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In 1755, on All Saints Day in Lisbon, Portugal, there was an earthquake off the coast. As the city crumbled, as the floodwaters came in, 60,000 people lost their lives in a day. To give you an idea, at the time that was about 25% of Lisbon's population — gone.

And people responded the way that people respond a lot of times now to disasters like that, wondering where was God, asking did God have a reason for such evil. You may have heard those voices in our own country after something like Hurricane Katrina, or after the earthquake and tsunami that killed over 230,000 people the day after Christmas in 2004 — voices that try to justify God in the wake of brutal, devastating, uncaring evil.

After that earthquake in Lisbon, Voltaire writes a poem. And because it's Voltaire, it's not short, but I'm going to just read a couple of lines from it:

Say ye, o'er that yet quivering mass of flesh, God is avenged. The wage of sin is death. What crime, what sin had those young hearts conceived That lie bleeding and torn on mother's breast? Did fallen Lisbon deeper drink of vice Than London, Paris, or sunlit Madrid?

You see, Voltaire is asking an ancient question, a heartbreaking question. He's asking why. Why Lisbon? Why these innocent lives? Why would God do this?

Voltaire's question hearkens back to a question that's raised by Christ. And I think the question was supposed to be rhetorical, but Christ responds to a tragedy in his own time that claimed eighteen lives in Jerusalem, asking whether that tragedy was divine punishment. And I think the answer is supposed to be no.

Naming the Problem

You see, today we are talking about the problem of evil. In church language we call it *theodicy*. And theodicy asks us to hold on to several competing claims. It asks us to hold on to the knowledge that God is all good, all powerful, all knowing — and yet it also asks us to hold on to the knowledge that evil exists in the world today. It asks us to acknowledge that there is natural evil, things like earthquakes and floods. And it asks us to hold on to the knowledge that there is moral evil, things like war and genocide.

Theodicy begs the question: why would an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God allow evil to happen if God knows that it's happening and has the power to stop it? The word theodicy literally means the justification of God. It is an attempt to justify God's allowing of evil.

What Scripture Offers — and Doesn't

There are several perspectives on theodicy in scripture. In fact, there are several competing ideas on theodicy in scripture, and some of them seem to actively contradict others. None of these answers gives us what I would call a complete picture of why God allows evil. If scripture gave us an easy answer, this would be a really short sermon.

You have the prophets, and the prophets don't speak with one voice. But I think we could sum up a common theme in the prophets: that God allows evil to exist in this time with the promise that in the future, God will make all things right. In Hebrew, it is called *Yom Yahweh* — the Day of the Lord. But why not intervene now? Why not make all things right now? Well, the prophets don't agree on that. But there is a general thought that runs through the prophets that the sins of the people cause suffering in the world — and not just for the people, but for all of creation. All of creation suffers for human sinfulness. And God chooses to respond with future hope rather than present change. That is the prophets, summed up.

Then you also have the book of Job. Job offers probably the closest we get to a theological discussion on theodicy in the Hebrew scriptures. Unfortunately, I have a tendency to think that Job leaves us with more questions than answers. You see, Job and his friends — and I use that term "friends" loosely, because I wouldn't want these people to be my friends — Job and his friends try to discern why God would bring so much evil into Job's life. Why must Job suffer even though he is righteous and good? They keep asking that same ancient question: why?

Of course, God doesn't answer, or at least God doesn't answer simply. Job and his friends ask the why question. Job points that question directly to God. And God responds with God's sovereignty over all creation, offering us — instead of an answer — a picture of a God whose nature is grander and stranger and perhaps wilder than we can imagine.

And then you have the Psalms. The Psalms discuss the issue of evil frequently. Psalms like Psalm 73 and Psalm 77 present us with images of righteous people who suffer while the wicked prosper. And rather than give us an answer as to why that happens, the Psalms seem content to remind us to stay close to God when life seems unfair.

I think maybe the closest we can get to a unified biblical theory of theodicy comes from both the prophets and the presence of Christ: that our concern over the *why* of evil is immaterial, and that our true concern should be knowing that ours is a God who goes into the suffering with us. The Hebrew prophets imagine God going into exile with God's people. God's people, who have been exiled, are not abandoned in their time of need. And in Christ, we see God entering the suffering of the world with all of us, choosing to live and know evil personally.

But I still don't think we have found our unified theory of theodicy. The Bible seems strangely aloof in giving us an easy answer.

Whose Suffering Counts?

