

“Staying Engaged”
July 24, 2022
Genesis 18:20-32; Luke 11:1-13

When I read the paper or watch the news or scroll through Twitter and Facebook, and I see all the violence and loss and fear people endure, I can start to feel pretty hopeless. It feels like the world is spiraling out of control and nothing we do makes any difference. We like to think our society has progressed, and in some ways it has, but lately the voices of hatred and bigotry have been especially loud. It leaves me wondering, and maybe some of you feel the same way, just where is God in the middle of all this?

And what is God’s role in human affairs anyway? In this story from Genesis we find Abraham confronting God, in fact, the Hebrew is a little ambiguous. Where we read “while Abraham remained standing before the Lord,” other ancient traditions read, “while the Lord remained standing before Abraham.” That may sound like semantics but the second reading suggests Abraham is judging God and not the other way around. And as this conversation unfolds it becomes clear that Abraham is at the very least questioning God’s judgment, God’s fairness.

It’s an old problem, called theodicy. It asks, “if God is all powerful and all good, then how can God allow bad things to happen?” It’s a question that’s caused a lot of people to give up on God altogether.

There’s no doubt we live in a world where horrible things happen, a world where innocent people are harmed or killed every day by the evil acts of others. Mass shootings and other forms of gun violence in our country has outraged many of us in recent months. The tragedy and heartbreak of it is undeniable, but what’s worse has been the inaction of our leaders to create policies that could reduce it, namely, by making access to guns harder instead of easier. Instead, often all we hear from our leaders is that phrase that’s become a sick joke: “thoughts and prayers.”

But when it comes to God’s role in all this, there seem to be only two paths. Either we just throw up our hands and say this is just the way the world is and we have to accept it. God will straighten things out in the sweet by and by. Or we give up on God entirely and stop expecting any kind of divine influence to change things. Both options seem hopeless to me: God is either there and feckless or not there at all. Either way, why bother staying engaged with God?

Both Abraham and Jesus offer us a third way. When Abraham begins bargaining with God, he does it with the understanding that God can be held to certain standards. It’s interesting how he frames it. First he questions whether the innocent will be destroyed along with the wicked in Sodom and then reflects on what that says about God’s nature: “Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” Abraham insists there is a standard of justice not even God can be allowed to violate. And then he goes even further by suggesting the possibility of God sparing all of Sodom for the sake of a few righteous, as few as ten, finally. In essence, Abraham reverses God’s plan. The innocent were going to be collateral damage in

God's efforts to wipe out the wicked; but now the wicked will be saved collaterally in order to spare the innocent.

By staying engaged with God rather than simply accepting God's plans or opting out of the relationship entirely, Abraham introduces God to a whole new worldview in which preserving the innocent has a higher value than punishing the wicked.

When Jesus responds to his disciples' request to teach them how to pray, he first gives them certain words to say. It's not entirely clear that these words are meant to be repeated verbatim or if they represent the topics to be covered and the approach to be used. In our worship we don't use these exact words as Luke portrays them. Our prayer is a little enhanced. But beyond the words, Jesus also teaches them what their attitude toward prayer should be. It comes down to tenacity. They are to be tenacious in their pursuit of God's attention.

For Jesus, prayer isn't a passive activity where we just receive, and it's not a mindless exercise of broadcasting our desires into the ether. Prayer is a way to wrestle with God, to challenge God to act. Jesus refuses to accept a world where injustice and suffering are simply part of the landscape and all we can do is accept things as they are. He calls his followers to stay engaged with God—to ask, to search, to knock. Jesus' words are rooted in Abraham's encounter with God. Both open up a third way that rejects passive acceptance and opting out of the relationship.

And for both the alternative is unacceptable. The alternative is a world where injustice is allowed to have the upper hand. The other day I listened to a lecture by the historian and scholar Jon Meachum at Chautauqua Institute. His topic was "the future of history." He discussed our current political situation as existential; we're at a crossroads where the future of democracy hangs in the balance. He believes many in the conservative right in the US are willing to sacrifice democracy out of devotion to a strongman. And it's up to moderates and the left to protect democratic principles. The problem is a lot of folks on the left are also disillusioned with the limits of democratic government. If the left decides to disengage and hand over the future to a radical rightwing, our future as a country will be pretty bleak. We can't just accept things passively and we dare not walk away from the fight. When someone asked later what's the incentive to stay engaged, he said the alternative is much worse if we choose to do nothing.

Both Abraham and Jesus refused to accept a world where injustice and violence, or rather injustice through violence, is allowed to rule. And Jesus insists to his followers that they have a role to play in changing things. In part that was expressed in their excursions through the countryside where they went proclaiming the good news and healing. And in part it has to do with how they pray. Prayer that's too timid to engage God and call God to account may be a waste of our time, and of God's. When Abraham called God on the carpet he didn't mince words about what behavior he believed is acceptable for God, and neither should we.

That may sound a little too bold to you. It sounds dangerous to approach God that way. Or it might seem disrespectful. I think it is dangerous, as Abraham seems to show. But it's also a way of taking God's role in the world seriously, a way of taking our relationship to God seriously. If God really matters, if God's vision for us revealed through Torah and Jesus'

ministry matters, then standing up for justice and compassion is worth the risk. Staying engaged with God is worth the risk.

The question for us is, do we have the courage it takes to stand for the things that matter to God? Do we have the courage to keep asking and searching and knocking and refusing to be ignored? Every time we stand with people who are vulnerable, with people who are in need, with people who are targeted for hatred, we are asking, searching, knocking at the door for justice and compassion to prevail. If we don't keep at it through our actions and our prayers, who will be there for them? Who will speak for those in our world most at risk if we give up? What kind of world will we have if we fail to stay engaged?

That's why Abraham was so bold in calling God to account. It's why Jesus insists his disciples be tenacious in their prayers. And now, it's up to us. God's vision of compassion and justice can only be realized through us. Have courage, be tenacious, and let God know you're ready to be used to change the world.

Amen