

God's Presence in Suffering

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- Reflecting on God and suffering in the wake of a pandemic and in the midst of a war
- Two real-life stories: Talking *about* God; Talking *to* God

Implicit Theologies

- Elements of a theology of suffering in “ordinary” people of faith
- Popular maxims – “everyday philosophy”
- Searching for meaning

Evil and Suffering

- Opposition to forms of *dualism* – the world is the good gift of a good Creator
- Salvation *of* the world; not salvation *from* the world
- Moral Evil: committed by human beings – does not have its origin in God
- Natural (Physical) Evil: disease, debility, genetic abnormalities, natural disasters and pandemics, physical death
- Theologians interacting with evolutionary scientists
- E. Johnson (*Ask the Beasts*): “How stunning to think that massive death is intrinsic to the process of evolution” --- The “free process” argument --- Affliction arises “from below” rather than “by direct divine will”
- D. Edwards (*The God of Evolution*): “In any authentically *theological* approach to natural evil, we must stand with the Book of Job (chapters 38-42) before the mystery of God and God’s creation, and acknowledge that there is a great deal that we do not know.”
- See also Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution and the Problem of Evil* (2008) – It is not possible for God to create the kind of world we inhabit without the costs that come with evolution

Biblical Perspectives on Suffering

See Dan Harrington, *Why Do We Suffer?* (Sheed & Ward, 2000)

Old Testament

- **Theory of Retribution** – righteous people receive blessing; those who do evil are cursed with misfortune – blessing and curse are usually limited to earthly existence – the Deuteronomistic authors (Deuteronomy through 2 Kings) – Deuteronomy 30 --- the Book of Proverbs – corporate and cross-generational dimensions – limited insight and dangerous – the “Prosperity Gospel”

- **The Cry of Lament** – direct testimony to the crying out of the sufferer – “The world of lament speech thus is based on the premise that the speech of Israel draws God into the trouble. God will act and life will be restored” (W. Brueggemann, *Israel’s Praise*) – a bold and transformed faith – Laments help people in pain get in touch with their emotions and pray without religious censorship – those who suffer belong to a tradition and a community of faith (D. Harrington, *Why Do We Suffer?*)

- **The Book of Job** – post-exilic –adaptation of an ancient folktale – the life of a righteous person turned upside down – Job’s resistance to the theology of retribution – wants to take God to court – the God-speeches “out of the storm” – the wonders of creation – wide variety of interpretations of the book – the doctrine of retribution is inadequate to the experience of suffering – the importance of lament – the experience of communion with God

– Elie Wiesel: during the days after World War II, Job could be seen on every road of Europe – “In times of stress it is to his words that we turn to express our anger, revolt or resignation. He belongs to our most intimate landscape, the most vulnerable part of our past.” (“Job Our Contemporary,” in *Messengers of God*)

- **Sacrifice** – an integral part of the religious life of ancient Israel – Deutero-Isaiah (chapters 40-55 of the Book of Isaiah) – Four poems of the Suffering Servant (42:11-9; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12) – “Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities . . .” (53:5-6) – influence on early Christian interpretation of the death of Jesus (see Acts 8:26-40) -- Sacrifice and the Catholic imagination

- **Apocalyptic** – The Books of Daniel and Revelation – revelations from heavenly beings communicated in code language – strange symbolism -- a message of hope offered to people who are suffering from oppression – God is sovereign – delayed retribution

- **The Pathos of God** – God’s transcendence/God’s nearness – “His [God’s] pain for the world is never the wailing sympathy of an uninvolved onlooker, but the genuine pain of one who is directly affected, the suffering of a comrade, who takes upon himself a part of the burden” (E.

Gerstenberger, *Suffering*) – God suffers *because* of the people’s rejection; God empathizes *with* the people who are suffering; God suffers *for* the people (T. Fretheim)

New Testament

- **Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom/Reign of God** – Mark 1:15 – the longing of Israel for the God of the covenant to come in power and establish God’s rule – inherent tension between the present and future dimensions of the Reign of God – Jesus makes the Reign of God present in his healings, exorcisms, table fellowship – “That evening at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons . . .” (Mark 1:32-34) – When God’s Reign became present in Jesus, *people found life* – “Jesus himself was less engaged in interpreting suffering than he was in actively working to overcome it” (W. Schrage, in Gerstenberger and Schrage, *Suffering*)

- **The Death and Resurrection of Jesus** – the scandal of crucifixion and the “folly” of the message of the cross – “It was uniquely and weirdly offensive to see the face of a crucified man as the human face of God” (G. O’Collins, *Christology*, 107) – the Easter experience – – Interpreting the death of Jesus as an act of loving service – God can be found in the suffering one – E. Johnson: in Christ the living God who creates and empowers the evolving world also enters the fray, personally drinking the cup of suffering and going down to the nothingness of death, to transform it from within (*Ask the Beasts*, 192) -- God is the One who brings life out of death

- **The Suffering of Believers** – Identification with the crucified and risen Jesus – Paul on his sufferings as an apostle (2 Cor 11:16-12:10; Gal 2:19-20)

Theological Reflection

Divine Compassion

- “I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering” (Exod 3:7) – God is “the Father of compassion and the God of all encouragement . . .” (2 Cor 1:3-4)

- Divine immutability (immunity from change) and divine impassibility (immunity from suffering) in classical authors like Thomas Aquinas

- Theology of the Incarnation: the Son of God truly suffered

- D. Bonhoeffer: “Only a suffering God can help”

- J. Moltmann: “Were God incapable of suffering in any respect, and therefore in an absolute sense, then he would also be incapable of love” (*The Crucified God*)

- E. Johnson: From a woman's point of view, "the idea that God might permit great suffering while at the same time remaining unaffected by the distress of beloved creatures is not seriously imaginable" (*She Who Is*)

- Pope Benedict XVI: "God became man [sic] in order to *suffer with* man in an utterly real way" (*Spe Salvi* 39)

- The notion of **Deep Incarnation** – "The Word became *sarx*" (John 1:14) – Niels Gregersen, Elizabeth Johnson, Denis Edwards – "an incarnation into the very tissue of biological existence, and systems of nature" (Gregersen) – Johnson: "The flesh assumed in Jesus connects with all humanity, all biological life, all soil, the whole matrix of the material universe down to its very roots" (*Ask the Beasts*, 196) -- See Edwards, *Deep Incarnation: God's Redemptive Suffering with Creatures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2019): "The Word assumes the creaturely humanity of Jesus with all of its ecological and cosmic interconnections and those interconnections are by the divine intention co-constitutive of the Word incarnate" (112) – the cross is the sacrament of divine compassion for the whole created world

- P. Zylla (*The Roots of Sorrow*) – our natural response to suffering is indifference – the call to move into the suffering of others with active help – (cf. Pope Francis on the "globalization of indifference")

– Romans 8: 38-39: *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

For Reflection and Discussion

-- What are the resources in my faith tradition that help me to cope with the experience of suffering in own my life or in the lives of those I love?

-- Are there people in my life who have taught me about coping with suffering? What did I learn from them?