

## Where is God in Suffering? Epiphany 4

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 71:1-6

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Luke 4:21-30

Where is God in suffering? The suffering in Haiti brings up that question. Theodicy is the word for the “defense” of God’s goodness and omnipotence in the face of evil. It is this question that has caused people to anguish, to decide that a good God cannot allow evil and that therefore God does not exist.

Several answers are **not** possible for Christians:

God does not exist

God does not love

God does not have power

God exists, God loves, and God has power.

But, that still raises the terrible question: why suffering?

Responses of theology, which I will suggest briefly, are not the only responses; other faithful responses include crying with those who suffer, or asking the question, “where is God?,” or even respectful silence; or working to alleviate the situation irrespective of belief in God. And answers given by Christianity are not so much answers, but pointers for where to look for God’s love and presence so as to participate in God’s outgoing, suffering-with, love and work. These “answers” are planks thrown over the abyss of suffering and its horror and pain.

First, regarding earthquakes and other natural disasters, God created the universe.

The universe has its own laws, which scientists labor to discover and describe; they include fault lines and the movement of the earth. We humans live day to day as though the universe were stable, but every now and then we realize that in fact, we all (6 billion humans and myriad creatures) are hurtling through space. Meanwhile, we live, work, and sleep and build our homes on the crust of the earth, which is not solid but essentially fluid. Hot magma lies below the earth’s crust, and the earth’s plates push against each other, moving, and rearranging themselves. We can’t predict when they will create a quake.

God then does not create earthquakes or decide when to send them on a certain group of people; nor does God protect from earthquakes or other disasters. That is wrong theological thinking. God would then be capricious, why save people here, and not there?

Second, Christians and Jews believe that God created all life; that all creatures evolved over time from God's abundance; and that humans, alone have conscience and free will. And that means that like God, humans know about good and evil, which causes emotional suffering. Animals, too, seem to have compassion for their own; but humans can anticipate, imagine, and feel others' pain from far away.

Humans have the capacity, too, to create suffering. The Genesis story of Adam and Eve is about humans' knowing good and evil by choosing to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge; it's a story about the fact that humans have both free will (the possibility of doing right or wrong) and awareness of the tragedy of estrangement, of not living in harmony with others and God and creation. This ancient story is full of wisdom; it tells of the consequences of evil: suffering in which both humans and nature are caught (God tells Adam and Eve that cursed is the ground because of humans; they will toil for food and suffer in childbirth, there will be estrangements between men and women, and all people will return to dust).

The Bible is faithful in portraying the world we know: an opposing force, evil, or sin, tries to destroy God's ongoing love, which works to harmonize people among themselves and between people and nature. Too, God's love and justice challenge a human will to power, to control, which is part of this evil force. This is shown in today's Gospel reading: where Jesus' preaches and tells stories from the Bible in which God heals people who were foreigners, and in some case enemies [Syrians]; this is seemingly good news, but this sermon makes the people in Jesus' synagogue angry; they apparently believed that God's mercy and regard were directed only to them, that their concerns and causes were dear to God, and that others didn't deserve his care (do we see refrains of this when nations pray to God to bless their efforts, as though God were on their side?). God's mercies are wider than human understanding.

The Bible speaks of this evil force, which includes human's will to power and control the wideness of God's mercy, with the phrase "principalities and powers". These powers foster injustice and destruction of human and natural community; they work against the kingdom of heaven that was entering the world in Jesus. These principalities and powers use power unjustly over others; in Haiti's history I believe they include: "enslavement, murderous colonial oppression, invasions by powerful foreign armies, grotesque homegrown tyrants"—(Bob Herbert, *NYTimes*), as well as deforestation for sugar cane production for sugar sent around the world: these powers have helped to make Haiti poor.

The third response to suffering for Christians is Jesus Christ. God was in Jesus Christ, reconciling the world to God's self, through Jesus' demonstration of how to live close to God, and through his sacrificial death. Through Jesus' taking on the evil of the world (by living and dying in it) and God's raising him from the dead, God showed for all time that good triumphs over evil.

What we learn about suffering through Jesus is the knowledge that Jesus' suffering was as much as any human could bear, and it included poverty and oppression; in his

suffering on the cross he felt abandoned by God. Jesus was still in communion with God, in him God was suffering with the world; during and after his life, Jesus' teachings, life and death gave hope to the poor, some of whom were slaves. They felt that Jesus' kingdom included them and that their lives mattered to a loving God.

Christians believe that God entered into suffering by choice: (Philippians 2:6-8: "Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped at, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness...") and that God's love longs to bring healing and peace and goodness and suffers with those who are far from that abundant life. .

Lutherans believe God suffers. This is a change from a strand in the history of theology, where God is defined as omni (more than); omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent: God is omni--, but always acts with regard to human freedom to respect that freedom and with care for creation.

Luther's theology of the cross teaches us about God's suffering, and suffering with the most vulnerable. "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Rom. 1:20]....He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross....A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is...."<sup>1</sup>

Fourth, despite everything that seems to the contrary, scripture has taught the Hebrew people and Christians a truth about every human being that "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you [Jer. 1:5]." And that in Jesus God made that depth of love even clearer.

Christians believe that God is in all, working to bring all things to good, even passionately longing for that, but part of the working is hidden from us. And, part of it is up to us; **the future is open**. God's love evolves because of our entering into it and carrying it forward.

Christians believe that we are to be with God in the work of love. Love eventually extending to care for all people and the whole of creation, not a will to power, is our vocation. To love in that way includes an experience of forgiveness of sin (which offers the possibility of pulling back from our tendency toward control and power and helping institutions to do so, as well), and it is for eternal life. Eternal life begins now, when God's abundance is being lived into.

With that summary, we can consider the suggestion, by Pat Robertson, and others, that Haiti now suffers God's judgment for sins. This is wrong.

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Augsburg, 1991), p. 38.

What we believe is that every life is precious to God and will someday find fulfillment in God's love. And that God is acting through the emergency aid, the prayers, and the considerations of how to rebuild Haiti and other troubled nations. We need to support development of schools, hospitals, factories, enhanced leadership; the effectiveness of such help is shown in the popular *Three Cups of Tea*, the accomplishments of Partners in Health, run by Haitians, and other projects and work through LWR, and building of canals, bridges, irrigation systems (such as the Marines are doing in Afghanistan, according to a recent newspaper report); these all provide ongoing reconstruction even as they foster dignity, community, self-respect, and bountiful environmental and communal life.

Love is clear-eyed, not beholden to any power other than God. It's aware of the human tendency to stop short of self-giving love, which asks nothing in return except the well-being of the beloved. May God's love inspire large generosity; large prayer; and rebuilding of Haiti in ways appropriate to it, with its leadership, for the Haitian people. They are full of faith and trust in God, despite all the hardships that have befallen them. May they see the love of God realized, and may we learn from them about that love.

Amen.