don't recognize him? Or is it something else?

2) Here we get to part two of our story. We're told exactly why they do not recognize Jesus. It has little to do with his physical appearance or the fact that they could never fathom a walking and talking Jesus executed just days ago. Rather, the story is guiding us in a different direction. Jesus asks them what it is they're talking about. Here's what they tell him: "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place here in these days?" "What things?" Jesus asks. And here, they not only describe what happened in the last few days. They also reveal their understanding of Jesus and their hopes for what he could have accomplished. Here's what they say: Jesus of Nazareth was a prophet mighty in word and deed before God and all the people. But our chief priests and rulers handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. "But we had hoped that he was the one to liberate Israel."

Clearly, for all that Jesus had tried to communicate with his words and actions, their hopes were in a military and political liberation of the nation. A crucified prophet is no messiah in the end. Their hopes have been dashed. Why believe in God and pray to God if all divine hope is in a crucified messiah? What difference can it make if force and violence by corrupt and self-serving egotistical rulers wins the day over and over again? What difference can it make to pray to God if we are still as vulnerable as ever to mother nature's fierce ebb and flow?

3) But the story continues... And the next part begins with the two disciples also sharing something else. Evidently, some of the women disciples went to the tomb first thing after Sabbath to care for Jesus' dead body. But when they got there, the body wasn't there. And if that wasn't bad enough, they claimed that they saw a vision of angels who said that Jesus was alive. When they shared this astonishing report with the other disciples, some rushed to the tomb to check it out for themselves. And guess what! The tomb was, indeed, empty but they saw no one. So, what does this all mean? What difference could it make if, indeed, Jesus' body is not just stolen or moved, but actually, alive in some way? How does this change anything?

4) Now we get to the heart of it all. Jesus gives them a very different interpretation to what it all means - not just the missing body, but also the meaning in his suffering and death. Jesus' suffering and death was no accident. Nor was his suffering and death simply an act of ruthless men wanting to hold on to their power and control, and destroy any threat from a perceived competitor. No. Jesus came to believe that if he wanted to reach into people's hearts by love

rather than fear, he had to choose suffering and even death rather than force and violence. If love is going to win, it has to fight violence, hate and indifference in a whole other way.

5) And this brings us to the last part of this story. When is it that “their eyes are opened” and they recognize the embodiment of love who is right there among them? It is when he is invited to sit down and enjoy food and fellowship with them. Only when love rises up and is shared in compassionate fellowship with one another does Easter come alive. And this recognition is so exciting for them, they speak of their hearts burning within them and they run back to Jerusalem to tell the others who have also experienced this heartburning rising up of love. Rather than everyone running off to their own corners of solitude grieving and mourning the loss of their hopes and dreams, they now come together to support one another as they rebuild their world beginning with their fellowship and care for one another.

OK, so what does all this mean for us and our world if we, too, want to recognize Jesus among us today? If you want a God who can forcefully bring peace and justice into the world and protect people from vulnerability to nature’s cataclysms, the God of Jesus and the God embodied in Jesus is not for you. Find another religion or no religion. But if you feel a burning in your heart to enter more deeply into what love means and how it works as a healing force in a world where hate, violence, injustice and indifference are still with us, then pay attention. Love heals by rising up again and again in the midst of pain, hurt, suffering and injustice, with care and compassion, speaking truth to power, praying our hurt and becoming channels of healing energy through our praying and doing. We need supernatural energy to flow in and through us to sustain us and resurrect us again and again when devastation overwhelms us. God is among us and within us as Spirit not force. God in Jesus rises up and is recognized wherever and whenever love is shared and expressed with fierce courage, resolve and surrender... That’s it.

For those of us who have felt the flow of such healing love energy, God is all in all. We keep diving into the river of such love again and again. We need a weekly and daily diet of it so that we recognize Jesus among us again and again whenever we witness love and live out love. For others of us maybe we prefer a God who will move things around in our world like chess pieces making everything right by physical force and persuasion... And even as we may need some force in the world as a deterrent or as a way of protecting and liberating the vulnerable and the innocent, force cannot save the world. Control cannot save the world. Punishing the wicked and the tyrannical alone cannot save the world. Only the growing ripple of love winning hearts can bring greater healing that is genuine into the world. That is the God we preach and proclaim, and the God we recognize among us at Easter.

May such a God win our hearts. May we, too, like the disciples then with broken hearts grieving, recognize the risen Christ among us. As our hearts begin to burn with love rising up within us may we experience comfort and healing. May we experience some fresh courage and resolve rise up within us to speak truth to power and to engage the world around us with a

heart for justice. And finally, with heart-burning love rising up within us, may we experience a taste of resurrection life here and now as we celebrate love in fellowship. Such love in fellowship is a taste of the heavenly kingdom to come in life beyond and in life here and now in the very midst of pain and uncertainty.

PRAYER: Come to us, O Risen Christ. Show yourself to us. Send your Spirit to us and through us afresh so that our hearts burn within us with the fire of your love which can never be put out. Amen.