

“Why? What Now?”
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-21
Epiphany 3 C
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Mighty, loving God; your heart is grieved when any of your creation suffers. You weep with us for the suffering in Haiti. Give us the gospel. Tell us again who we are. And let all cared for, and helped, and fed. Amen.

In this inaugural sermon, Jesus plunges into Isaiah and preaches that God takes sides.

The Spirit of the Lord . . . has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
. . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to
let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

Jesus sat down. All eyes rested on him. No one dared breathe. Jesus’ sermon is one sentence, “Today these words have been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus announces that God takes a side; God has a preference for the captive, the blind, the oppressed, the poor. God takes a side with those who suffer loss, disease, death and, yes an earthquake. George Packer reports from Haiti,

The night after the earthquake, Haitians. . . slept outdoors, in the streets and the parks of Port-au-Prince. . . . [H]undreds of people lay under the sky, and many of them sang hymns: “God, you are the one who gave me life. Why are we suffering?”¹

That is our first question, “Why?”

In 1755 at midmorning of All Saints Day, a devastating earthquake hit Lisbon. The city was destroyed. Every church was leveled. Tens of thousands died. So unprecedented this catastrophe was that it the whole world to thinking *why*, “how could these things happen?” “The eighteenth century used the word *Lisbon* as we use the word *Auschwitz* today.”²

All of Europe struggled to explain. Prizes were offered for essays that might help. In far away Prussia an unknown scholar Immanuel Kant crafted three essays for the local

¹ George Packer, “Suffering,” *The New Yorker*, January 25, 2010, 19.

² This quotation and the line of thought of the succeeding paragraph are from Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: The University Press, 2002), p. 1.

newspaper, which attempted to describe how earthquakes happen. Kant was among the first to try to shift blame away from God to ‘natural causes.’ Somewhat earlier, the German Idealist Gottfried Leibniz rendered his explanation that even with its imperfections and its disasters, this world was the “best of all possible worlds.”³ Voltaire satirized Leibniz’s optimism by writing *Candide* in which Pangloss (a thinly disguised Leibniz) experiences all of the numbing absurdities of life and finds no redemption in the “best of all possible worlds” explanation. Our first question is “why?”

There are those who make the case that the modern world began with that Lisbon earthquake.⁴ For since then you and I continue to be pressed to come up with some explanation for why and how these bad things happen? That explanation is sometimes called *theodicy*, or an attempt to explain God’s ways in the world. It has long been my observation that you can put any dozen Christians in a room, close the door, open some verses from the Bible, and within fifteen minutes their conversation will swirl around questions of theodicy, of explanation. Since 1755 this is truly our modern question.

I’m going to attempt an explanation with you today. You may find this explanation plausible or maybe not, and that is fine. An explanation is theology, not preaching. The good news will be preached in this sermon, but it will be right at the end. Right now I would like to offer you some theological equipment to deal with suffering, tragedy, disaster, and an earthquake in our time that has apparently killed some 200,000 people.

Some theodicies (explanations) are just wrong, Pat Robertson’s, for example. His explanation is that God brought this punishment for impious decisions made in colonial Haiti. If God ever *were* the cause of such calamity, I am skeptical that Pat Robinson would be able to discern it. According to Jesus, God is on the side of the poor and suffering, not on the side of those so invested in their own self importance that they spend their energies pointing out how others have missed the mark. Some explanations are just wrong.

But here is the dilemma. If God is all-powerful *and* loving, why do things like this happen? Robertson’s theodicy – and many, many others not nearly so coarse -- is of the sort that God’s love gives way to God’s power. According to it, in extreme situations we would rather God be “in charge,” be powerful, than loving.

Rather, it seems to me that “God is love” is announced in countless Bible stories, and especially in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the power side that needs

³ This popular phrase is actually from Voltaire’s satire of Leibniz. Leibniz wrote “. . . this universe must be in reality better than every other possible universe.” *Theodicy, Philosophical Works*, Trans, G. M. Duncan. New Haven, 1890. Originally, 1710. www.class.uidaho.edu/mickelsen/texts/Leibniz%20-%20Theodicy.htm

⁴ That is the “alternative” thesis of Susan Neiman, *op. cit.*

examination. Let's see what might happen if we imagined God's power giving way to God's love.⁵

What is "power" for you? Is it the ability to make something happen in the sense of forcing it? Is it the seduction of a child's face, which hardly forces anything, but seems to have power? Is power the persuasion your loved one can effect in you?

