

5) GOD Part 2

Suffering, Evil and God's Providential Presence

In the last session we reflected on various ways the bible images God. Images of God also express ways people experience God (God Part 1). In this session we reflect on how God can be experienced as a powerful helper in the face of evil and suffering.

1. Different Kinds of Suffering. There are all kinds of ways we suffer as human beings. We suffer accidents when we are at the wrong place at the wrong time, we suffer because we are vulnerable and often powerless in the face of illness or the forces of nature, and we suffer because of the actions of other humans against us. While accidents, illness and natural disasters are terrible events, devastating and tragic, human actions and cruelty toward others can lead to the most painful kind of suffering. We reserve the word "evil" and the word "atrocious" for human cruelty and abuse against other lives. Suffering is suffering however it comes, but to struggle to forgive and move on is much harder when it involves other people we must engage because they have hurt or harmed us, betrayed us or neglected us.

2. God's presence and help in our suffering. There are two quite opposite ways God has been conceptualized and experienced that have shaped how we see God as a powerful helper in our suffering.

A) For much of Christianity, God has been conceptualized in the image of a powerful monarch, more powerful than all evil and ultimately in control. This means that when there is suffering and the evil that is sometimes behind it, it must be interpreted: 1) as deserved because of poor choices and therefore our fault, 2) as divine punishment for our failure to live according to God's will, 3) as serving some larger purpose of which our suffering must play some mysterious part we are called to trust, 4) as a way to humble us and teach us some lesson(s). We can never blame God because God always has a reason and always has a plan for us and the world. God is in control. If suffering comes it has to fit into all that some way. We can protest and complain that it is unfair and even cruel, but God can help us cope and ultimately come to a place of surrender and peace in accepting what happens as God's will. Everything that happens is ultimately under the sovereign will of God.

OK, so what about evil? Is that God's will too? No, it is not. Yet God has mysteriously allowed evil its time, for a time, but in some undisclosed future evil will be defeated and banished forever. We must hold on to that faith and hope.

But if God is a God of love, how can God allow so much suffering and evil? Is there no other way to help us learn and grow whether we are at fault or not? Is there no better way for God's will to be fulfilled than necessitating our suffering and permitting evil to do such harm? We cannot ultimately question God. Our role is to fight evil and seek to help each other when we

suffer, but we cannot ultimately know why. We must learn and grow through our suffering and be patient and resilient in our resistance to evil. We pray to God to help us accept and help us find strength to cope. God is ultimately in charge and will carry us and provide (providence) a way through to the other side. God will give us strength to overcome if we accept with patience what is and grow more obedient and faithful to God's will. We can pray for deliverance, and sometimes, God intervenes to change things. But ultimately, we must just accept suffering as somehow part of God's larger mysterious plan.

B) Throughout the bible, historically and especially since the 20th century, many have questioned and ultimately rejected a God of power and control imaged as some universal and eternal monarch. If God is most primarily steadfast love (*Hesed* in Hebrew and *Agape* in Greek), then God must be experienced as powerful helper in a very different way. As creator Abba, God does not control the universe or mother earth or the animals any more than God controls us humans. Freedom is built into the order of the universe just like patterns and rhythms in nature also are. Choices must be made even as all life is vulnerable and has needs that must be met. For example, we need food and if we are to survive we must find ways to get food. We have no choice as we are vulnerable and needy. But whether we take it from others or work together with others to secure it is entirely our choice. Our vulnerability can make us afraid and even mistrusting of others. But it can also encourage us to open our hearts to build trusting relationships of mutual care and compassion.

In this way of thinking, God is imaged as a lover seeking relationship with us so that such love can energize us from our hearts outwards. God is a caring parent who offers us a beautiful world to care for and creatures all around us as vulnerable as we are, hoping to inspire us with love to build a network of reciprocally caring relationships so that we all flourish together. Suffering comes because we are vulnerable and the world is an open interplay of forces. But it also comes because people make poor choices out of fear and insecurity. They grow hate and mistrust, see other lives as threats or as means to an end and hence, seek to control and dominate in order to generate greater security and power for themselves. Control because of fear, and domination because of mistrust, are demons of perverse addiction that can never be satiated. How much money, land and control of others does one need to be satisfied? It can never be enough unless hearts are changed to find fulfillment in a very different way.

So then, suffering is a reality because we are vulnerable, and evil is real because humans make bad choices. We all suffer but some suffer extremely if they and we are not protected in our vulnerability. God as love will not use the weapons of violence and force to stop evil and God doesn't swoop in to rescue us in our suffering in some externally interventionist way. But when hearts are opened to be transformed by the energy of God's love, and when God as love above, beside and within is at work within us, the journey through suffering and the confrontation of evil become opportunities to grow love in all kinds of ways – as compassion,

forgiveness, repentance, finding our empowerment as we empower others, deepening our hearts as we accompany others, expanding our emotional granularity as we become present for others and see them in all their personhood because we care. When love is flowing into us and through us we are also more primed – body, mind, spirit, for healing. And further, through prayer with hearts full of compassion we send healing energies of love outwards. God the Spirit is in this energy flow.

We find our purpose through love and through and beyond our suffering. We confront evil not by evil's weapons of fear and hate (which would be revenge), but by seeking ways to make peace with justice that refuses to dehumanize the enemy we are trying to resist and hold accountable. This is God at work in, through and among us. This is God's power, God's presence within and around us and God's help in redeeming and transforming us in this life and beyond. God will provide (providence) a way through, but we must look for God in the right place and open our hearts to God in the right way. Our prayer to God is this: "God, please provide a way through for me. Whatever the outcome, may my spirit flourish and my heart grow. May I find ways to experience victory in all my relations and find peace in whatever comes. May justice and love win because you are working in and through me. With you above me, Christ beside me and the Spirit empowering me within, all things are possible... Amen."

What do you think?