

One of the most important claims of the Bible, I think, is in the opening verses of Creation. God, or “Creator” or “Source,” whatever name makes sense to you, after each day of creation, calls what was made “Good.” The adjective chosen by the writer of the Creation Story is not “perfect,” not excellent, not perfectly fair... but “Good!”

I have a good friend that likes to say, well if “I” created the world, if I were God, I surely would have done a few things differently! Natural selection and survival of the fittest... I suppose they have some purpose, but it just doesn’t seem fair that lions can take down just about anything in the jungle, and that tiny viruses can take down hundreds of thousands of humans, It’s just doesn’t seem fair!

We have had many instances of sickness in our church community, and we have other friends and family that are dealing with physical maladies. And then when you add emotional stresses such as fear and anxiety, or even hatred and violence, it get’s just too much to bear, and it is natural to say “get me off this treadmill!” It is also natural to ask why, why, why?! We remember that Jesus himself said “My God, My God, WHY hast thou forsaken me?”

And we might ask “Why ME?” I’ll never forget a church member of long ago who contracted ALS, Lou Gehrig’s disease, the weakening of all muscles so that in her last days, she held a pen or pencil in her mouth to type on her computer or move her motorized wheelchair. People wondered if she asked “Why ME?” Her steady and response was Why NOT me? Spiritual writer Joyce Rupp says she finds comfort in thinking that “a form of my experience also happens to others.” Recognizing our common humanity, this is not just happening “to me alone.”

I do believe there is a certain amount of randomness in the world, the element of chance. From Viruses to tornadoes to cancer to car accidents, I cannot believe that every particle movement in the universe is scripted with some sort of blueprint. That would make God a puppeteer with all of creation; it would imply that animal and human beings are puppets or marionettes of sorts. But we surely have much freedom an agency in this

world. More than one teacher or life coach has said that's what's important is "not what happens to us, but how we respond!" We are free to stay in the mire and muck of complaint and despair; we are also free to find reasons for gratitude in whatever circumstance we find ourselves.

Let me get to the Christian scripture in this Sunday's cycle of readings... perhaps a lesser known story, but important enough to record for the early Christians. You've all heard the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Enoch in the book of Acts???? Just kidding... I had to refresh my memory and do a little research myself! Even Philip, as one of disciples, is not spoken of much. But it seems that Philip had evangelical zeal, introducing everybody to Jesus He personally brought his friend Nathanael to Jesus and they became followers; he brought some Greeks to meet Jesus, and in this story, he introduces an Ethiopian to Jesus. So why is this story important? One reason is that it underscores the incredible diversity and universal outreach of the early Christian mission.

First of all, the guy in the chariot was an Ethiopian in a royal entourage. They had traveled up from Northern Africa, east of Egypt, to worship at the Jerusalem Temple. Apparently the Jewish faith and temple worship did attract people from all over. Some converted and some were called "God-fearers." The Ethiopian was undoubtedly very dark skinned. AND he was also a "eunuch." We know that means he was rendered sterile, in order for him to be a servant in the royal court, in charge of the treasury actually, and it is likely that eunuchs were also servants to royal harems. I think that although he had a good job, regarding the requirements for the job, he could easily cry "Unfair!" The Ethiopian eunuch was in many ways marginalized, a non-gendered or neutered person, fit only to be a loyal servant in the Queen's court, and according to Jewish law (Deuteronomy 23.1) he was probably not allowed in the temple where his group went to worship.

But there is Good News in the story. When the disciple Philip is guided by the Holy Spirit to go over to the Ethiopian's chariot, the good news of Jesus' inclusive love begins! The Ethiopian was reading the Jewish

scriptures, (Yes, a “God-fearer” or we could say a “God-seeker.) And he was reading from the prophet Isaiah Chapter 53, about a messiah or savior who would be like a sheep led to slaughter, like a lamb silent before his shearer, one for whom justice was denied, also called the “suffering servant.” The eunuch surely would have identified with the position of being a suffering servant...

Yet the promise of the prophet and the example set by Jesus years later is that the suffering servant is also the one who can save, can heal, can lead with new kinds of victories. Philip, the disciple-evangelist is said to have told him all about Jesus, one who was humiliated, denied justice, led to his death, but went through it all with a spirit of overcoming, a spirit of steadfast love and life that could never be extinguished. The Ethiopian eunuch was so moved by the promises of Isaiah and the stories of Jesus that he spontaneously said “let me become a follower of this Jesus; there’s some water, is there reason why I could not join and be baptized into this community?”

We could echo his question: What is to prevent me from being baptized, or being part of Jesus’ community? What is to prevent people on the margins from inclusion in God’s spirit? What is to prevent gender non-conforming brothers and sisters from full participation? Laws of the temple? Laws in society? Attitudes in the institutional church? Inner pain or shame? Doubts? As Paul once said, What in all creation could possibly separate us from the love of God? Unfortunately, there is way too much fear of difference in this world. Fears that lead to ostracizing, excluding even acting with hostility or violence to keep people separate.

The first letter of John is so clear that “God IS LOVE,” and that there is no fear in love, that “love casts out fear!” So when we feel life is unfair due to sickness, natural disasters, or interpersonal problems, we can hold fast to the promise that Love does cast out fear, and that Love shows up as Goodness and kindness, that God declared all of creation Good! We can infer that Good IS stronger than evil, that love IS stronger than hate,

that love is stronger even than death, since it is the eternal quality the divine quality that never is extinguished.

The Ethiopian eunuch went away with new found love and joy! He found love and inclusion from Philip and from the identification with Christ as also a suffering servant. And that sense of being love and included was also the experience of grace and joy of starting a whole new life, starting with the decision use waters of baptism to symbolize new life with Christ. It is probable that he was one of the founders of the Ethiopian orthodox church, as he spread his joy.

Of course we lament that Life is not fair; we groan and complain about injustices and ask Why Me? ... and there is much value in the honesty of lament, much healing in letting loose some tears and grief.... *"We need a God who knows about pain,"* professor Barbara Brown Taylor writes. *"We need a God who knows about pain... The cross teaches us that God's power is not the power to end all pain. It is, instead, the power to pick up shattered pieces and make something holy out of them."* As people of faith we will always ask: where do I see a glimmer of hope, a flicker of light, an expression of love? In late April and early May, rail-trail walkers are greeted with one of the first signs of Spring, the yellow daffodils. The mystic Julian of Norwich had her share of physical maladies and feelings the isolation of monastic life, yet she made these verses about yellow daffodils representing divine Love, Love as Lord of all, Love as God.

*LOVE, like a yellow daffodil is coming through the snow.*

*LOVE, like a yellow daffodil is Lord of all I know.*

*Ring out, bells of Norwich, and let the winter come and go!*

*All will be well again, I know!*

Life is unfair, there is always suffering in life, but God is Good and called Creation "Good." With Isaiah, we echo that we have a Savior who was "well acquainted with grief." And with Psalm 23, we echo that "surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life."