

## Where Is God in All This?

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*"Grateful for small miracles, we rejoice in the wonder of light and darkness and the daring of hope. Holy One of Blessing Your Presence fills creation." -- Beth El Congregation, Sudbury, MA*

**Reading** – from *Seasons of Our Joy* by Arthur Waskow

By the twenty-fifth of every lunar month, the moon has gone into exile. The nights are dark, and getting darker. And late in Kislev, we are close to the moment of the winter solstice – when the sun is also in exile. The day is at its shortest and the night at its longest, before the sunlight begins to return. It is the darkest moment of the year, the moment when it is easiest to believe that the light will never return, the moment it is easiest to feel despair.

At this dark moment, we celebrate Hanukkah – the Feast of Dedication – by lighting candles for eight nights. Night after night, the candle-light increases. And night after night, we make our way into, through, and out of the darkness of the sun and moon. We experience and feel the turn toward light from the moment of darkness, the turn toward salvation from the moment of despair.

### Sermon

If the Bible were read as theater, you might say that God is both the lead character and the director – not to mention set designer and much else.

Right from the start we get the point as to where God is in the midst of all this – life, death, joy, sorrow, the works:

“In the beginning...” God said let there be light, God created the heavens and earth, God separated light from darkness, God created all the living things, including (when He finally got around to it) human beings.

And then we quickly learn of God’s role along the way as the one who makes the rules and the one who punishes when the rules are broken.

Adam and Eve cast out of the Garden. The Flood. Pestilence. War.

All because one of God’s rules was broken. Simple as that.

Might be a good rule – against murder, for example, or theft, or a rule about how the poor are treated.

But, still. God’s in charge of the rules and in charge of the consequences for not following the rules. And everything can be understood – in the Bible or in our lives – as having to do with whether or not we have kept to the rules.

At least that’s one understanding of the Bible’s message.

Because, all this said, in the course of the Bible questions *are* raised – now and then anyway. What about Job, to begin with, and his sufferings which had nothing to do with his transgressions – for we are told that he is an upright man? Where is God for Job? (Just as, where is God for us when our sorrows and sufferings are manifold?) The answer? Well, the book of Job has had many interpreters and interpretations. But the answer in the book of Job to

the question, the enduring question of undeserved suffering would seem to be either mystery (God knows more than we do about all this, so keep quiet with your questions), or mystical (there are larger meanings about which we know little, but if we let go into the divine reality the questions will dissolve), or simply... unresolved.... As we might feel the question of undeserved suffering is unresolved for us.

In our age the question of undeserved suffering took on a sharpened poignancy with the Holocaust. Some have gone so far as to say that God Himself died in the Holocaust. For how could a God with a shred of goodness and decency, allow the deaths, the cruel and punishing deaths, of the six million and more? And what about Stalin's murder of more millions? And what about Hiroshima? Nagasaki? Cambodia? Rwanda? Darfur?

Is it just because our own sense of decency has become somehow heightened in our era that many now see these genocides as arguments for atheism? After all, for all the brutality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it's not as if recent decades have cornered the historical market on human cruelty on a mass scale – not to mention undeserved personal suffering, which is also an enduring dimension of the human condition.

Whatever the reason, if we no longer feel able to understand suffering in terms of just punishment for sins that surely we or someone must have committed, or if we refuse to accept that God would *test* anyone with the kind of suffering we see around us – personal or global – where, then, *is* God in the midst of all this? What kind of God would *be* in the midst of all this? Is God, as some theologians would have it, all good, but *not* all powerful? Or, as some traditions assert, is God the source of good... arrayed against the cosmic forces of evil? Or did God create the universe and then step back, as Deists would have it, leaving it to us, imperfect humans, to do the best we can with our multi-edged gift of freedom? Or is there a mysterious plan beyond our knowing? Or... is it all a cosmic, evolutionary roll of the dice – no God at all?

Well, the Jewish festival of Hanukkah – which begins in a few days – is at least suggestive in relation to a few of these sorts of questions.

Hanukkah has several roots.

As a festival of light close to the time of the winter solstice, it has roots in more ancient pagan solstice celebrations.

But historically, Hanukkah celebrates the military victory (of course, the tradition has it, with the help of God) of the Maccabean Jews fighting against the rule of the Greek Antiochus, Antiochus who had prohibited Jewish ritual, tortured Jews who refused to assimilate to Greek culture, and profaned the Temple.

Yet later generations of rabbis were uncomfortable with a religious festival celebrating a military victory, and indeed celebrating God's role in the violence of a military victory. So they turned the focus of the festival to the lighting of the Hanukkah candles, one more candle for each of the eight nights of the festival. The eight nights representing the miracle of the oil – only enough oil for one day found in the desecrated Temple following the Maccabean victory... yet miraculously burning for eight days. And then the light came also to represent increasing spiritual illumination, came to represent the enduring human hope for a return of light during a time of great darkness. The first reading this morning expressed well this dimension of the spirit of Hanukkah.

