

Doubting nagging questions

Eventually, we begin to seek explanation. “Why?” a child asks, over and over. It is genuine and open. She is seeking reason, explanation. With Adults, the question can be more of an attack: Why would you do that? Why are you with them? Why aren’t you here yet? Once, when I told a beloved teacher that I was going into ministry, her response was, “Why are you doing that with your life?” The reality of being a Christian among progressives is so often being asked, “Why do you buy into any of that church stuff?”

O, God, why?

“I cry out loud to God aloud to God that God may hear me. I seek the LORD – I lament, but my soul refuses to be comforted.”

If I were trying to sell “that church stuff”, this would not be the Psalm I use. This Lent, we’ve been looking at themes from *Naked Spirituality*. We started with the Season of Spiritual Awakening, and celebrated the mountaintop spiritual moments in our lives. Then, we moved to Spiritual Strengthening – learning to ask for help, learning to say “I’m sorry”, learning to petition. And now – Spiritual Survival – in the midst of suffering, we are asking “Why?”

If you think this just keeps getting heavier, that’s because it has. This is Lent, and now, one week out from Holy Week, we’re approaching the more troublesome time in our church life. Good Friday – the death of Jesus – is troublesome. Psalm 77 is troublesome. Because this Psalm, like Lent, like Holy week, draws to mind things we might just as soon not want to think about. Does God really come in anger? Does God ignore the afflicted? Does God, every so often, forget compassion and grace?

Those questions, those doubting nagging questions: Who in this room has ever doubted? Who has kept vigil in the hospital room? Who has watched a beloved relationship, or project, or community fall apart around them, and say, “Why?”

You can tell everybody that this is your Psalm. Because Psalm 77 is *not* about a tendency of God to forget. It is about the tendency of human beings to feel forgotten. To feel forsaken. To doubt. Like the rest of the Bible, this was written by human hands, and these works speak a truth about the human condition. About our propensity to doubt. To question. To fear. That’s why it’s important to look at passages like this. Not because we should be brought down, but because there are times in our life that is down. Despite the fallacy of ever-forward progress, life comes in waves, in seasons.

Spiraling of fear

I don’t know about you, but my life does not endlessly get better. Rather, there are periods where everything bops along just fine, and then, and then, and then... That’s true in our personal lives, in our communal lives, it’s true for our planet.

And we know that in the face of suffering easy answers come up a little short. The well-intended platitudes of “Everything happens for a reason” and “God has a plan” fall short for me.

Has anyone heard of the religious identity of “I’m not that kind of Christian”? I even identified as that in times in my life, because that’s the reality of being Christian among progressives, or even moderates. I have felt the need to explain the purpose of suffering to my non-religious friends. I have felt the need to give a reasonable account of how the very enlightened but historical Jesus would have condemned all the bad things going on in the world if he were still here.

And I have been wrong. As it turns out, God does not need my explanation, and I have come to believe that the last thing the world needs is a *reasonable* account of Jesus by reasonable Christians. Suffering – and what we will have to do as a species to combat suffering – is beyond reason.

We need something more. We need something deeper. We need to be brave enough to resist the easy explanation or the logical reason, and sit with the doubting, nagging question, "Why?" Full stop. *Why?*

In company with Christ

"Why?" "Why have you forsaken me?" *Elohi, elohi, lema sabachthani?*

These words spoken by a man far from reason. These are Jesus' words on Good Friday, and so close to the end of Lent, I cannot think of a more important time to stress why Good Friday is important. Because many of us shy away from it – because of the gore, our resistance to suffering, our bad experience with it, the way it was hijacked. And also, I think it's time we take it back. I think it is time we take Good Friday back as Protestants because we need it.

Because Good Friday answers the most important question. "Where is God?" *Here.* In the midst of the suffering. And it answers "Who?" Who is God? God is not the false God who doles out justice from far away. God is not a God of explanations or plans. Let those Gods – those false deities come crashing down. And let us behold the God who is manifest in Jesus Christ. Jesus – an executed insurgent – whose name, reasonably, should have been forgotten to history. And so, then, how is it that his story here? How is it, that I have experienced his story, even his very name, as something that calls to the deepest part of my being?

Here is the truth. And here is why the cross, Jesus the Christ are most important for me: Because while, in Jesus there is not an explanation for suffering, there is something more. There is meaning. Because in Jesus, we have the boldness to cry out to God, and in Christ, we have the hope that God cries out through us. Because if Jesus is Christ, then not only has God remembered us, but also God has never abandoned us. God is in the midst of our greatest suffering, because God has suffered it with us, in us, and through us. And in the midst of darkest hour –even God cries out.

That's not a reasonable explanation, but explanations come up short. What is real, what matters, is the love of God – the love of the one who suffers with us.

Ultimate meaning

Once I was asked what I wanted to hear God say. *It all mattered.* I want everything to have mattered. Every moment of suffering and sorrow. Every grief and tear. I want to have hope that there was meaning in all of it. And, I do. The sorrow of our lives has the ultimate meaning, because through our shared suffering with Christ, we have touched the very heart of God.

This is the season in which we grow into the people God is calling us to be. In Lent, especially in Holy Week, we come together to remember, trusting that in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, all meaning is held in the love of God.