

The God We Don't Believe In

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Reading:

The late Rev. Forrest Church says “When the bottom falls out of the world, when a mighty wave slaps the life out of everyone they love, leaving them bereft and alone amid the ruins, some believers challenge the nature of reality with the reality of their own experience and lose their faith. After the 2004 tsunami, “This disaster has shaken my faith,” one bishop dared to confess. Of course it had. Look for a loving God in the eye of a hurricane or riding the crest of a tsunami and, barring the most inhumane twists of logic imaginable, you will look in vain.”

Sermon:

A week prior to the death and resurrection of Jesus, the holiday that the Christian tradition celebrates as Easter, Jesus approached Jerusalem and entered the city for the last time. He entered Jerusalem knowing full well that he would suffer and die there, that the end of his life was near. Knowing that the city and those he loved would experience suffering yet to come, and he wept and lamented as he overlooked the city.

In the following week, Jesus would preach for the last time, he would break bread with his closest friends. He would be crucified by an empire that he was threatening with his radical message of acceptance and love. He was killed for stirring up the masses in resistance and hope, for driving the moneychangers out of the temples and upending Rome's power structures and the status quo of his time. Jesus was crucified not by God, but by Empire.

Some interpretations of Jesus' death say that he died for humanities' sins, that it was a part of God's great plan to give God's only child to the world to save us from ourselves. I do believe that Jesus was a man who lived a great life, who embodied love for others and love for life and resistance to the oppressive structures around him, but I do not believe that our faith tells us that Jesus died for some larger purpose of salvation—I believe that our faith tells us that Jesus suffered and died as a human prophet at the hands of human cruelty, and that he offers legacy of radical hope and love and resistance, not a legacy of suffering where the ends justify the means.

Theologians have asked what kind of loving, parental God figure would knowingly sacrifice their child to the cruelty of capital punishment. What kind of God would

hurt us for our own good, would cause suffering with some sort of hidden, manipulative plan that we just need to trust?

What kind of God allows bad things to happen to good people? Could that God be all-knowing and all-powerful, and still be loving? How can we reconcile that with the evil and the suffering that we see in the world around us?

People we love die before we or they are ready. We try our best to keep ourselves healthy, yet we get sick for no fathomable reason. Racism and sexism and climate change and genocide kill people, devastate communities. We experience suffering at the hands of fellow human beings and we experience suffering for no discernable reason at all.

Different religious traditions respond to this in different ways. Some say that God must not give us more than we can handle, or say that God is so all-knowing that God must have a plan that we humans cannot fully understand.

We Unitarian Universalists believe that suffering is an inherent part of life, not a punishment for a way of living. That all of our goodness and holiness will not and can not save us from heartache and loss and injustice. We don't say much either way on the subject of God. But I, for one, refuse to believe in a God who has control over our lives and orchestrates our suffering for God's own cosmic purposes. I cannot believe that a loving God allows racism to kill young people of color, as though they didn't belong to stay here on this earth.

But that does not mean we have to forgo a sense of the Holy altogether.

We ministers are sometimes fond of saying "tell me about the God you don't believe in, because I probably don't believe in that God, either".

It's a little tongue-in-cheek, I'll admit.

We each have a sense of the God that we don't believe in, or can't believe in. That's fairly easy. The harder, deeper question is naming a sense of the sacred that we *do* believe in, in the face of suffering and loss and evil.

Whether God is a word, which is in the end just a symbol, that works for you or whether the word carries connotations of a God you don't believe in that you just can't shake, I invite you to enter with me into a spirit of radical openness and imagination when we talk about how we name and encounter the holy.

I didn't grow up with the angry, vengeful God of the Old Testament, or the loving yet sacrificial God of the New Testament who sent Jesus to the cross. I grew up with a vagueness and slight discomfort around God in my Unitarian Universalist upbringing. Yet I believe that we have just as much of a right to name, interpret, and define the Holy as right wing Evangelicals, or as religious extremists do. And if we

religious progressives don't talk about God, those who would define God as an oppressive and vengeful deity control God's public image entirely. And I think God needs better PR than that. Don't you?

It wasn't always like this for me. God's presence has grown in my own life and beliefs in my adulthood. I came to name God through one of the hardest, darkest times in my own life, a time when by all measures I should have lost any faith I might have had, after a close friend unexpectedly died.