As I was working on this, I started to think of May 2020, when a man named George Floyd was killed by a police officer in Minneapolis. It was one of multiple incidents that year that led to what the *New York Times* called the largest protests in the United States since the civil rights era. I watched a lot of the reporting on the trial of the man who killed George Floyd, and one of the primary defenses raised — both in the trial and in some of the surrounding media — was that it was somehow more excusable because he was not a saint, that he had been in and out of prison for years for drug charges, for counterfeiting, for theft. The argument, at least in some corners, seemed to be that his death mattered less because he was not an innocent.

When I was also preparing for this message, I read an article by David Bentley Hart that he wrote in response to that tsunami in 2004 that killed 230,000 people. In that article, he lists a whole set of times when Christians have been forced to wrestle with the idea of evil — the Black Death, world wars, genocides, famines, earthquakes. He talks about every time a parent has had to bury a child. And in all these times, and so many more, we ask the why question.

It struck me, as I was thinking about George Floyd and about that article by David Bentley Hart, that the only time we seem to have a problem with the question of evil is when evil is directed toward innocent or good people. When Pol Pot died of a heart attack, nobody was asking why God created heart attacks. When Bin Laden was killed, no one was asking why God would allow gun violence. It seems that we are okay with evil so long as it isn't inflicted on evil people. Perhaps that's why some of the loudest Christian voices after things like Hurricane Katrina pointed toward the sin of the people rather than the suffering of the people. Evil makes sense when we can claim it is directed at evil, sinful, or wicked people.

But it's my belief that when we speak about the existence and the prevalence of evil, we need to think about it in broader terms. Because we don't just say that God allows evil to happen to innocent or good people — what we say is that God permits evil to exist, to be visited upon righteous and unrighteous alike.

Love Before Power

I say this because I think that evil is directly related to God's love for us. Let me unpack that a bit.

You see, the way that I reconcile the theodicy problem is to recognize that maybe our initial assumptions were wrong. Remember those assumptions we started with? God is good. God is all-powerful. God is all-knowing. What if we started from the wrong place — not that those assumptions are wrong, exactly, but that maybe we understood them the wrong way? Maybe those assumptions don't mean what we think they mean.

Because when we say God is all good, I think we tend to picture that the way we might picture doing something good for somebody else. But I think actually, when we say that God is all good, what we're really saying is that God is all *loving* — that God's goodness flows out of God's love. Not out of God's opinion on how things should be, but out of the very fact that God *is* love, and God's goodness flows from that love. That's a distinction that matters, because love defines the very character of God.

Specifically today, I want us to think about how God's love informs God's power — because that's another one of our assumptions, that God is all-powerful. And I do believe that to be true. But I also believe it's true that God chooses to limit God's own power — that in order to love us fully, God limits God's power. Because when there is a power dynamic like the one that exists between an all-powerful God and a human being, how can there be authentic love?

I believe God chooses to limit God's power. And I know that's in the nature of God, because God has done it before. That's the story of Christ. That is the story of Jesus Christ: God choosing to limit Godself in order to love us. That God would choose to be born in a stable, as a child, powerless amongst the powerful, in order that God may love us and that we might love God. It is in God's nature to limit God's power so that love may prevail.

So perhaps God could intervene in our lives, could root out all the evil, eliminate it entirely from the universe. And from our side of the equation, we might say that would be a good thing. But I'm not sure that kind of power would be the loving way to love us.

This morning, Pope Leo gave a homily, and something he said struck me. He said that God chooses smallness as a sign of his discreet, patient love. God chooses smallness. And maybe we have a hard time with that, because that's not our experience of other human beings — ever. We don't often experience people who choose to diminish themselves. And yet that is our God. Ours is a God who chooses smallness as the sign of discreet and patient love.

And maybe that is the closest I can get to a theology of theodicy that makes sense: that God would choose love over power, would value love that much, even when it's hard to see it as good — and that by choosing love, God invites us to make the same choice.

Because I think sometimes we have a choice between power and love, between being right and being loving. And I think, by the example God gives us, we are always supposed to choose love. From a place of love, we human beings have the ability to challenge evil, injustice, and oppression in a way that is so much more powerful than we can yet imagine. But it begins not from a place of power, but from a place of love.

Prayer

Beloveds, let us be in an attitude of prayer with one another.

What a gift it is you gave to us, oh Holy One, that your call to us was not to have power and dominion over all, but to have love for all — that when your Son, Christ, was offered power and dominion over all, Christ chose to be small and to love instead. Lord, show us how, through love, we might challenge evil; we might challenge oppression; that through love, we might change the world. In Christ I pray.

Amen.