

Choose Life

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

I Corinthians 3:1-9

On the northeast corner of Michigan's Upper Peninsula lies Whitefish Point, which defines where the main body of forbidding Lake Superior turns into Whitefish Bay, which leads to the Sault canals to the lower Great Lakes. On the Point you will find the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum. Every second of every day that museum is open it plays Gordon Lightfoot's song, The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald over the sound system. Every. Single. Second. I once asked a museum employee how she liked the song. "I used to kind of like it," she said. "Now I *hate* it." The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald tells the story of an actual laker, a cargo ship, that capsized just off Whitefish Point during a horrific 1975 storm, taking the lives of all 29 men on board.

The song contains a haunting lyric: "Does any man know where the love of God goes, when the waves turn the minutes to hours?" This is just the age-old question of how a loving God can permit suffering. The existentialists tried to construct a life philosophy that found meaning and purpose without faith in any god. Existentialism rose in a Europe stunned by World War I and the depression, then the rise of socialism and fascism. Writers like Franz Kafka, Italo Calvino and Jean Paul Sartre attempted to develop an ethical framework that could take the place of the morality posited by the Bible and the Christian tradition. But the existentialist project never

really took root outside of Europe and American faculties of philosophy. Its answer to the question of why God permits suffering was, 1. There is no God. 2. Life has meaning only when and if people take responsibility for their own pain. 3. It is absurd to believe anything else. And by the way, life itself is absurd.

Such a bleak world-view has never dominated here. This is still a nominally Christian nation, and optimism and hope still remain important parts of our national mood. So we must find a different answer to why God permits suffering. And we must do so without minimizing the depth of the pain. National Public Radio reported this morning that the death total from the earthquake in Syria and southern Turkey has passed 28,000. A few more miraculous rescues may possibly occur, but every other body unearthed will be dead. The vigil families have stood, beside impenetrable mountains of rubble, listening to the panicked voices of trapped loved ones grow ever fainter, have converted into the grief of watching the big machines indiscriminately scoop out massive gulps of concrete, re-bar, wood and bodies.

Does anyone know where the love of God grows when the earth turns the days to forever? As the centuries pass and life has become more and more comfortable for us, this question changes its shape. On the one hand, we Americans have not experienced war at home for nearly 165 years. Our standard of living has steadily risen. Even natural disasters, while potentially deadly, do not cause the catastrophe seen in the Middle East. Trouble seems to have backed away from us. On the other hand, death still stalks us. We have just emerged from a pandemic (please God!).

The economy may tilt toward growth or it may fall into recession. And the San Andreas Fault is long overdue for another correction. Not to mention the gargantuan plume of magma pressing upward beneath Yellowstone National Park.

The question of God's love for God's people has always plagued humanity. Moses lived about 3,600 years ago. He purportedly spoke the words we read today from Deuteronomy. Our verses form the end of what scholars call his Third Discourse. He speaks in the territory of Moab, to the east across the River Jordan from the Promised Land. The Israelites have completed their forty years' of wandering from Egypt. God has told Moses he will not cross into the Promised Land with the rest of the people; he tested God's patience one too many times and for punishment, he can see—but not enjoy—the place which the people will occupy. Picture a father sending his sons off to join the army to go to war. Suddenly he has no time to tell them all the things they need to know. So the father dumps all his advice into long discourses he considers fatherly talks. The sons hear them as lectures.

Our verses contain the conclusion of those talks. We can safely infer therefore they also contain the point Moses considered most important. Indeed, the theme here pervades all four books from Exodus through Deuteronomy. They reiterate the covenant God has made with Moses on Mt. Sinai. God has promised to bless the people if they obey the law. But God has also promised to curse the people if they fail to obey the law. “See,” Moses says, “I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God...the Lord your

God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it.” Ah, but: “...if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods...you shall perish...therefore choose life.”

Actually, Deuteronomy was written approximately 600 years after Moses died. Priests in the Jerusalem temple produced it for the edification of a new boy king, Josiah. These later authors perceived their little nation of Judah faced an existential threat. The northern kingdom of Israel had already succumbed to a foreign empire; now their country faced the same fate. They believed the reason for this was the people had long since ceased obeying God's commandments. The curses of the covenant must surely follow, they reasoned. So they produced Deuteronomy (literally, “Second Law” in Greek) as a summary of the first four books of their Bible. They staged a dramatic “discovery” of its scrolls in the temple library and gave them to King Josiah. Josiah read them, got the message, and immediately initiated a series of reforms. It's all there in the Old Testament book of II Kings.

What if our religious scholars today attempted to pass off their own work as having come from a Christian figure of 600 years ago—say, a Puritan preacher in New England exhorting his congregation to greater purity, greater piety, with the twin promises of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience? The analogy actually fits rather well. But both the priests of Jerusalem and the Puritans faced the same problem: life is not that simple. Good people get cursed. Bad people get blessed. And what, on a more fundamental level, is a good or a bad person? Who

gets to make that judgment? Surely obedience to God's commandments is a good thing. But it does not guarantee blessings. Clearly not.

If, therefore, we still want to answer the question of how a loving God can permit suffering we must think and believe with more nuance. Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul placed more stress on faithfulness than on obedience, on maturity than on the transactional deal offered by the Mosaic covenant of old. To illustrate, we turn to Canadian Geese. Because, why would we not? It turns out that snapping turtles occasionally ambush geese. The turtles grab the geese and try to pull them underwater. In the process they sometimes break the geese' feet. A story in a recent Discover Magazine told of a gander observed limping on the grounds of a Barnstable, Massachusetts animal rehab facility. A staff member captured the male and brought him inside. (Living in a neighborhood with hundreds of Canadian Geese I can tell you that, even with having helped my veterinarian father capture pigs, cattle, sheep, goats, *deer*, etc., I can think of *nothing* that could entice me to attempt the capture of a male goose.) But this man did it.

They anesthetized the goose and began setting his foot. The surgeon heard a "TAP TAP TAP" on the window the surgical suite shared with the lawn outside. And there stood a female goose, the male's mate, peering in at them—sideways, which is how a goose looks straight at you. Discover printed a picture of her doing it. For the rest of the procedure she kept tapping and staring. Once the male awakened they let her inside. She waddled ahead of them, fully aware—probably through her sense of

smell—of where her mate lay. She walked to him and started preening his feathers. For the remainder of his two-week recuperation she came to visit him each day.

Geese famously mate for life. The Discover article stated that about ten percent of goose pairings end in “divorce”, usually thought to be due to the failure to bear young. But newly single geese, whether through “divorce” or the death of a mate, rarely join a new couple. By nature or by nurture, they remain faithful. This is the lesson for us. Faithfulness, not obedience, keeps us in line with God's will for our lives. Faith also helps us to sustain the terrible uncertainty caused by the question of how a loving God can permit suffering. It turns out the Bible and the tradition do not have a satisfactory answer. They are unanimous only in their insistence that we strive to hold on to our faith in the face even of earthquakes. Physical earthquakes. Emotional earthquakes. Spiritual earthquakes.

Choose life. Choose to live in such a way that you experience the fullness of life in this realm and the next. It turns out that remaining faithful is in itself a form of blessing. Choose to strive to remain faithful to your covenant with God. Let your faith, a gift from God, empower you to do what God calls you to do—and not do what God calls you not to do. But make no mistake: your life depends on faith. Take a lesson from that female goose, staring sideways through the window at her wounded mate. Do not walk away from the only one who gives your life meaning. Hanging in there gives us our only shot at dealing with the unanswerable questions. It also gives us our best shot at holding on to our hope. Choose life. Stay faithful.