

THE SIN OF PROCRASTINATION

The Rev. Julia Macy Offinger
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God said to Moses, "I am who I am." (Exodus 3:14)

In this week's Epistle--no, not Paul's 1st Letter to the Corinthians, but the letter sent each week to the people of Grace Church, our rector opened with the question: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" And then he went on to imply, if not exactly that the sermon would *answer* that question, at least that we would go deep into exploring the question together. I opened the Epistle, like many of you, and my interest was piqued! Why do bad things happen to good people? I thought to myself: "I wonder what Don will say in his sermon. He's really set quite the task for himself." And then I realized, oh right ... I am the preacher this week. So let's see if I can answer the question of theodicy for all of us here today...

In all seriousness, the study of why evil exists if God is good, or theodicy, is an entire theological discipline, and I will not pretend that this sermon is going to solve it for you for once and for all. World events of the last few weeks--airplanes falling out of the sky, 50 people killed as they gathered together in worship--it doesn't make sense, it is frightening, and we want to make sense of it.

And the Gospel story this morning appears, at first glance, like it might contain an answer to the question, "How could God let these terrible things happen to people?" Is there some kind of message hidden in human suffering, is there any logic to why it happens and to whom? Applying some sort of reasoning is appealing to us because it assuages our fear--as though we could do something to avoid death, avoid suffering, avoid the fear of what is unknown.

As Jesus speaks to the gathered crowd in the story, much like a modern preacher, Jesus invokes the headlines of the day--tragic events that surely were at the top of mind of those who were listening--Galileans tormented by the police, 18 people who died when a tower collapsed near Siloam--and yet his conclusion is not really satisfactory if you are hoping for some of that logic, or some justice, or some explanation. Jesus instead answers with a parable, about a fig tree, that has not borne any fruit. Give it another year, he says, before you cut it down. Huh?

This is the point in sermon preparation where I turn to the Old Testament reading to see if it provides any clues, but today it is the seemingly equally inscrutable burning bush, and God telling Moses "I AM who I AM." What does this all mean? I would like to offer a synthesis of these two readings--I AM who I AM and Jesus' musing on human suffering--that is not about God's punishing us, but rather about the wages of sin, and one sin in particular: PROCRASTINATION.

This lesson from Jesus today is actually about procrastination. Putting off what you need to do today in the face of the suffering, pain, and humanity that is, and always will be, all around us. Figuring out what the barriers are in your life to repentance, and breaking them down, in order to be fully prepared to face the world--a world that certainly has a lot of pain, but also a lot of joy. So, let me tell you a story of my own that joins today's Old Testament reading with the Gospel:

My last year in high school, I spent a few days a week volunteering in North Philadelphia, in a large, ramshackle, former rectory, a dilapidated house that was being used by an organization called Siloam--a spiritual wellness center for people living with HIV/AIDS run by a sassy catholic nun and a sassier catholic priest, Bernadette and Jim. The house offered free spiritual direction and

self-care services, like massage and yoga and meditation--services often not covered by standard health care, but often extremely helpful to people with chronic illness.

Siloam appears in the New Testament twice, in today's Gospel reading as the site of a tragedy, but also in John, after Jesus heals the sight in a blind man, and tells him to wash in the pool of Siloam. Though Siloam's logo was the shimmering surface of a healing pool of water, I'm sure its dual resonance as a place of unexplained suffering was not lost on Bernadette or Jim when they named their organization.

Bernadette and Jim started Siloam in the early 1990s when the majority of people living with AIDS in Philadelphia were young gay men who were almost certainly also going to die of AIDS. By the time I worked there in 2003, the mission of Siloam had drastically changed. The life expectancy of its clients had changed; people living with HIV/AIDS were truly living, but often saddled with complicated and expensive health care regimens. And the population it served had changed: in North Philadelphia at the time, Siloam's neighborhood, one in four black men, regardless of sexual orientation or any other factor, one in four black men was HIV positive.

The shifting focus of Siloam as an organization, and the moving target not only of HIV/AIDS, but of how systems of oppression are interconnected and evolving, reminds me of the evolution of Jesus' audience, from the time of his teaching, throughout his ministry, and then in to today. At the time of today's Gospel story, Jesus is preaching and teaching with the understanding that the apocalypse, the literal end of the world, is very near: potentially within months, certainly within the lifetime of anyone who is listening. The immediacy that Jesus often requires of his listeners; one can imagine that same kind of immediacy in the early days of Siloam, when helping clients navigate the healthcare system was imperative to do on a Monday, because the client might not be alive by a Friday.

Today we read the Gospel with a wider lens; we understand that the apocalypse is--most likely--not necessarily imminent. The repentance that Jesus requires is on our to-do list, of course, but maybe not above the things we have to get done this week, right? Our repentance looks something like St. Augustine's famous prayer, "God, make me good, but not yet."

