

## “Who Sinned?!”

*Psalm 23; John 9:1-41*

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Jesus is walking along and he sees a man who has never seen anything. You can imagine how acute this man’s hearing must have become; and out of his darkness he hears the disciple’s question, “Rabbi, who sinned [...] that this man was born blind?” The man born blind does not respond, but surely it was a question he himself had asked before; a question that always led to more questions. Had his mother or father committed some terrible sin? Why aren’t *they* blind? Had *he* somehow sinned while still in his mother’s womb? How can an unborn child sin? Inevitably, the questions turn to God (or rather *on* God): Why did God *punish* this man, afflicting him with blindness? Or, if it is not punishment, then why did God *allow* this man to be born blind? Is God *testing* this man? These are the same kinds of questions we ask when a loved one is diagnosed with cancer; or when a child dies; or when earthquakes, tsunamis or other natural disasters devastate a country. A theological inquisition ensues, as one question leads to many others, and the most desperate question that arises is: “Where is God?”

Now some of us really do not mean to engage in theological discussion when we ask such questions. Reflecting on a funeral for a Harvard grad, who had died in a “senseless, irrational car accident in the prime of life,” Peter Gomes recalled a young man asking, “Will I wake up some morning and understand why Willie had to die in this way, at this time?” “It was not a question that required an answer,” Gomes said, “at least not then, for he was baying at the moon, not making a theological inquiry” (*The Good Book*, 212). It is a challenge for people of faith, who often talk about God, to recognize when questions about God need to be asked, but not answered. When Psalm 23 sounds untrue—when it seems as if the Lord is *not* our shepherd, that he is *not* with us in the darkest valley, that there is *no* comfort, that our cups are *empty*, and that goodness and mercy do *not* follow us—sometimes we just need to *bay at the moon*.

Still there are others who truly want answers—the disciples want to know, we want to know—and there are some who dare to provide answers. The technical term for this would be *theodicy*, whereby people have tried to “justify God,” to defend “God’s goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil” (Merriam-Webster); as if God needed our defense! I must admit that I’m not a fan of theodicy, especially these days with folks like Pat

Robertson being quick to provide “godly” reasons for natural disasters. In *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis almost warns those who would try to console him after his wife’s death from cancer: “Talk to me about the truth of religion and I’ll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I’ll listen submissively. But don’t come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don’t understand” (25). We would do well to think long and hard before speaking on God’s behalf.

However, if you are daring enough to attempt to “justify God,” I would at least recommend that you consider emulating the English poet, John Milton. In the 17<sup>th</sup>-century, Milton wrote his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, what some might call a work of theodicy; and he opened his poem with a prayer seeking the direction of God’s Spirit, which he called the “Heavenly Muse”:

“Sing, Heavenly Muse [...] I thence/Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song/That with no middle flight intends to soar/Above th’ Aonian mount, while it pursues/Things unattempted yet in prose or in rhyme [...] what in me is dark/Illumine, what is low raise and support/That to the height of this great argument/I may assert Eternal Providence/And justify the ways of God to men.”  
(*Paradise Lost*, Book 1)

At least Milton recognized the difficulty of writing his “adventurous song” and knew that he was attempting something that exceeded his own ability to grasp. In the words of the psalmist, Milton acknowledged that without divine intervention—“Eternal Providence”—that “such knowledge [was] too wonderful for [him]; so high that [he could not] attain it” (Ps. 139:6). The Christian mystic, Howard Thurman, often ended his sermons, even his eulogies for John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., with this statement: “Our words are ended and the rest is silence.” (*With Head and Heart*, 210) Thurman knew as well as any the limitations of our words and our knowing. He knew that there was a time to stop speaking, embrace the silence, and listen for God.

The truth is that there is knowledge that we cannot attain; and in every journey of faith there comes a point of not knowing; a point where our theologies, our explanations of God fall short. When it comes to God, I am certain that we will have more questions than answers. Even the ever-zealous apostle Paul wrote that “now we see in a mirror, dimly [...] now I know only in part” (1 Cor 13:12). Questions do not signal a lack of faith, rather they are an expression of faith. Elie Wiesel once wrote of Moché, a man who “explained to [him] with great insistence that every question possessed a power that did not lie in the answer”:

“Man raises himself toward God by the questions he asks Him,” [Moché] was fond of repeating. “That is the true dialogue, Man questions God and God

answers. But we don't understand His answers. We can't understand them. Because they come from the depths of the soul, and they stay there until death. You will find the true answers, Eliezer, only within yourself"

"And why do you pray, Moché?" [Eliezer] asked him.

"I pray to the God within me that He will give me the strength to ask the right questions." (*Night*, 2-3)

According to Moché, the questions we ask God are powerful, whether or not they are answered, whether or not we understand the answers, because they *raise us toward God*. Such an idea challenges us to be faithful whether or not we are comfortable with unanswered questions. After asking God question after question, reflecting on the death of his wife, Lewis wrote, "I get no answer. But a rather special sort of 'No answer.' It is not the locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly no uncompassionate, gaze. As though He shook His head not in refusal but waiving the question. Like, 'Peace child; you don't understand.'" (*A Grief Observed*, 69).

The blind man's neighbors, the Pharisees, and other Jewish authorities ("the Jews") cannot bear not knowing. They are filled with questions, and demand answers. How? Where? What? Who? Again and again, they ask the man who had been born blind, "How were your eyes opened?" They ask his parents, "How does he now see?" And even after he tells them all, they ask him again, "How did he open your eyes?" His answer, his testimony is simple: "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." He tells them each time exactly what happened with no exaggerations, but they cannot accept his answer. They could have easily explained the man's *blindness*: He or his parents sinned, and God made him blind. Simple. But this? This healing broke all the rules, and challenged all of their ideas about God. It was a blessing to the blind man, and a burden for the Pharisees.

For all they knew, God had spoken through Moses, sinners did not observe the Sabbath, and sinners could not open the eyes of the blind. Yet with a simple act of compassion, Jesus reminded them that they did not know everything there was to know about God; he reminded them that they still only knew "in part." Early in John's Gospel, Nicodemus the Pharisee had already come to Jesus, telling him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God" (John 3:2b). Yet since Jesus breaks Sabbath here to make mud for the blind man's eyes, there's debate about whether he's a sinner or a man from God. They're divided on the subject and the question of "How?" still lingers; but for the man who *used to be* blind it's a non-issue.

“One thing I know,” he said, “though I was blind, now I see.” All he knows is that one Sabbath day, a man named Jesus *saw him*, made mud, spread it on his eyes, and when he washed it off, he could see. There in the midst of all the not-knowing and the questioning and the doubting and the arguing, this man holds on to the “one thing” he *does* know: God’s work has been revealed in him through Jesus, the man from God who met him in his suffering, broke Sabbath and joined him in being called a sinner. If ever he wondered, “Where is God?” he now had his answer.

Peter Gomes once wrote that “It is the most orthodox of Christian doctrine that the Savior does not save us *from* suffering, but is with us *in* and *through* suffering.” In the midst of our suffering and questioning, we seek comfort from the one who suffered on the cross, asking his own questions, and died. Each week I meet with brothers and sisters at Christ Episcopal to pray, and often included in our prayers are these words: “When we face the bitter paths of suffering and loss, and when our hearts cry out for reasons why, Christ of the cross of Calvary, stay with us.” Beloved, of all the things we can know, the “one thing” I pray we know is that in times of suffering and questioning, Christ has been there with us, “baying at the moon.”

And for that I say, “Lord, I believe.” Amen.