

Finding Better Questions

https://youtu.be/YK2f0pE7s_8

Lectionary Lessons: Psalm 23, John 9:1-41

The Hymn we sang in response to the Gospel today was one written by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. It concludes with these words. (Full Text can be found at the end)

*Love can make the darkness bright;
faith in you makes all things clear.*

It seems, with our public health emergency, to some, it is as if darkness, a shadow, the shadow of death has settled across not only our land, but across the world. As we have entered a “new normal” things seem far from “clear”, for us, even as Christians, as people of faith.

So, as stress, distress, & anxieties have mounted
some have been playing the blame game.

In this situation for our world... I believe...
it is not helpful to point fingers, and say
well “they” should have or
could have done something different.

When the disciples tried that track with Jesus
he put a quick stop to it.
WHY?
Perhaps in part because when we say,
it is all the fault of x
that this has befallen him, her, them, us
then we are also saying something,
perhaps unwittingly,
that we believe about God.

A number of years back there was a movie
where the lead character, Bruce,
has been having a really, **really** bad day.
Never mind the rest of the story,
or how what the rest of the movie says
or implies about God may be just as bad.

For this morning, this is the quote of interest.
*“C'mon, lemme see a little wrath!
Smite me, O mighty smiter!
You're the one who should be fired!
The only one around here
not doing his job is you! ANSWER ME!!!”*
— Bruce Nolan, Bruce Almighty

The quote is important because it says something
about how some people often think about God.
I think many of us would be afraid to pray that way,
afraid of being “smited”.
(Some might critique that word. I am using it deliberately)

When the Florida nightclub got shot up,
and all those people died,
some thought that was really God at work.

When the Hurricane devastated Puerto Rico...
or the one that devastated New Orleans
Some said
*O, **that** was the judgment of God.*

What about the Tsunamis of recent memory?
Japan, at Fukushima, Friday, 11 March, 2011
Indonesia, 26 December, 2004,

And, when the Earthquake hit Haiti, 12 January, 2010,
that was seen be some to be
the wrath of God for pagan religion.

And before health care got a handle on HIV
some suggested that it was “*the gay disease,*”
God's judgment for an unholy way of life.

Today, we have better understandings, of that virus in
particular. And in each of the cases cited, we see evidence
of a distorted understanding of God

When the disciples asked...
“Who sinned that this happened?”

Jesus reply was, in essence...
*Stop asking that question.
It is the wrong question.
That is not who God is.*

He was not discussing this in particular, but Thomas Oord,
an author whose work I have been following of late has
suggested that to say that
God sent it,
or God could have prevented it, but didn't
amounts to the same thing.

Dr. Oord does offer his insight on this topic on his blog
[http://thomasjyoord.com/index.php/blog/archives/
gods-will-and-the-coronavirus](http://thomasjyoord.com/index.php/blog/archives/gods-will-and-the-coronavirus)

If we believe that God inflicts pain and suffering on people,
as an expression of his wrath,
Or if we believe that God purposefully does not intervene
When God could...
Either way, it makes God the author of evil.

Consider it this way...

Suppose a parent inflicts severe physical trauma on a
child, we would call that child-abuse.

If the parent stands by, while another inflicts severe
physical trauma, we would call that criminal negligence.

Much of our thinking about God is rooted in distorted
theologies, imperfect human attempts to understand
something, someone, who cannot be contained,
not by the universe,
least of all by our minds.

Seeing God as retributive,
the great cosmic "smiter",
IS a distorted theology.

That does not make theology pointless.
Rather we should take our cue from Jesus
in particular from our Gospel today.

He redirected inquiry.
He pointed to a more productive way of dealing with life
with circumstances
with the situation in front of them.

Eugene Peterson paraphrases Jesus this way (*The Message*)
*"You're asking the wrong question. You're looking
for someone to blame. There is no such cause-
effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We
need to be energetically at work for the One who
sent me here, working while the sun shines. When
night falls, the workday is over. For as long as I am
in the world, there is plenty of light. I am the
world's Light."*

I had done my own paraphrase, before I read that by
Eugene Peterson. I said it this way...
*The real question is,
given these circumstances,
how can the glory of God be revealed?
What does the kingdom of God look like?
How can we be embodying that?.*
Those are the questions.

*If you want to hear my full paraphrase of this gospel passage,
I have it on my YouTube channel.
<https://youtu.be/V11Esptm2o4>*

I remember, while I was in college,
commenting to a roommate,
*I know what it is to fear God.
I don't know what it is to love God.*

At that time, to me "salvation" meant
a "fire insurance" policy,
so that when I die I wouldn't "burn".
Salvation is so much bigger than that. Really.

My journey into grace has been a long one,
and the journey keeps going deeper, and
the horizons keep on broadening for me.

It began with a college professor,
teaching a course in Biblical Greek
when he assigned a word study for me to do.
That word was "grace".
We were working with Paul's letter to the Romans.

That same professor,
later teaching a course in Biblical Hebrew
again kept pointing us to how the Old Testament
also is a narrative of grace.

My journey continued, as friends whom I had offended
granted forgiveness,
displaying grace,
demonstrating its practical outworking.

