

Preaching About Suffering

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One beautiful spring Sunday morning in the early 1970's, the boiler exploded in the educational building of the First Baptist Church of Marion, Ohio. Amid the rubble left by the blast were found the bodies of several Sunday school children and their teacher. The newspaper accounts specified the exact time of the tragedy, and the best I can calculate, my congregation and I were in worship and singing the hymn "Fairest Lord Jesus" at the precise moment that the disaster happened. "Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of all nature," we were singing, as children in a Sunday school room far way, possibly hearing stories about the very same Jesus, innocently lost their lives.

I heard about the accident later that day on the radio and silently said to myself, "I'm glad I am not the pastor of that church." Fresh out of seminary at the time, I was frightened, overwhelmed by the magnitude of such a tragedy. What could I say? I could never begin to respond to the questions that must surely be in the hearts of the parents and the other members of that congregation. I was to learn, however, as I grew in my understanding of ministry, that in truth I *was* the pastor of that church. Every pastor is the pastor of that congregation — not that all pastors encounter suffering in such staggering proportions — but all congregations do experience innocent and inexplicable suffering in ways large and small. All pastors and preachers must face the pastoral and theological questions that follow in its turbulent wake.

There is, as the restless Preacher of the Old Testament reminds us, a "time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance...a time to keep silence, and a time to speak...." When tragedy strikes, when the raw nerve of suffering and grief is exposed, this is almost always "a time to keep silence...." No one wants, or needs, a preacher to stand in the pulpit or at the graveside and attempt to *explain* things. At most the preacher can join with the mournful in an aching lament. The empty void of loss and innocent suffering mocks all attempts at reasoned answers, and even theological claims that may be "correct" on other occasions are rendered "wrong" by the wild anguish of the sufferer.

There are however, other times, times to speak, times of relative calm when the preacher can employ the pulpit to think through with a congregation the issues, needs, and theological themes involved in suffering. Suffering is an assault upon the heart, but it is also a threat to the mind of faith, and preachers need to assist congregations in wrestling with its intellectual challenges. But how?

Beginning in the Pew

The place to begin is with what the hearers already believe about suffering. People are not waiting on the preacher to write wisdom upon their blank tablets; they already have some understanding of the place and meaning of suffering in life, some way of placing the undeniable fact of suffering into the constellation of other ideas they hold to be true about the dignity of human life, their sense of personal worth, and the nature of God. It may be fragile, imperiled by conflicting experience, fashioned out of theological cellophane tape and paper clips, or held at dear intellectual cost, but everybody needs some way to factor innocent suffering into the equation of life's

meaning. Otherwise, they simply could not go on in the face of it.

The first step, then, in preparing to preach on suffering is to discern what the hearers already hold to be true about it. An excellent set of clues can be found in Rabbi Harold S. Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*,¹ an immensely popular and widely read book that remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for months and which can be found in the homes of millions of people, many of whom probably possess no other theological volume. The preacher's temptation, of course, is to try Kushner in the Court of Superior Theology and to convict him on a number of charges — dualism and reductionism, to name but two. To do so hastily, however, would be a serious mistake and would miss the main contribution Kushner has to offer the preacher: insight into a way of speaking about suffering and God that many people find at least provisionally satisfying and more compelling than what they have heard before in Sunday school and sermons. Kushner has done what few others have been able to do. He has provoked a broad range of people in our culture to think somewhat deeply about a theological issue. We may finally look elsewhere for theological complexity,² but along the way Kushner can be a reliable guide to the thoughts of many in the congregation.

A key to Kushner's popularity (and a bit of wise counsel for the preacher) is his insistence on clear, nontechnical, unambiguous language. Here is the first paragraph of the book:

This is not an abstract book about God and theology. It does not try to use big words or clever ways of rephrasing questions in an effort to convince us that our problems are not really problems, but that we only think they are. This is a very personal book, written by someone who believes in God and in the goodness of the world, someone who has spent most of his life trying to help other people believe, and was compelled by a personal tragedy to rethink everything he had been taught about God and God's ways.

