

God . . . Presently

Prevenient Grace: God with Us

I believe that God is with us. It is in this very basic belief that I have geared this essay. There are three main aspects of this essay that I find vitally important. First, *God with us* redefines God in a way that is meaningful and powerful for a world hungering for acceptance, forgiveness and justice. Second, we are happening upon a new millennium. In the last millennium, the definition of God was challenged by many events. However, the event that challenged our definitions of God was (and still is the Holocaust). We come to a crossroads, as believers; to look back at the road we have traveled and are critical about how we see God's future for us. Third, *God with us* is a theological notion, which, in its essence, tries to be liberative. Its task is to bring together the Christian components of faith in the light of human suffering and Earth's groaning. Throughout the essay, I refer to *God with us* as a "construct" in light of these four important aspects.

The resources for this essay happen to follow John Wesley's 'quadrilateral'. Scripture seen in the light of *God with us* takes its lead from those who are forgotten and ignored in our society. When we take into account that God is with the *whole* of creation, our interpretation of Scripture changes. The Christian tradition, through the centuries, has become a nurturing point for creeds and doctrines in the varieties of Christian experience of faith. Reason is the appreciation of *God with us* in our freedom of thought. Reason allows the Christian to embrace the multitude of people and beliefs, so that justice and equality is raised. Experience plays a vital role in this construct. We must see that we are all in need of liberation. *God with us* allows for an open opportunity for God to walk with us in our suffering and jump with us in our joy. The experience of those on the margins harkens to us that God is with others as well. "The presence of God is never in question. What is doubtful is our attention to the struggle of God in which we stand. God is not removed from human beings. Yet God in being present to us is constantly 'hurt'. This provokes the act of God's non-violent 'self-defense' in atonement with its consequent justification. The usurpers of God's power are 'righted'-- in spite of themselves, for God shares in their vulnerability. No act of reunion needs to precede our God-walk. God's power is life-energy, moist and verdant like grass in the spring. Usurping it we dry up. Living by it we involve ourselves in justice-making."¹ The experience of North Americans in the twentieth century has been an experience, for those in power especially, of covering our eyes to injustice economically, ecologically, physically, spiritually and psychologically. *God with us* must aid in the uncovering and opening of the eyes and ears to those on our continent and in our world who are suffering and are hurting.

The setting of this construct is at God's Eucharist table. The sharing of God's-self at the table should see humans as equals because God shared God's-self in creation, on the cross, and in our world. The sharing at the table means solidarity between the wealthy and the poor and the powerful and the powerless — God empowers all of us at the table in the sharing of God's-self. The Eucharist table embraces the rampant economic poverty in the world, the rise of HIV/AIDS in wealthy and impoverished countries, the growth of militarism, the raising of boundaries, and the capricious care of

¹ Herzog, Frederick. *God-Walk: Liberation Shaping Dogmatics*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988, p. 122.

the earth. The poor, the diseased, the tortured, the victims, and the forgotten come together at the table to partake of the body and blood of God in Jesus Christ, the One of redemption, reconciliation and justice.

God's Image and Prevenient Grace

After almost six thousand years of monotheism, nations and many peoples have come to understand the view of one God as sovereign. The Assyrians, Greeks and Romans would have liked to lay claim to such an involved and rich history of religious activity. Jews, Christians and Muslims alike have worked toward formulating governments and structures in order to urge their constituents that God is a sovereign God. Ultimately, we must look to individual and social images of God in our midst to help us define the Divinity that reigns in, through, above, below, within, without, near and/or far.

This is where the fullness and variety of images of God help us to know that we are not alone in our specific interpretation of God. There are those in our world that believe that one God, the creator of all life is sufficient. God is viewed by some as the entirety of creation, most inclusively nature and its creatures. While others view God as spirit weaving in and out of this world from cosmos to soil, transcending the parameters of humanity. Still others hold a Trinitarian view of God in that God is together wholly 'other', carefully linked by a common thread of love. Some believe that God in this Trinitarian view is mother, lover, and friend. We must respond to the God of the Exodus and the temple, the God of Job, Jonah and Isaiah, and the God of Jesus and Paul. By vocation and simply being, our belief in something beyond ourselves aids our living out of the experiences of our lives.

Our theological construct of *God with us* maintains a God that is in community with God's-self and God's Creation, which is, in essence, the Trinitarian aspect of God. God continues to add to creation. Jesus Christ continues to liberate creation. The Holy Spirit continues to sustain creation and those in need of liberation, that is, *all* of us. "*The God in Christ we worship through the Holy Spirit as triune God comes to us in lowly corporateness. God moves in nature and history as social self that struggles with every creature.*"² Within nature and history, as insists Herzog, if *God with us* is true, then God suffers with us, God is joyous with us, God is in fear with us.

God's presence is with us even before we recognize God. This presence is God's free gift to us. Remember Psalm 23:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

[The LORD] makes me lie down in green pastures;

[The LORD] leads me beside still waters;

[The LORD] restores my soul.