And, circling back to the questions at hand, maybe lighting the Hanukkah candles – lighting any candle for that matter, our chalice, our candles of joy and sorrow, our candles on the dinner table, a Christmas candle – can take us beyond any intellectualizing about a reality – God,

the ultimate source and creative power of the universe – that the intellect is, actually and simply, incapable of grasping, much less articulating... yet that sometimes the heart can intuit or experience? Maybe lighting a candle, representing spiritual illumination, inner light, guiding light, can dissolve the questions – at least for a time.

But questions do return.

So, then, where *is* God in our lives?

For me:

To begin with, those of you who have been attending Old Ship for any length of time know by now that I don't use the word "God" very often. Some of you like that. Some of you may not.

But the word is so often misunderstood, misused, and abused that I hesitate to use it much.

When I hear a preacher of one faith or another talk so glibly about God, I wonder: Do his or her listeners all have the same idea or experience in their minds and hearts when they hear the word "God"? Do we really know what we are talking about?

Or I hear a terrorist invoke God and I surely know that whatever I think about God, I don't believe God sanctions terror – nor can I imagine a God who sanctions bombing, or in fact war in general. Torture? If there is a personal God, that God surely does not approve of torture (by whatever name we call it). If there is a personal God I'd cast my lot with, this God would be shedding tears for the one being tortured, or for the innocent being bombed or terrorized.

But is "God shedding tears" any more than a poetic image? It doesn't end the torture, it doesn't bring back someone we loved.

Well, as my questions a few moments ago suggest, theologians and philosophers have twisted themselves into knots trying to reconcile suffering and evil on the one hand and God on the other. As for me, after many years pondering these things, I don't see much use in the effort. Suffering and in particular the terrible things humans sometimes do to other humans are to a certain extent beyond my comprehension. Yes, sociological and political and psychological analyses can help us understand... a little bit – but, still, that there should be such things in the world is, to my mind, simply a cosmic bad deal to say the very least and the attempt to explain this "deal," this reality, does a severe disservice to the person, the living, breathing, precious person who is suffering.

And though it may well be that with my limited human abilities, it's just that I can't understand the mysterious ways of God and the universe, in a way I don't want evil to be understandable in a cosmic sense. I don't want to know that there is some higher purpose to the suffering of a starving child or a tortured prisoner or a friend in a hospital bed. That, to my mind, would be to compound one evil with another.

Maybe – *maybe* – in the sweet bye and bye I'll understand it, as the old gospel hymn has it – but that doesn't help much now.

What then? What then?

Well, not much. And maybe everything.

Presence. I know one thing. I feel called to be present to suffering, to witness... and to help when I can. And, for me, *presence* might be as good another name for God as anything. Not only presence in relation to suffering, but presence in relation to the early morning sky over World's End, or to the last falling autumn leaves or to the coming winter's snows or spring's flowers, presence for another's beautiful face and unique life, presence.

Here. At the dinner table. In the woods. In a hospital room. Lighting a candle; back to the Hanukkah candles. Or any candle.

Present.

And for me, the more present I am, the more I *feel* something I might sometimes name God.

Though, actually, I don't feel a great need to name that experience of presence anything. In fact, I kind of worry about naming it. In this I'm guided by the first line of the Chinese text, the *Tao Te Ching*, which says that the Tao (the Way of the universe) that can be named is not the eternal Tao. I'm guided too by the wisdom of the Jewish prohibition against speaking the divine name.

So... presence.

And, this season, the lighting of Hanukkah candles – or a Christmas candle – can be one simple way of evoking such presence.

One contemporary Hanukkah lighting ceremony includes these words: “In darkness, be light! And in your light preserve a spark of darkness, a spark of the Mystery from which light grows.” (Rabbi Arthur Waskow)

The invitation in these words, as well as in the more traditional blessings spoken in Hebrew, is, it seems to me, an invitation to *presence*. Grateful presence we might add.

With the assumption that out of such presence – out of our experience of God, if you will – may come the desire to *be* more present, more God-like (if that language is your language) to be a healing presence through our own words, our own deeds, to realize, as we might also put it, that God is more a verb than a noun, and that when we behave as we would imagine children of God behaving (as I put it last week), we are ourselves being more present to life and to one another, and we are in turn evoking God's presence – that experience that we *are* part of something much larger – call it Creation, call it Brahman, call it God, call it what you will.

So maybe, oddly enough, surprisingly enough, maybe we're back where we started – God as the lead character, director, and set designer.

And since we do sometimes need language to express or at least point toward the inexpressible, God as a name for our experience of presence and of relatedness, God as our human way of talking about the larger reality we know and feel ourselves to be part of. God within. God among. God as that which draws us to be kinder and more generous and more loving; God as that which draws us to be peacemakers in a troubled world; God as that which calls us to say “no” to war, “no” to terror, “no” to divisiveness, and “yes” to peace, “yes” to the reality of our interdependence, “yes” to the call to heal the earth, to secure human rights on this International Human Rights Day, “yes” to care for the person next to us.

God in the room with someone who is sick or dying... when we are present for them.

God in the room as we resolve a conflict that has been dividing us, whether in our family or in our church or in our workplace.

God in the woods or in the fields as we plant another tree, and another.

God in our hands as we contribute to some noble effort to make the world a better place.

Present.

So may it be.