The personal tragedy Kushner refers to is the death of a son, Aaron, at age fourteen due to progeria: the condition of "rapid aging." Kushner and his wife had thought of themselves as relatively good people and, in terms of religion, more committed than most. But because of his son's death, and for the first time in his life, Kushner began to question the faith of his childhood, the confidence that God is an all-wise and loving parent. No theoretical descriptions of the place of human suffering could satisfy him. "Any attempt to make sense of the world's pain and evil will be judged a success or a failure," he wrote, "based on whether it offers an acceptable explanation of why (our son) and we had to undergo what we did."³

Burton Cooper has said that Kushner's theology is, like "Tillich's, except more immediately so, ... an 'answering theology.'"⁴ He raises the questions that people are asking and searches for satisfying answers. Indeed, "there is," Kushner writes, "only one question that matters: why do bad things happen to good people?" Kushner is especially effective (and herein lies another piece of sound guidance for the preacher) when he lists and attacks in detail the typical, but inadequate, answers often given to that question, such as "people get what they deserve," "God must have some purpose in your suffering," "we'll understand it as God's will someday," or "suffering is educational." The fact that Kushner's book was so gratefully embraced by many Christians, even though his biblical exegesis is sometimes questionable and his

theological proposals are at variance with much in the orthodox Christian theological tradition, is a sign that these typical answers, so descriptive of the ways that countless preachers at funerals and other occasions of grief have often spoken about suffering, have become bankrupt and have lost whatever explanatory power they may have held. Kushner throws the old nostrums out the window, and thereby does what many of our hearers have wanted to do, but did not have the courage to do. Indeed, Kushner is courageous enough to take the next bold step and to place the matter squarely where the person in the pew knows, at least intuitively, that it belongs: in the face of God. For Kushner, and for many in our congregations, the crisis of suffering is finally a crisis about the moral character, power, and trustworthiness of God.

Kushner is not, of course, the only modern voice raised in protest in the heavenly court. August Wilson's play "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," to cite another example, takes place in a run-down recording studio in Chicago during the late 1920's. Several black musicians have gathered to record with Ma Rainey, the legendary blues singer. As they wait for the arrival of Ma and rehearse their music, the musicians exchange conversation that slowly exposes the bitter racism of the world in which they live and the rage and self-hatred it breeds.

At one point Cutler, the band leader, tells the story of an incident that happened to a black preacher named Reverend Gates. Gates, it seems, was on a train from Tallahassee to Atlanta to visit his sister, who was ill. The train stopped at the little town of Sigsbee, Georgia, and Gates stepped off the train to use the bathroom. The bathrooms, however, were for whites only, and Gates was sent to an outhouse 200 yards behind the station. While he was there, the train pulled out, leaving Gates alone in this strange town.

As Gates stood on the station platform wondering what to do, nightfall approaching, he noticed a group of white men gathering at the station, watching him ominously. Fearful of their intentions, Gates began walking down the tracks, away from the station, not knowing where he was going. The white men began to curse and taunt him; a gun was fired into the air. Gates stopped walking, and the gang of whites circled around him. He told them that he was Reverend Gates and that he was traveling to see his sister, who was sick. "Yeah...but can you dance?" one of them replied. Then the men tore the cross from Gates' neck, ripped his Bible into shreds, and forced him to dance. "That's the only way he got out of there alive," said Cutler, "...was to dance. Ain't even had no respect for a man of God!"

At this point, one of the musicians, Levee, angrily responds, "What I wants to know is...if he's a man of God, then where the hell was God when all of this was going on? Why wasn't God looking out for him? Why didn't God strike down them crackers with some of this lightening you talk about to me?"⁵

There it is, the scandalous question almost all of our hearers want to ask, but are not sure they have the right to raise: "Where the hell was God when all of this was going on?" The deepest reason for the powerful appeal of Kushner's book is that he drags that secret question into broad daylight and is unafraid to look at its implications.

Framing the Question

Kushner does another service for his readers, and for the preacher, by setting up the classic formula of what, since the seventeenth century, has been called the

“theodicy problem.” Basically it is a theological conundrum composed of four seemingly contradictory claims:

1. God exists
2. God is omnipotent
3. God is morally perfect: good, just, fair
4. Innocent people suffer

Now this brings to expression, in almost mathematical simplicity and elegance, the way that many people in congregations, all of them children of the Enlightenment, experience the intellectual puzzle posed by innocent suffering: as a series of cherished theological ideas that apparently cannot all be true at once. Thus, one of these theological claims must be jettisoned for the sake of the coherence of the whole. But which one?

Many in our time are ready to give up on claim #1, the existence of God. The theodicy problem is only a problem for believers. Job, on the other hand, was willing to challenge claim #3, the goodness of God, while his well-meaning friends were encouraging him to scrap claim #4, the innocence of the sufferer. Kushner, however, sweeps the scalpel over claim #2, the power of God. “I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make innocent children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason.”⁶

In challenging the idea of God’s omnipotence, Kushner joins a chorus of many contemporary theologians, who either reject the classical category of divine omnipotence (e.g., Process Thought) or drastically redefine it (e.g., God, though theoretically omnipotent, nevertheless chooses to operate in the world as if this were not so). Once Kushner has made his bold claim, that God lacks the power to overcome evil and suffering, he quickly gets into trouble. He suggests that suffering is generated by randomness, or Fate, a notion that is, at base, dualistic, and he finally leaves his readers with a theology that is mostly anthropology. God “helps” the sufferer, but it is ultimately the sufferer alone who must forge whatever meaning can be found in the experience of suffering.⁷ Kushner has helped us to name the problem as our hearers would name it, and he has placed the question into an intellectual framework, but now the preacher must leave him and turn in other directions.