[The LORD] leads me in right paths for [The LORD's] name's sake

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

for you are with me; your rod and your staff—

they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

² Herzog, p. 77.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.³

God with us is so evident in this psalm of praise and recognition. This prevenient grace is at work in the life of the psalmist as it is in our lives. Wesley describes the “grace that comes before us” in one of his earlier sermons, “Free Grace.”

“The grace or love of God, whence cometh our salvation, is free in all and free for all. First, it is free in all to whom it is given. It does not depend on any power or merit in [humankind]; no, not in any degree, neither in whole, nor in part. It does not in any wise depend either on the good works or righteousness of the receiver; not on anything [the person] has done, or anything [the person] is. It does not depend on [the person’s] endeavors. It does not depend on [the person’s] good tempers, or good desires, or good purposes and intentions; for all these flow from the free grace of God . . . Thus is [God’s] grace free in all, that is, no way depending on any power or merit in [humankind], but on God alone.”⁴

God walks with us freely. Joyfully or sorrowfully, God is with us! Thank be to God!

What about suffering and pain? Suffering and liberation are the human’s call and God’s response, respectively, to activity on earth. “God does not will injustice. Furthermore, inasmuch as God suffers with the oppressed, God suffers oppression and injustice.”⁵ The reality of suffering makes real the righteousness of God and the sinfulness of humanity. Therefore, we are called to respond directly to God as God remains with us. Frederick Herzog gives two senses of God’s own suffering: 1) God suffers through humanity and 2) God suffers for humanity.⁶ God’s act of justice and God’s act of love, respectively, is the end result of this nuance of divine suffering. God’s suffering through humanity struggles with injustice and oppression with us to bring about justice. God says in Exodus: “I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings.”⁷ God’s suffering for humanity is recalled each time we partake of the Eucharist. “This is *my* body, which is given for *you* . . . This cup that is poured out for *you* is the new covenant in *my* blood.”⁸ *God with us* takes shape in suffering and in liberation.

The Problem with an Absolute God After the Holocaust and the God with Us Theodicy

As stated above, the Holocaust changed the way people thought about an all-powerful and all-knowing God. It is important to ask this theodicy question because of its relevance, not only after the Holocaust, but the terrorist attacks in Africa, Israel and in the United States. We must be challenged by our past but never urged to repeat it, as the cliché goes. In his book, *The Gifts of the Jews*, Thomas Cahill wrote of human history:

The past is no longer important just because it can be mined for exemplars but because it has brought us to the present: it is the first part of our journey, the journey of our ancestors. So in retelling their life stories, we have a serious

³ from the *New Revised Standard Version, (NRSV)*. Inclusive language used in the essayist’s translation.

⁴ Wesley, John, “Free Grace” in Albert C. Outler & Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991, p. 50.

⁵ González, Justo. *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990, p. 93.

⁶ Herzog, pp. 69, 72, respectively.

⁷ Exodus 3:7, *NRSV*.

⁸ Luke 22:19, 20; italics added, *NRSV*.

obligation to get their histories straight. We are not merely creating literature: we are retelling a personal story that really happened and that has helped to make us the people that we are.⁹

The stories of our past shape our everyday life. These soliloquies give prudence to common cultural literacy by which humankind lives. Where does God fit into these stories? How do the stories reflect God? What was God doing while this certain part of history was being made?

Growing up I listened to the history and watched movies but never had I tried to fully comprehend the massacre. Never had I reached back into my mind to try to comprehend the carnage. Never had I ever thought about the people who were behind the murders. So out of my anger and disbelief I solicit God for the answer to my questions: where were you? Why weren't you helping those in the concentration camps? Where are you now? Still angry I turn on the television and hear about the war crimes committed in Yugoslavia, Bosnia, China, and the list goes on, I ask the same questions of God. I do not want to find any answers, I want to be able to say, as the man among the rubble of Auschwitz, "I cannot understand what happened yet I still believe in God."

"When the 'transports' arrived, a small percent of the victims were selected to be worked to death in chemical and other factories built nearby. The rest of the men, women, and children, stripped of their clothing were rushed with whips, dogs, and gunshots to 'shower rooms.' Nazi dignitaries watch the gassing through peepholes. Rings and gold fillings of the corpses were removed, women's hair cut off for industrial uses, and the bodies cremated or buried in nearby woods, often by squads of Jewish prisoners who were later killed."¹⁰ How can an absolute God sit back and watch such a carnage take place? Where was God in Auschwitz? Did an absolute God know what was going on at Auschwitz? Is God Absolute? Charles Hartshorne in *Divine Relativity* states: "If God is purely absolute, then the being which [God] enjoys simply in [God's]self is [God's] *only* being, and if this cannot be known, then it seems we can know nothing or think *nothing* of God, either as [God] is in [God's]self or not as [God] is in [God's]self."¹¹ There are three main aspects for a better understanding of a non-absolute God: God as suffering with us, God as compassion, and God giving freedom.¹²

The object of suffering is a gripping one for both Jews and Christians. Suffering, of course, is one of life's underlying understandings, even as Job came to understand it. As a human being, suffering is being without joy. One cannot truly understand that he or she is suffering unless he or she has been fully immersed in joy. Since we are created *imago dei*, the human being must realize the full power of emotion that lies in this way of thinking. If we are suffering, isn't God? This means that God is in motion with us. Obviously, I am trying to avoid a dualistic sense of the Divine; in that, somehow God

⁹ Cahill, Thomas. *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels*. New York: Doubleday, 1998, p.129.

