

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. 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 to teach us a lesson in acceptance, and subservience. 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 and compassion and justice and stewardship of the Earth. 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 context of natural forces and human violence. And

God looks on and laughs or cries, comforts or condemns based on how we do, but 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, 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 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 formula for the path, 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, 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 innocent and oppressed. For example regulating and reducing the presence of guns, not because you can't handle them, but because we – as a race of people – 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 no one is putting those people asunder. This is a whole lot less neat and tidy than, “No divorce, ever, period,” but it is 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.

Last week we talked about the intention and workings of God – in Nature, of Nature, indeed as Nature. Lenny thoughtfully pointed out that the great thinker Baruch 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. Instead of being cursed for saying these things, I personally was rewarded by Nature in the form of a little furry quadruped, rescued from disease and

starvation and now providing me the “quirky mix of joy and challenges” that come with canine companionship.

The dog’s name is Fulu, which I made up because I thought it would be fun to say. But further research shows that Fulu was a word already. In Chinese, in the Taoist religion, the Fulu were holy seers who could draw and write supernatural talismans that functioned as summons or instructions to deities and spirits, as tools of exorcism, and as medicinal potions. So perhaps this is a holy dog after all; I’ll keep a close eye and ear on him. Who knew?

Fulu, not to be confused with Zulu, the African tribe whose dispersion extends to Tanzania, where last week we just sent the last documents and funds for the ambulance project. All are eagerly awaiting news of its safe arrival this month.

Also not to be confused with Bulu, as in *Alah le bulu*, a Mandinka proverb from the other side of the continent. *Alah le bulu* means “God disposes.” We hear Job addressing his friends and his family with this very sentiment: “The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away; blessed be the Name of the Lord. God disposes; Nature runs its course. It is truly horrifying to think of God allowing one of his minions, Satan, to goad him into endorsing Job’s torture just to prove Job’s 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 them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the

fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" But 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.

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 see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, so that he might taste death for everyone. God made the pioneer of our salvation perfect through sufferings, and Jesus is not ashamed to call us sisters and brothers, because whether we celebrate or suffer, we too are saved by knowing we belong in the arms of God. This gives us the freedom to do what we can while we can and to let go of the question: "Why?"