Hearing God in the Windstorm

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I teach a class at Wittenberg called “Demons, Devils, and Hellfire.” It’s a survey of literature that ventures into the underworld beginning with Greek stories by Homer and Plato, continuing through Dante’s *Inferno*, and ending up with movies from the 20th century. I’ve enjoyed this class for years now because it offers students a chance to raise big questions and to put their own convictions in the context of writers who have asked similar questions at various points in time.

One topic that inevitably comes up in that class is just how easy the Greeks and Romans had it when it comes to explaining the problem of evil in the world. Their gods can be as peevish, jealous, power-hungry, and vindictive as the worst of humanity, so there’s no real wrestling when the people from the classical world had to explain why bad things happen to good people. If the gods don’t operate under any commitment to justice and mercy, why should we expect events in our own lives to reflect a principle of fairness? You can see the effect of this worldview in its heroes: The adjective most associated with Odysseus is not “virtuous,” not “honest,” but rather “wily.” He’s a warrior who knows how to get things done, has the skill to manipulate others, recognizes when to play the system, and generally understands how to arrange matters to serve his own advantage.

When we get to Christian journeys to the underworld, the heroic examples change, and so do the theological quandaries. The biggest problem of all can be summed up in three propositions, propositions which all seem to be true individually but which appear hard to reconcile when taken together:

First, God is just.

Second, God is also all-powerful.

And third, there is evil and injustice in the world.

So how do we explain that? If God is good and all-powerful, why should evil persist? But persist it does. A quick look at the local paper, the national news, and global events will likely lead us to ask questions about how so much could go amiss in a world that takes its origin in an all-powerful and just God.

The question of why-bad-things-happen-to-good-people is a preoccupation of writers who describe the underworld in the Christian tradition. And it’s a matter of significance as we process the events of our lives.

On one occasion when I taught the “Demons” class and the class was having a discussion about this tension, a student shared some stories about his father who was a surgeon. By virtue of that occupation, this man found himself in difficult situation after situation where the people he was trying to help experienced a profound sense of injustice and sometimes a sense of unanswered prayers. He was, in other words present to others at times of spiritual crisis. The student shared that his father had learned one response that was often helpful, even if it was a little counterintuitive. When friends and family members of patients would ask why their prayers weren’t answered, he would give them some time consider that question, and then he would ask them if they thought it was possible that God did hear their prayers but that this time the answer to the prayer was “no.”

While the thought of a God of mercy denying a passionate request may sound difficult to process, this surgeon found that the possibility of a “no” response provided wounded friends and family with a way of keeping God present in their lives. The answer of “no” may be difficult to explain and harder to process, but it was an answer nonetheless. So while the pain of loss remained, this surgeon had found a short question that helped some people feel closer to God amidst their loss.

Our first reading today comes from the Book of Job, the classic text in the Hebrew tradition that wrestles with the problem of the suffering of the innocent and pious man. The proverbial expression “the patience of Job” takes its origin in the story of a just man who endures many long chapters of hardship—the loss of family, the loss of wealth, the erosion of his own health—and all the while, he maintains his conviction that the just God of his ancestors presides over creation. Eventually, the hardships he confronts lead him to cry out in terms that sound a lot like the language a surgeon delivering unwelcome news might hear:

“I cry out to you, but You do not answer me;

I wait, but you do not consider me.

You have become cruel to me;

With your powerful hand You harass me.

You lift me up and mount me on the wind.

You make my courage melt” (30:20-22)

In his moment of despair, Job comes before God with a poignant testimony, asking for justification or explanation from his Creator: Why, God, do bad things happen to good people? It’s a weighty question, and for Job, it is his moment of spiritual crisis. God’s response to Job is a lengthy one, but our first reading conveys the gist.

Then the Lord answered Job out of the tempest.

“Gird up your loins like a man.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

“Tell me, if you have understanding.

“Who determined its measurements—surely you know.”

“Who laid its cornerstone . . .

“When the morning stars sang together

“And all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”

The Book of Job is a complicated Hebrew text, one that has generated competing interpretations, but when it comes to God’s reply to Job, there’s one thing that Christian and rabbinical scholars tend to agree on: God does not really answer Job’s question. Instead, God seems to use a rhetorical pivot, changing the topic from the injustice of Job's particular circumstances to the unfathomable work of creation, and all we can infer from this shift is that the answer to such questions is beyond human comprehending.

While we might wish for a more direct answer to Job’s testimony, the story, I think, gains vitality by leaving some questions somewhat unresolved, leaving readers to struggle when the questions are both fraught and significant. And there is a lot of struggle in this interaction. God’s voice is a tempest, a whirlwind. God also begins his reply by forewarning him that there will be struggle when Job asks questions like this. “Gird up your loins,” God says, which is another way of saying “prepare yourself for battle.” It’s contentious. It’s stormy. But this moment of struggle is also an unusually direct engagement with God; in fact, early interpreters of the story of Job argued that Moses must have written it because only he would have been worthy of such direct contact with Yahweh.

The possibility that Job’s difficult questions in a moment of crisis may have led him closer to God is also suggested by the conclusion of the story. There, God rewards Job for having grounded his understanding in Truth and not in the passively accepted theology that hindered the best efforts of some of his friends to help him make sense of his hardship. There is something about certain moments of struggle, moments that may wound our sense of justice, that have a capacity to crystalize our deepest questions, help us dispense with our less resilient ideas, and bring focus to our relationship with God.

I’ve had a fortunate life, but in one period when there was some tragedy, I remember receiving a card from a friend that simply said, “God be with you at this Holy time.” At first, I have to admit, I was taken aback—in what way is a time of loss, a time of personal tragedy, also a Holy time? But to the extent that these moments become the occasions to struggle earnestly and hear God in the tempest, they may have the opportunity to be holy moments in our lives.

The story of God speaking to Job in the tempest may help us better understand how the Jews of the first century would have heard today’s reading in Mark. Jesus and his newly assembled disciples travel from Galilee by boat when a “great windstorm arose” making the travel treacherous. Jesus is apparently unfazed by the tempest as he naps in the stern of the boat, and he is only aroused when the alarmed disciples urge him to take heed of the danger. Seeing their fear, Jesus performs a miracle, calming the wind and the waves. The story at one level makes a point about Jesus’s divinity as the disciples marvel at his ability to control the elements, but Jesus’s questions for the disciples actually points to a different interpretation: “Why are you afraid?” he asks, “Have you still no faith?” In Jesus’ view, the windstorm is not a natural disaster; it’s not an evil that needs to be averted in a way that tests or reveals his divine powers; rather, the need to calm the wind and the sea is an indicator that the disciples, despite their best intentions, have yet to adequately prepare themselves for tempest encounters like the one described in Job.

It’s a helpful lesson for the disciples who will, soon enough, experience tragedy and who will have opportunities to ask “Where is God?” in the events leading up to the crucifixion. They will, at that crucial moment in our faith tradition, have opportunities to listen for God’s voice amid the tempest.