This same wider perspective of time eventually reached those working in HIV/AIDS in the United States, as well. At Siloam, Bernadette and Jim's relationships with clients changed as they realized they really would be forming long term relationships with people with ongoing need.

I spent my time there helping these two with the administration of the place, in particular writing grant applications for small amounts of money that were crucial to helping the place run, especially as its mission evolved from short term to long term care. Bernadette and Jim were very talented at the day to day tasks--the counseling, the interaction with clients and volunteers, even the upkeep of the crumbling building--but not so much the administrative end. I inherited stacks and stacks of papers shoved all different directions in metal filing cabinets and would spend hours trying to figure out, in these early days of the internet, just which grants we were even applying for. So it was at this job at Siloam that I acquired two habits that are still with me today: drinking coffee and procrastination.

You see, to fit hours in around my school schedule, I had to be on a 5:30am train from the suburbs into the city. After a few weeks of this, I found myself, for the first time in my young life, nodding off at my desk as I ruffled through papers. One day I decided to have a cup of coffee and oh wow, it really worked!

The procrastination came about a bit less honestly. I had a stack of grant applications to get through, and it was tedious, but it also didn't really take me all that long once I got going. And when I did have a few done, Jim and Bernadette were always very pleased and impressed with my work. So a vicious cycle began where I would make things more interesting for myself by giving myself less and less time to get things done by the end of the day, and see if I could still get the same approval. And then one day I realized that Jim and Bernadette didn't even really need to see my work at the end of every day, I could really stretch it out to the end of the week. And then a week passed where they didn't ask at the end of the week, and the pile got bigger, and then I was stuck in a pit of procrastination and despair.

The coffee drinking did not help the anxiety that was now plaguing me on my morning commute. One day, it finally came to a head. Jim came in to my office and innocently inquired about the status of a specific grant application that was due, and the truth came tumbling out. "I haven't done it." I didn't know what was going to come next, and I was suddenly stricken with guilt. I had the most respect for him and Bernadette and this organization and its clients, but I hadn't shown it. I could barely look him in the eye. "Follow me," he said.

Jim took me into his office and sat me down and informed me we were going to do some spiritual direction, to get started getting to the root of my procrastination. I don't remember exactly what we talked about for an hour, but I remember my teary remorse and gratitude for his kind response to my failure. To close the session, Jim asked if he could share a song with me. This part I will never forget; he turned on the CD player in his office and played the Los Angeles Gay Men's Chorus version of "I am what I am" from the Broadway show *La Cage Aux Folles*. Imagine, if you can, this priest, lip syncing to 100 men singing this drag queen's famous anthem: "Your life is a sham, til you can shout out, I am what I am."

Perhaps you now understand why, for me, the third Sunday in Lent is otherwise titled procrastination Sunday, coupling Jesus' mention of Siloam in the Gospel lesson, with God's words to Moses from the burning bush: "I am who I am." And why, 15 years later, I realize Jim was a pretty wonderful priest. Because repentance, turning away from bad behavior and toward God, requires self-knowledge, and self-knowledge is understanding God's will for your life, what God wants for you. Whenever we are able to say: "I am ___" and fill in that blank proudly, we are invoking the very being of God in us.

Jesus' parable is a little less literal and on the nose than mine, but it still underlines the point that though human suffering cannot be avoided, the suffering of avoiding repentance, the suffering of burying our head in the sand, of needless procrastination, that suffering can be entirely avoided. Jesus tells of a fig tree that has had no fruit for three years. Its owner wants to cut it down, but its gardener promises to dig around and put fresh manure on it. Give it one more year! Procrastinators in the room will be very familiar with this move--asking for an extension!

My point is that this digging around the roots of our failures--the roots of where we are separate from God, the dry and decaying parts of ourselves that might even look dead from the outside--this digging requires a great deal of self-knowledge and courage. Because you know manure does not always smell good. But it is the only way to bear fruit, which is God's deepest desire for each of us.

Okay, so after all this--I've really been procrastinating this whole sermon--I think I do have a tiny little answer to the question of theodicy, why God lets bad things happen to good people. It is just this: it is not ever what God wants for us. It is the problem with the free will that God gave us that evil occurs, and when it does, God weeps with us. God weeps with us after tragic events that send

ripples through the world and God weeps with us in private moments of failure and loss, too. God weeps with us.

Of course the opposite is true as well: God revels in our repentance, God delights in every turn away from evil, in every step toward God, in every time someone is able to say, "I am what I am."

The time is now, not later, not tomorrow, not years from now. Today is the time to dig yourself out and tend to your roots so that you may bear fruit in the world, because this broken world needs it desperately. Drink a cup of coffee if you have to, but do not procrastinate a second longer. We need you.

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