

Among the 50 questions that were posed for our 6-week series “If I Could Ask God Anything,” at least 5 questions dealt with evil and suffering: “Why does God allow children to suffer?” “Why does Jesus call us to carry our cross?” “Why doesn’t God do more to lessen acts of evil, like ISIS, mass shootings, genocide?” “Why did Jesus have to suffer so brutally?” “How can a loving God stand human suffering?”

It’s clear that if many of us could question God face-to-face, we’d want to ask: “Why do you allow so much evil and suffering?” For sure, the sheer depth of suffering and evil in the world causes many to forsake their faith. And based on other questions I received for this series, I can see it also causes many of you significant anguish, when a family member or valued friend abandons faith because they cannot square the idea of a loving and powerful God with the world’s pervasive evil and suffering.

Because my own life has been marked with significant loss and trauma, this is not for me an idle philosophical or theological question. It is quite personal. I think you should know this from the outset: that what I offer in response to this question does not come from a dispassionate or academic distance. While I have much learning to do, my responses to this question emerge from my lived experience, my own anguished prayers, and my ongoing grappling with scripture.

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When I was in seminary, my understanding of God’s response to human suffering was significantly re-shaped by reading a work of historical fiction, *Silence*, by Shusako Endo. *Silence* is a haunting, breath-taking, and sometimes grueling read. I consider its impact on my faith to be extremely meaningful. (In fact, I get chills whenever I talk about it.)

Written in 1969, *Silence* just came to the big screen in a movie directed by Martin Scorsese. (Has anyone seen it?) As I said, it is a work historical fiction about a Jesuit mission to Japan in the 1600’s. It’s important to know that historically, Japan was very receptive to Catholic missionaries up until about 1614. But the situation changed dramatically.

The impetus of the missionary journey depicted in *Silence* was a real-life story in 1633 of another Jesuit priest in Japan. That priest, Christovao Ferreria, was an actual person who publically

denied his faith. Fr. Ferreria’s renunciation of Christianity shocked Catholic Europe and many Jesuit priests clamored to go to Japan and redeem Ferreria’s apostasy by dying as martyrs. That historical context is the springboard for the book.

The main character is the Fr. Sebastian Rodrigues who is spirited into Japan where he begins a covert ministry in a small fishing village. Hearing that the authorities are coming, the Japanese peasants who make up his flock help the priest into hiding. In hiding, he observes the arrival of shoguns who arrest, torture, and kill the people who had just saved his life. The priest becomes increasingly frustrated by God’s *silence* as the villagers suffer torture and death while refusing to betray the priest.

Eventually apprehended, Rodrigues imagines that he will soon undergo a glorious martyrdom; that his heroic resistance unto death will be an offering to God that redeems the failure of the priest who had renounced his faith.

Rodrigues then learns that his captors have no plan to kill him. Instead, Rodrigues is placed in a cell where he hears Japanese converts to Christianity being tormented. He is then told that it is their suffering he can end if he denies his faith. In this dilemma, Rodrigues is confronted by the priest (Ferreria) whose failure had led him to Japan in the first place. His former mentor says this to Rodrigues, “You make yourself more important than [those being tortured]. If you will [deny your faith] those people will be saved from suffering.” And then this line. The priest tells Rodrigues, “Surely, Christ would have denied his faith *for* them.”

Now, if you are like me, you don’t come to worship to hear a book report! So, I ask you to bear with me a moment longer. As Rodrigues considers his options: denying his Christ or dragging out the suffering of Japanese converts, there’s a moment where he gazes upon a bronze statue of Christ. (It’s this statue he must step upon to signal his disavowal of Christ.) And for the first time in his journey, the silence – the silence of God – is broken. Fr. Rodrigues ‘hears’ the Christ statue ‘speak’ to him; these words: “Trample! It was to be trampled on by men that I was borne into this world. It was to share men’s pain that I carried my cross.”

This novel prodded me to re-engage, at a much deeper level, the scriptural testimony about God’s

response to evil and suffering. Here are three things I'd share this morning.

First, as the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:18, the message of the cross is truly foolishness because the cross reveals that God's power and love have almost nothing – if anything at all – in common with our human sensibilities of how divine power and love should work. Isn't this why Jesus was mocked on the cross (because the onlookers were certain that if Jesus were truly the Son of God, he could save himself and vanquish his tormentors)? That's how human wisdom works. That logic makes perfect sense to me! But for reasons I can barely grasp, the cross is God's wisdom of how love and power work.

And this is why we must be careful when speaking about God and human suffering, especially in a moment where someone is experiencing tragedy, suffering, or grief. Even if I say something that makes sense to me... it's still human wisdom!

Last weekend I was with a friend who lost his youngest child to brain cancer in August. As he shared with me both his grief and gratitude for his son's life, I had no wisdom to extend, no refined theology of suffering and evil to offer. Instead, my role was to “be” God's response to his suffering. To be present. To listen and love and weep with my friend. To companion his suffering. (And to be clear, to have said, “It must be God's plan” or “At least your boy is in heaven” or “I guess God needed another angel” or “It reminds me to count my blessings”, or anything of that sort, would've been me trying to share ‘human wisdom’ about the way God works. [Those may be okay things to say to console ourselves, but only to ourselves!])

Building on that, my second point is that God has responded to evil and suffering in a way that we need to pay closer attention to. Last week I told a story about a girl and her father during a thunderstorm... let me share a similar story. This time it's a young boy. In the midst of a tremendous thunderstorm, he became quite frightened. After trying to be courageous he finally cried out to his father. His dad came in to the room and said, “Don't worry little guy. God loves you and will protect you.” With tears streaming down his cheeks the boy said, “I know God loves me and will protect me. But right now, I need somebody with skin on.”

In his book, *The Reason for God*, Timothy Keller shares: “Christianity alone among the world's religions claims that God became uniquely and fully human in Jesus Christ and therefore knows firsthand despair, rejection, loneliness, poverty, bereavement, torture, and imprisonment. In his death God suffers in love, identifying with the abandoned and god-forsaken.” That is exactly what *Silence* affirms so exquisitely, that God has put ‘skin’ into the game, so to speak. To say this more theologically: God has demonstrated in Jesus that he is so deeply relational, that God can and will vacate sovereignty and transcendence to be with us and for us.

Building on the first two things I've said, my final thought is that in the incarnation, and in the cross, God has clearly and emphatically revealed his opposition to evil and suffering. And not only that, but that God in Christ invites us to do whatever we can to remedy evil and suffering. Our first glimpse into this truth precedes Christ, in Exodus 3:7-8. In calling Moses to free the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, God says, “I have seen the misery of my people... Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I've come to deliver them...”

But note, God needs Moses to get involved in the plan. And this is what Jesus means in Luke 14:27, when he says, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Jesus is saying that by definition, a follower of his will join alongside him to diminish suffering and resist evil.

... There's a comic strip where two guys are talking to each other, and one of them says he has a question for God. He wants to ask why God allows all of this poverty and violence and suffering to exist in the world. And his friend says, “Well, why don't you ask?” The fellow shakes his head and says, “I'm scared that God will ask me the same question.”

Over and over, when we ask God why suffering and evil and injustice are allowed to exist, we need to listen for God's reply, because I think we will hear Jesus say: “You tell me why this is allowed to happen. You are my body, my hands, my feet.” Take up the cross and follow me. Amen.