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## Asking God the Overwhelming Questions about Pain, Suffering and Justice

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## The overwhelming questions.

Earlier in the academic year, I noted that these have been “unsettling, chaotic, and disorienting times.” It has been a year of endurance, tenacity and “completion” for our academic communities. That the year was completed is a mark of success. There has also tremendous sadness, lament, and tragedy laced throughout our campuses. Even though the resiliency of our campus communities were strengthened, there have been hard things endured and processed. The attempt to reconcile the God of justice, kindness and grace with the reality and experience of evil, pain, and suffering has been constantly present and at the forefront.

This attempt at reconciliation is often called a theodicy question. Not surprisingly, it is repeatedly asked in Scriptures. It is a raw and lonely question. Deeply personal, and often asked of God himself. The essence of the question is “why me?” It is a justice and fairness question. “Why did this happen? Where were you God? This was not fair!”

These are messy questions. Answers given by God are also messy and often uncomfortable. In many ways, God never answers these why or fairness questions. He does not avoid them, but he notes something more important. He notes his desire for intimacy with us and with those who are hurting and suffering. God manifested himself physically among men and women demonstrating his love, care, and mercy.

Over the past year, there have been times where when my students have questioned God’s justice and care for themselves and those they love. Students have repeatedly questioned what they have seen as incongruence with what they see in life and what they know about God’s character. Sometimes with despair, they asked if God has forgotten and abandoned them.

## The unexpected answers.

The Scripture illustrate that we are free to voice anger, frustration, and ask hard questions (Ps 22). God often answers us in an unexpected way. That he chose to physically manifest himself among us is one of his answers to the theodicy question. One of names we call Jesus is Emmanuel (Mt 1:22). Emmanuel is translated “God with us” or “God is with us.” God came to be with us when Jesus was born. It is the way he answered our questions about suffering. God promised we would not be alone. The fancy theological word is theophany – a manifestation to humankind of God. I would understand that it is a demonstration of God’s presence.

The ethicist and chaplain, Colin Johnstone noted that: “It has been my experience that my personal pain and suffering has been resolved by the caring presence of another person or the caring presence of God. It has also been my professional experience that suffering is eased and resolved by a Healing Presence and not by a brilliant answer to the Theodicy question.”<sup>1</sup>

God does not promise that everything will be alright. However, he does promises that he will never leave us (Heb13:5). There is nothing that we can say or yell at him that will make him leave or love us less. We do not need to hide our grief, confusion, and even anger. God made those emotions, he can certainly handle our raw expression of them (Rom 8:39).

Johnstone continues and asserts: “The mystery of the Incarnation, “God with skin on,” is nowhere more real than in the birth and death of Jesus Christ. The scandal of the dying God gives meaning to the scandal of the dying child. There seems to be a balancing of the universe when a sobbing father, helpless at the suffering death of his beloved child remembers that the Lord, the creator of the universe and the source of all life, has also been a grieving father.”<sup>2</sup>

The author with whom I am engaging shares the same surname as myself. He is my father. He passed away four days ago. This was not our first goodbye. Alzheimer’s started its serious battle with dad about a decade ago. About six years ago he no longer recognized me, but still knew that he knew me. Four years ago, there was no longer any cognitive or emotional recognition. The good byes have been on-going. This week it has been more final.

It many ways his recorded thoughts from the past are now counsel for engaging the questions I am currently experiencing personally and within our campus community. These thoughts and reflections have permeated my interactions with students. Students often attempt to understand evil, injustice, pain and suffering. It is a human challenge with which students wrestle frequently. The counsel of a man who daily dealt with the questions of theodicy has leavened my care of students.

For over 25 years, my father cared for families and patients who were ill and dying from cancer. He would reflect on how these patients and their families, understandably, wrestled with the “why” and the “fairness” questions. He also observed that when listeners hear those types of questions (often similar to ones asked in scripture) they are uncomfortable, and don’t know how to respond, and often resort to platitudes and clichés. My father observed that God consistently chooses not to answer these particular questions. At the same time, God is comfortable with our anger, our tears, our frustrations, and even our curses. He understands our grieving pain, because his own son was killed on Good Friday (Lk 23).

God does not promise that everything will be alright. However he does promise that he will never leave us (Heb 13:5). (My apologies for the repetition, but this is an essential point.) As noted before, there is nothing that we can say or yell at him that will make him leave or love us less. However, he will not force his way into our lives (Rev 3:20). We need to consent to his presence. He does not want us to be alone in grief, hurt or pain. He promises to be with us. He wishes to bring grace into that loneliness.

In my conversation with hurting students, giving them permission to be angry, confused, and perplexed is powerfully transformative. It helps them see that God is truly on their side and has tremendous love for them even in the midst of hard situations. When tragedy and trauma strike, we often lash out at God questioning his care and commitment. Dad suggested that a defense is unnecessary and the question moot when God chooses to manifest himself in their lives (theophany). God chooses to be present in their loneliness, pain and grief.

### “God with us”

Historically followers of Jesus have celebrated Easter in various ways. My father lived in the world of ambiguity existing on Holy Saturday. Because we are on this side of history we can anticipate that while the crucifixion happened on Friday, we know the resurrection happened on Sunday. However, I am not sure those who lived with and knew Jesus really understood. On that Saturday, I imagine they felt incredible sadness and grief. Confusion, discouragement, and anger because they no longer had a future with Jesus. They were probably fearful, not knowing how they would live without this person with whom they shared so much of life. I am sure they were asking “why did this happen?” And struggling with things not being “fair!”

God does not promise that life will always go well, but consistently promises his presence, his faithfulness and steadfast love. We are never abandoned, he is always “God with us” – Emmanuel. This is a messy answer to the questions asked by our students regarding suffering, pain and justice. But the answer is respectful of them, and honoring of God. The “presence of

another person or the caring presence of God” begins the easing of the pain and suffering experienced by our students and communities.

### **Footnotes**

Colin B. Johnstone, “Theophany & Theodicy: When the Inevitable Questions of Suffering Confront the Living God,” *Touchstone* (July/August 2017): 39.

Johnstone, “Theophany & Theodicy.”