Exploring the Resources

At this point the preacher should explore the resources available in the theological heritage of the church. We are not the first generation of Christians to be troubled by innocent suffering, nor are we alone in seeking some satisfying theological understanding of it. Effective preaching on suffering will, in some measure, introduce hearers to the ways in which Christians throughout the centuries have struggled to wrest meaning from such experiences.

A noteworthy guide to the historical sweep of this theological issue is John Hick’s much heralded *Evil and the God of Love*.⁸ Hick surveys the development of theodicy and finds two main traditions at work in Christian thought. These could be called “the majority report” and the “the minority report.” The majority report is essentially Augustinian in origin, and its main contours are well known: God created a perfect world and placed in it free creatures. As Augustine himself describes it in *The City of God*:

In Paradise, then, man...lived in the enjoyment of God, and was good by God's goodness: he lived without any want, and had it in his power so to live eternally. He had food that he might not hunger, drink that he might not thirst, the tree of life that old age might not waste him. There was in his body no corruption.... He feared no inward disease, no outward accident.... As in Paradise there was no excessive heat or cold.... No sadness of any kind was there, nor any foolish joy; true gladness ceaselessly flowed from the presence of God, who was loved "out of a pure heart...." The honest love of a husband and wife made a sure harmony between them.... No languor made their leisure wearisome; no sleepiness interrupted their desire to labor.⁹

Through an exercise of free will, however, angels and humanity rebelled against God and sought to be their own lords. This misuse of freedom effected a deprivation of good (evil as nonbeing), the fall of the whole created order, and set into motion the divine agency of redemption. Put in terms of Kushner's list, therefore, Augustine chooses to question claim #4, the innocence of suffering, but not in the individualistic way that modern people pose the issue. Augustine does not point to the immediate and actual sins of individuals, but rather to the *original* sin of the human race. Joined in community to Adam's crime, no human, even an infant, is technically innocent, but people suffer not in proportion to their individual sin, but rather as a consequence of the fallen creation. Suffering, thus, is unequally borne.

Hick levels a number of criticisms at this majority report, namely that it is logically incoherent (whence came this impulse to rebel in a perfect paradise?) and profoundly impersonal, on his way to announcing his partiality for the minority report. Hick finds in the work of Irenaeus, the second century Bishop of Lyons, an alternative to the Augustinian style theodicy. Augustinian theodicy assumes that a good God would choose to construct a world of perfect pleasure, but what if that is not God's goal? What if God rather wished to create not a world where the temperature is always perfect and the food always tastes good, but rather where souls can be made, where people through their own moral choices can be fashioned into the willing children of God? It just may be that such a world is the one, full of ambiguity and paradoxical suffering, that we have been given. As Hick maintains:

Instead of the doctrine that man was created finitely perfect and then incomprehensively destroyed his own perfection and plunged into sin and misery, Irenaeus suggests that man was created as an imperfect, immature creature who was to undergo moral development and growth and finally be brought to the perfection intended for him by his Maker....[I]nstead of the Augustinian view of life's trials as a divine punishment for Adam's sin, Irenaeus sees our world of mingled good and evil as a divinely appointed environment for man's development towards the perfection that represents the fulfillment of God's good purposes for him.¹⁰

Reframing the Question

The work of John Hick, and others like him, acquaints the preacher with the resources available in the history of theodicy, but increasingly a different approach to the question of suffering is developing in the theological literature, namely the rejection of the theodicy problem in general. One of the finest treatments of this

approach is Kenneth Surin's beautifully clear *Theology and the Problem of Evil*.¹¹

Surin claims, correctly I think, that the traditional way of posing the theodicy problem (the way Kushner states it, for example) "militates against a properly Christian response to 'the problem of evil.'"¹² The theodicy problem is a philosophical problem, and any proper solution to it is required to be a philosophical one. The "God" of theodicy is very much the "God of the philosophers," and, thus, a God essentially unrecognizable in the narratives, practices, and faithful life of the Christian community. "[T]he God [the theodicists] seek to justify is the very 'thing' that the adherent of a properly Christian 'understanding' of God will find herself being disposed to abjure."¹³

Like Hick, Surin explores the history of theodicy, but unlike Hick he does not attempt to respond to the theodicy problem on its philosophically stated grounds. He moves instead to different ground and seeks to develop, with the help of theologians like Dorothee Soelle, Jürgen Moltmann, and P.T. Forsyth, what he calls "theodicy with a practical emphasis."