¹⁰ Seltzer, Robert M. *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980, p. 670.

¹¹ Hartshorne, Charles. *Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1948, p. 15.

¹² See: Jonas, Hans. "The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice" in *Jewish Theology and Process Thought* by Sandra B. Lubarsky and David Ray Griffin. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1996.

watches the events that take place because being created in the image of God does not mean that we *are* God. “Clearly, God, to be God, must surpass all other beings. But God need not be conceived of statically to be superior, for it is logically possible that God can be self-surpassing. Moreover, if God is static and not evolving, unable to experience care and concern for others, a concerned human being would be ethically superior to God!”¹³ One can only try to explain in their limited human language how to explain the phenomena of God. The question in this essay is not to find deep theological answers to the existence of God, presumed; the crux of this portion of this essay is to try to explain the events leading up to and during the Holocaust with a world view consisting of a loving, living God. Elie Wiesel reminds us of an ever-present God in *Night*. After the hanging of children at the gallows a prisoner looking on to the torture of these children asks: “Where is God now?” The answer Wiesel gives is “[God] is hanging here on this gallows . . .”¹⁴

How is it that a loving and living God makes no change in the events of the Holocaust? As above in the previous paragraph, God must be aware of suffering but cannot change that which humans decide to do (no matter the horror), thus, the belief God suffers *with* us but also God *transcends* suffering. God is a God of compassion. “This caring God is not a sorcerer who in the act of caring also provides the fulfillment of His concern: he has left something for other agents to do and thereby has made His care dependent on them. He is therefore also an endangered God, a God who runs a risk. Clearly that must be so, or else the world would be in a condition of permanent perfection.”¹⁵ In order to be fully compassionate, one must be empathetic to the situation. Empathy yields understanding. God must be a very empathetic God to transcend that suffering. “Love, defined as social awareness, taken literally, is God. It is much more true that we are socially unaware that we are socially aware, and that by an infinite ratio. God is socially aware—period.”¹⁶ Human beings are flawed so when we can recognize that the Divine is right in front of us, God is in front of us.

A God aware of suffering and a God that is fully compassionate must give humankind the freedom to make choices in and through our existence. God chooses to walk with us in times of celebration and trial, joy and suffering. The God’s choice is not random; it is rather a conscious decision. “Far from the beginning where necessity ends, freedom consists of and lives in pitting itself against necessity. Separated from it, freedom loses its object and becomes as void as force without resistance. Absolute freedom would be empty freedom that cancels itself out.”¹⁷ This is also the case with humankind’s freedom. If humans were born without the freedom to choose, they would just be robots. But what is so invigorating is that God has granted humans the freedom to choose. In the freedom God gave, God relinquishes God’s-self from the human’s choice. God therefore is moved by the decisions humankind makes. What a compassionate God! Grace that is with us from the beginning to the end is grace moved by humans’ choice and humans’ need. The hope is that *God with us* is recognized as part of humanity’s existence with a partner God.

¹³ Kaufman, William E. “The Evolving God in Jewish Process Theology” in *Jewish Studies*, Volume 17. Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997, pp. 116-117.

¹⁴ Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Bantam, NY, 1960, p. 103.

¹⁵ Jonas, p. 150.

¹⁶ Hartshorne, p. 36.

¹⁷ Jonas, p. 151.

Martin Luther King Jr. knew the goodness of God in the midst of struggle. Dr. King also knew that God's love was freely given to all people. In this theological construct of *God with us*, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s political life and belief system becomes the North American person's template for theological practice. King brought a new understanding of suffering in the United States to the forefront; he utilized the power of his pulpit and the plight of his people to open eyes and ears to the injustice suffered by the African American communities across the United States. King brought a theology of liberation to praxis in many ways. It is in this model of King that we can certainly see the power of *God with us*, even in our suffering. The statement below is inspirational for an understanding of *God with us*.

“At times we need to know that the Lord is a God of justice. When slumbering giants of injustice emerge in the earth, we need to know that there is a God of power who can cut them down like the grass and leave them withering like the green herb. When our most tireless efforts fail to stop the surging sweep of oppression, we need to know that in this universe is a God whose matchless strength is a fit contrast to the sordid weakness of [humanity]. But there are also times when we need to know that God possesses love and mercy. When we are staggered by the chilly winds of adversity and battered by the raging storms of disappointment and when through our folly and sin we stray into some destructive far country and are frustrated because of a strange feeling of homesickness, we need to know that there is Someone who loves us, cares for us, understands us, and will give us another chance. When days grow dark and nights grow weary, we can be thankful that our God combines in [God's] nature a creative synthesis of love and justice which will lead us through life's dark valleys and into sunlit pathways of hope and fulfillment.”¹⁸

¹⁸ King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Strength to Love*, “A tough mind and a tender heart.” Philadelphia: PA: Fortress Press, 1981, p. 20.