As sad and senseless as this loss was, I *found* what I would later come to call God, in the people who gathered around those of us who were grieving. I found a Holy tenderness and love in the church community that mourned with us, sent cards and shared meals. I found grace in the friends who showed up, time and again, to listen with patience and understanding and human kindness and generosity. It was through experiencing suffering—a part of life that each of us goes through—that I also experienced the most love and grace.

Kate Braestrup, a UU minister and chaplain who lost her husband in a car accident, writes about how she explains this to their four young children:

"I say to them, 'It was an accident. There are small accidents, like knocking over your milk at the dinner table. And there are large accidents, like the one your dad was in. No one meant it to happen. It just happened. And his body was too badly damaged for his soul to stay in it anymore, and so he died.'"

She continues, "God does not spill milk. God did not bash the truck into your father's car. Nowhere in the scripture does it say 'God is car accident' or 'God is death'. God is justice and kindness, mercy, and always—always—love. So if you want to know where God is in this or in anything, look for love." ¹

Friends, we are here to be the living, incarnated hands and hearts of a loving God who offers us presence, not protection. A Holy presence that weeps with our suffering, who mourns with us. A Love that works for justice for all children of the earth, not just some. A Spirit whose love is wider than our understanding, but never beyond our reach.

And yet, when we look to one another to be the hands and hearts of a loving God, we humans are only just that—human. And that can be a recipe for disappointment, and sometimes create more suffering. We fall short, we say the wrong things, we don't show up when we are called. We are broken and imperfect incarnations of the Holy. Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of "When Bad Things Happen to Good People", asks, "Are you capable of forgiving and loving the people around you, even if they have hurt you and let you down by not being perfect? Can you forgive them and love

¹ Kate Braestrup, *Here If You Need Me* (New York, Little, Brown & Co: 2007), 187-188.

them, because there aren't any perfect people around, and because the penalty for not being able to love imperfect people is condemning oneself to loneliness?"

After my friend passed away I got angry—mostly at the acquaintances who said the wrong things at that *particular* moment. I couldn't get angry at the God I didn't believe in, that God that made bad things happen. So instead I got angry at the humans who fell short in responding to my suffering. The imperfect, human manifestations of a divine spirit that offers us witness and presence in the face of our suffering.

Suffering is a part of life, not punishment for a way of living. And we as a church community—your ministers included—can only offer imperfect companionship on the journey. We cannot offer neatly packaged answers.

I saw that companionship present here yesterday at Pat Manley's memorial service—a beautiful and touching and tender tribute to the legacy and love that Pat has left here. An image that stayed with me throughout the evening was that in the reception, when folks were all downstairs milling about, I noticed how many people mentioned to me other memorials that have been held at this church—partners, children, parents, friends. I was struck by how many people I saw walking around the reception who carry losses with them—both losses I know about and your stories that I don't yet know. How many times this community has gathered before in witness and in love. How many times you will gather again.

For there will be times to come when suffering comes to our doorstep—it has and it will again—times when we weep with anger and sadness at the gates of the city; when we join the circle of the bereaved, who knowingly nod at our losses, cock their head, for you know they've been there; times when goodness in the world seems hard to find, and our trust is shaken to the core, when we cry out "why?" and "why me?". These times have come before, and will come again. And in those times, I pray that we are able to look to that presence that loves us beyond belief, and to be that presence for our siblings when they experience those moments.

Authors Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock write:

"We testify that facing into human suffering is necessary and that in communities of justice and compassion, God's presence can be manifest as people offer loving presence to one another. Such presence heals and transforms, and it elicits surprising revelations of life's resilience and grace."²

They continue: "This is how I speak of God: a presence gradually unfolded by life in its richness and tragedies, its devastating losses and its abundance: a power calling

² Rebecca Parker and John Buehrens. *A House For Hope*, (Boston, Beacon Press: 2010), 100.

us into a fullness of living, a passion for life, for good and for ill: an unquenchable fire at the core of life, glimpsed in light and shadows.”³

Beloved, in all the fullness of this world—in it’s beauty and it’s brokenness, in the light and in the shadows, may we come to know the sacredness around us, that Holy spirit that offers us presence, not protection, but always, always love.

May it be so, and Amen.

³ Parker, 101.