Surin's argument is subtle and finely-tuned. For him, the problem of evil and suffering arises "when particular narratives of events of pain, dereliction, anguish, oppression, torture, humiliation, degradation, injustice, hunger, godforsakenness, and so on, come into collision with the Christian community's narratives, which are inextricably bound up with the redeeming reality of the triune God."¹⁴ The Christian "answer" to the problem of suffering and evil, then, is not a philosophical claim that allows one to say, "Now this explains it, this solves the problem," but rather a retelling of the Christian story in such a way that people are enabled to live one more day, one more hour, with the anguish. "The Christian 'answer' to the 'problem of evil,'" Surin maintains, "is the hesitant, stammering bringing of [God's] reconciling action to speech....[This] is supplied by the texts which contain the narratives of the passion of Jesus Christ and the passion of all victims."¹⁵

Speaking the Promise

Theologians like Surin allow the preacher to come full circle. At the bedside or the graveside all we can and should do is to weep and to tell the old, old story once again. But our minds demand more. We have questions, philosophical and theological puzzles, post-Enlightenment inquiries, and the preacher who avoids exploring these can be accused of "know-nothingism."

We can only go so far, though, down the path of theodicy. Finally we come to the place on the way where we must once again assume the narrative voice, the voice of lament and doxology. We must admit that we have been placed into the middle of life and that, from our vantage point, suffering is an unsolvable mystery. We must affirm that the meaningful question is not "Is theism unintelligible because I am suffering?" but "Is God a God of salvation -- is God one who can help?"¹⁶ And our only response to *that* question is a story, *the* story of the love of God and the passion of Jesus Christ. It will seem too little to go on, given the magnitude of human suffering and the insistent urgency of the questions, but the story of God's redemption is finally all we have, and the retelling of it is all we can do. By the grace of God it is enough, enough to keep us moving in hope for another day.

This is what William Sloan Coffin was pointing to in his powerful and well-known sermon on the occasion of the death of his son. After having described the futility of preachers and other well-intentioned folk attempting to use the Bible to

somehow explain the tragedy, Coffin returns to the biblical affirmations, as narrative promise rather than as philosophical solution:

And of course I know, even when pain is deep, that God is good. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Yes, but at least, "My God, my God;" and the psalm only begins that way; it doesn't end that way. As the grief that once seemed unbearable begins to turn now to bearable sorrow the truths in the "right" biblical passages are beginning, once again, to take hold: "Cast thy burden upon the Lord and he shall strengthen thee;" Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning;" ... "In this world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."¹⁷

Or, as Paul Scherer once put it:

I know the things that happen: the loss and the loneliness and the pain.... But there's a mark on it now: as if Someone who knew that way Himself, because He had travelled it, had gone on before and left his sign; and all of it begins to make a little sense at last — gathered up, laughter and tears, into the life of God, with His arms around it!¹⁸

Coffin and Scherer are assuming the narrative voice. They are not afraid to think deeply and hard about suffering, but on the far end of their thought, they finally acquire the rhythm of the storyteller, the cadence of the singer of hymns. As we, unknowingly stammering out the hopeful promise of the gospel, sang on that Sunday morning long ago, when the first cries of terror and heartache were arising in Marion, Ohio, "Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer, who makes the woeful heart to sing."

NOTES

¹ Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1981).

² For a generally positive assessment of Kushner, see Burton Cooper, "When Modern Consciousness Happens to Good People: Revisiting Harold Kushner," *Theology Today*, Vol. XLVII, No. 3 (October, 1991), 290-300.

³ Kushner, 5.

⁴ Cooper, "When Modern Consciousness Happens to Good People," 294.

⁵ From August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (New York: New American Library, 1981), 95-98. This story is included in Thomas G. Long, "Praying for the Wrath of God," a sermon to be included in a forthcoming edited collection of sermons on the Book of Revelation.

⁶ Kushner, 134.

⁷ For an excellent, appreciative, but critical analysis of Kushner, see John Douglas Hall, *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1986), 150-158.

⁸ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, revised edition (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978).

⁹ *The City of God*, XIV.26.

¹⁰ Hick, 214-215.

¹¹ Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

¹² Surin, 3.

¹³ Surin, 7.

¹⁴ Surin, 27.

¹⁵ Surin, 143.

¹⁶ Surin, 137.

¹⁷ William Sloan Coffin, "Alex's Death," *Sermons from Riverside*, January 23, 1983, 4.

¹⁸ Paul Scherer, as quoted in Hall, 11.