And when I was participating in a men's Bible Study group,
and someone wanted to promote a theology of
God's absolute sovereignty,
that God has charge of everything,
that directly or indirectly all that is or will be
serves the will of God...

I gently objected. I offered that we need to be careful what
we say about God. We do not want to make God the author
of evil. We believe in a God of Grace.

At that same meeting, someone asked me what "grace"
meant. I offered the following quick definition...
Grace is unearned, unmerited favor.

Today, you or I may not be able to make a salve
that creates sight for those born sightless.
But our words can be a salve, a balm,
bringing grace and health to wounded spirits.

We might not be able, yet,
to stem the tide of the Corona virus.
Its spread, the infections, the deaths it causes
likely will get worse before it gets better
But we can bring grace to stem the tide of hysteria, fear,
thinking that somehow this is God "getting" us.

God is not like that.
A "god" like that would not be worthy of the name.
Or our time.

We may not be able to comprehend God,
to see God clearly,
to get our minds wrapped around God,
and tie it all up in a nice neat box,
with a theological ribbon decorating it.

But that does not prevent us from saying
some things that we have found to be true.
Because of what Christ has done in and for us,
we may say things like these ...

With the man, formerly blind,
*"Pretty astonishing isn't it", said the man. "You
don't know his origin, yet he opened my eyes.
Everyone knows that it is the righteous to whom
God listens, and such a miracle as I am has never
been seen before. How could Jesus do ANYthing,
if he were not from God?"*
*This again, is my paraphrase of the passage,
referred to above.*

With the author of the letter to the Hebrews
*The Son reflects the glory of God and shows
exactly what God is like. He holds everything
together with his powerful word.*
We find similar kinds of declarations
in Phillipians, and in Colossians.

Julian of Norwich lived during one of the waves of
devastating illness that ravaged Europe,
the Black Death, Bubonic Plague.
(b. 1342; d. post1416)

She said...
*If any such lover <of God> be in earth which is
continually kept from falling, I know it not: for it
was not shewed me. But this was shewed: that
in falling and in rising we are ever preciously
kept in one Love.*

I find this similar to the message of Psalm 23.
Using the verse of Lowell Mason
*shared in another YouTube video
<https://youtu.be/kxvtYvn6fak>*
*also shared earlier in the full liturgy video
<https://youtu.be/whaGUPU94HY>*

We can affirm ...
1 *My faithful Shepherd is the Lord,
Supplying all my needs;
In pastures green He makes me rest,
By quiet waters leads.*
2 *He tenderly restores my soul
When I am in distress,
And for His Name's sake guides my feet
In paths of righteousness.*
3 *Through death's dark valley though I walk,
No evil will I fear;
Thy rod and staff will comfort me,
For Thou art ever near.*
4 *A table Thou dost spread for me
In presence of my foes;
Thou hast anointed me with oil,
My cup of joy o'erflows.*
5 *Through life Thy goodness and Thy grace
Shall daily follow me;
And I, within Thy house, O Lord,
Shall ever dwell with Thee.*

The Psalmist does not claim immunity from the ills and
troubles of life. He simply trusts God ... He trusts God to go
with him through it all. And so may we.

And meanwhile, we do have work to do, today.
*How can the glory of God be revealed?
What does the kingdom of God look like?
How can we be embodying that?.*

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette's hymn concludes with:
*God, we pray that we will be
people filled with light and grace.
We are called to be your light,
telling how you've changed us here.
Love can make the darkness bright;
faith in you makes all things clear.*

After the Sermon in the liturgy video we have
a hymn,
a time of prayer,
see <https://youtu.be/3wsT7uWxqFs>
some announcements,
a benediction and
some closing music.

See next column for Carolyn Winfrey Gillette's hymn.

Her email and website are offered at the bottom.
If you would like to support Carolyn Winfrey Gillette's
ministry of hymn-writing, Please contact her directly.
Any donation, she would receive with gratitude.
Her family has been undergoing a health crisis, and
I am sure she would appreciate hearing from you,
even a word of thanks.

Christ, You Made the Blind Man See

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Christ, you made the blind man see;
with some mud you healed his eyes.
So you acted lovingly,
bringing health and changing lives.
Yet it was a Sabbath Day;
rules were all that some folks saw;
They were quick to scorn the way
you put love before the Law.

Christ, you came to judge the earth,
bringing truth and life and light,
Showing humble ones their worth,
giving vision, bold and bright.
Those who proudly think they see
are the ones who often find
Though they act quite boastfully,
they, in fact, are really blind.

God, we pray that we will be
people filled with light and grace.
Show us what we need to see
in this culture, time and place:
We are called to be your light,
telling how you've changed us here.
Love can make the darkness bright;
faith in you makes all things clear.

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www.carolynshymns.com*

*Permission is given for free use of this hymn,
including online streaming,
as churches respond to the corona virus crisis.*

*Biblical Reference: John 9:1-41
Suggested Tune: Joseph Parry, 1879
ABERYSTWYTH ("Watchman, Tell Us of the Night")
for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=979JrZs1log>*

*We used an Alternate Tune: ST. GEORGE'S WINDSOR (Elvey)
Come, ye thankful people, come via a piano recording by GBoD*

*OR a video you could listen to...
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrDQiJJClak>*

Not these lyrics!