Whitehead writes,

When the Western world accepted Christianity, Caesar conquered, and the received text of Western theology was edited by his lawyers. . . . But the deeper idolatry, of the fashioning of God in the image of the Egyptian, Persian, and Roman imperial rulers, was retained. The Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar.⁶

The phrase "omnipotence of God," is a Greek import. It does not occur in the Bible. If God were omnipotent in this Greek sense, then God would have all the power. And because God would have all the power God could presumably wrangle the consequences he wanted from whatever awful circumstance presented itself. A God who had all the power would never be surprised, would never have to be disappointed, would never have to express regret. If you are omnipotent in this Greek way, then you would always get your way. Yet in the Bible God is forever not getting what God wants, not even from God's own people.⁷ On more than one occasion Jesus is surprised at how things turn out.⁸ God even regrets the creation and moves to pick up an historical erasure to wipe it all away and start again.⁹ This is not a God that has all the power in the sense of getting God's way all the time.

Power is *persuasive*, rarely *coercive*.¹⁰ Even a mighty king -- even a dictator -- in his coercive power can be resisted. If that were not so, we would now be subjects of Queen Elizabeth. Perhaps it would be more biblical to understand that in every situation God has *some* power, but that is no guarantee that God will get God's way. The future -- what

⁵ Push comes to shove Jean Calvin consistently emphasized God's sovereignty (power), while Martin Luther came down on the side of God's mercy (love).

⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Corrected edition, ed. by David Ray Griffen and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1929, 1978), p. 342.

⁷ Deuteronomy 9:6-14.

⁸ Mark 12:41-44; Matthew 15:22-26; and perhaps the most haunting, "Jesus wept." John 11:35.

⁹ Genesis 6:5-6.

¹⁰ Lewis S. Ford, *Lure of God: Biblical Background for Process Theism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978). And "Divine Persuasion and the Triumph of the Good," *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. by Delwin Brown, Ralph E. James, Jr., and Gene Reeves (Indianapolis: Bobs-Merrill, 1971), 287-304.

is going to happen – is open. And in that future even God’s power is persuasive, not coercive.¹¹

God is not the *only* cause for what happens. There is more going on in an earthquake, for instance, than God’s willing. There is also power in the forces of plate tectonics, in the contingencies of where and when one is born and lives, and even the power of our own heart. God, as the Catechism never tires of reminding, is *resisted* by “the world, the devil, and our own flesh.”¹² And sometimes that resistance prevails and God. . . loses. Why do we suffer? Because sometimes even God loses.

Jesus’ sermon makes it plain what side God is on. So our second question is, “what next?” Now it is time to preach, to announce to you the good news. And we shall find that good news this morning in Nehemiah.

“The book of Nehemiah: it is a general’s diary, a governor’s report, a man’s plea to be given credit by his God, to be remembered for his good works.”¹³ Under Ezra and Nehemiah’s leadership an exiled and humiliated people are brought back from the dead. The episode in today’s text is one of those life-resurrecting reforms.

In this profound section, all the people are called together into a public place.¹⁴ civic (not religious) place. Amazingly, “all the people” in this case included men, women, and even children.¹⁵ The rabble stood up and fell silent as if to honor and hear better. The scroll was unrolled and the word from God was read. That word (*torah*) defined who these people really were. This word was God’s word that brought them into, and back into, being. Once humiliated, they are reminded who, and whose they are. That is gospel. That is good news. Tears of joy flow.¹⁶ Call a feast, insists God. The scene

¹¹ Jesus seeks to persuade Peter in John 21:15-19.

¹² “. . . the will of the devil, the world, and our flesh.” Small Catechism, *Book of Concord*, ed. by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), p. 357.

¹³ Anne Roiphe, “Nehemiah,” *Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible*, ed. by David Rosenberg (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), p. 473.

¹⁴ The place of the “Water Gate” suggests “a unique and extemporaneous civic movement rather than as a religious festival **All the people** (vs.1) included **both men and women**, a situation unusual enough for comment since women ordinarily had little share in religious meetings.” Raymond A. Bowman, “Nehemiah” (exegesis), *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume 3 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954), p. 733.

¹⁵ On women and children, see Roiphe, p. 479.

¹⁶ “The teaching here is then understood to be an affirmation of the joyous character of the festival of Booths about to be described It has been regarded as a special festival initiated without precedence to celebrate the recovery of the law The attitude of joy and thanksgiving at the reception of the law reflects the spirit of Deuteronomy (cf. Deut. 12:12; 14:26; 1:11ff.)” Bowman, p. 738.

finishes with all the people, even those without food, being fed. Reminded of who God declares them to be, and the result is that people are fed.

According to United Nations officials,

The relief effort in Haiti could end up being the most difficult, faith-testing recovery from a modern disaster, perhaps even exceeding that of the 2004 Asian tsunami.¹⁷

Why? You have heard Jesus remind you what side God is on. You also have experience with history and the world that demonstrates that things can happen that frustrate and grieve even God. Not even God gets God's way all the time.

What now? Remember who God says you are, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, the children of God. You know what's now! People will be fed. Injuries will be tended, homes built, and people will be fed. And people will be fed. Amen.

¹⁷ Ray Rivera, "Obstacles to Recovery in Haiti May Prove Daunting Beyond Other Disasters," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2010, A7.