

God of the Tollbooth, God of the Road

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Texts: Psalm 22

God of the Tollbooth, God of the Road

Beloved ones, it is so good to be with you this morning, in person and online. I hope you're all safe and cozy where you are in the midst of this first big snowstorm of the season – a little smaller than we thought, maybe, but still! Thanks be to God that in the midst of it all, the weather can still remind us of our right size, and the Earth can still remind us of her power.

Please, will you pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be acceptable to you, oh God, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

This morning, we continue with our sermon series on big questions. So far, we've explored Jesus' humanity and divinity, why church is important in these times, why choose this church, and last week, Mike preached about the concept of atonement – how could a loving God send his son to death on the cross, and how on earth does that relate to saving us from our sins? You all are full of good questions! And hard questions! The people of God, and the people of First Church are a question-asking people, amen? A curious people. A thirsty people. A mystery people.

And today's question is no different. It's a big one. And it's been one that's haunted those of us who love God and live in this broken and beautiful world for generations. Our question asker wrote, if "God is good, all the time," why does God heal or relieve some, while allowing others to suffer? You know, simple stuff. An easy question for a snowy Sunday. A layup, really.

But truly, this question gets right to the heart of the thing. It's a question that was asked over and over by our spiritual ancestors – it's the agony and bewilderment that led David to write Psalm 22, which we heard just an excerpt of this morning – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It's this same Psalm, which must have been known by heart by many Jews in Jesus' time, that Jesus moans from the cross, captured, bleeding, and suffering for all to see. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Where are you, God? If you love us, how could you let this happen?

As Jesus' life shows us, it's the most natural thing in the world to cry out to God in the midst of our suffering – when tech bros armed with AI are infiltrating our government, when we are struck with a heavy burden of depression that nothing seems to lift, when we are far away and the cruelty of war ravages our home... when we survive the cancer but our sister is taken far too soon, when Gazan children starve as the world watches, when the pregnancy so longed for is lost, when a plane full of people falls from the sky, when we need to parent our glorious trans child in a society that denies the truth of their identity. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

This question gets to the heart of an ancient paradox: three seemingly irreconcilable points on a triangle. Imagine with me. One point of the triangle holds the truth that suffering exists. It is real. Pain is real, and war is real, and cruelty is real, and privilege is real, and life doesn't seem to measure in fairness. Suffering exists. Evil exists. Life can be unfair and hard.

Another point of the triangle holds the conviction that God is good and wants the best for us. We proclaim this when we say that “God is good all the time,” and when we address God as loving, as our parent. We remember this each week during the confession and the declaration of

forgiveness – that even with all of our faults and foibles and collective sins, God loves us unconditionally, sees the best in us, and calls that forth. We are renewed and recommitted to doing justice and loving mercy through God’s love for us. God is good and wants the best for us.

And the third point of the triangle holds the belief that God is all-powerful. This one is a deep one – we call God “almighty,” and in the narrowest places, when it seems all is lost, we raise up pleas for God to intervene. When, as the Psalm says, “trouble is near and there is no one to help,” we call out to God from the depth of our guts – HELP, PLEASE, GOD, HELP.

How can all three of those things be true at the same time? God loves us and wants the best for us, and God is all-powerful, yet suffering and evil exist. It’s hard to reconcile.

It’s that last point on the triangle – the belief that God is all-powerful – where we get into some trouble, I think, because of how we tend to understand power. If we imagine God as the ultimate CEO, managing and orchestrating all of our lives, then the reality of some people suffering horribly while others don’t make God into a mercurial and vindictive boss. If we imagine God’s power as singular, emanating from a single source full of willpower, if we imagine God as having the power to ordain someone’s suffering and another person’s wellbeing, to decide whether to prevent atrocities or to allow them to continue, then at best God is aloof and at worst God can be cruel and unfair.

Beloveds, GOD is a word that our beautiful and complex and limited human minds put on a great, vast mystery. And those limited human minds of ours, in imagining how life force moves, how grace works, in reckoning with the wonder and the brokenness of this Earth home of ours, tend to limit God. We make God smaller and more human-like when we

imagine that God's power functions like that of a CEO, or a monarch, or like an all-seeing teacher. We shrink God's power into something we can more easily understand.

I got an email this week from a faithful and beloved unofficial member of our church who attends church online regularly. He wrote to share a story that he had lived that week, and he gave his permission for me to share it with you this morning. Driving on the highway last week after the winter dark had descended, in the bleak cold of a New England February night, our friend found himself in the cash only lane of the highway toll. Now, those lanes are few and far between, and I imagine on that night there might have been one, maybe two toll attendants out there in the night, surrounded by the white flash of E-Z Passes next to them, opening their windows only occasionally when a car chose the Cash option. You can imagine how isolated, cold, and dark that job is on a February night.

Our friend pulled his car up to the tollbooth window and, greeting the attendant, asked, "how has your day gone?" The man responded, "not very well." Our friend asked him if he would say more, and after a pause, he responded, "my niece and her daughter were killed in the plane that crashed into the Potomac River yesterday." They paused there together in a fellowship of silence. Our friend asked the man's name, and he shared it. I imagine that they held each other's gaze for a moment. And our friend let him know that he and his family would be in his prayers and in his heart throughout the next days. It was so hard to drive away from the tollbooth, he said, after sharing a moment like that.

Beloveds, I share this story with you today because I believe it helps us reimagine how God's power might function. Our God is not a God who ordains or allows the crash of a plane full of beloved human beings. Our God is not a God who sits back like a moody ruler and allows one plane to go down while another lands safely. God's power isn't as singular as that,

as if held by one all-seeing omnipotent human being. Instead, our God is a God who meets us on the road, in the dark loneliness of a winter's night, and dwells with us in our suffering. Our God is a God who makes a space of love and possibility between two strangers wherein compassion and connection can grow. Our God is a God who weeps with us, mourns with us, and who makes a way of love and connection and resilience and possibility when all seems lost. This doesn't mean that our suffering ends, or that the brutality and injustice of the world dissolves. It means that God functions in mysterious and unpredictable ways, like mycelial fungal networks underground, like a flock of birds responding to each other's micro-movements as they swarm together into something much larger, like weeds blooming strong through the cracks in concrete, like networks of people organizing to protect their immigrant neighbors from ICE, like a neighbor shoveling an elderly neighbor's sidewalk. God in the cracks, God in the midst of it all.

When we imagine God's power in human terms, we can also slip into a narrative that our relationship with God is transactional. This one is deep in me, and I imagine in many of us sweet souls raised in the context of the Protestant work ethic – if we work hard enough, if we are good, we will keep our standing in God's sight and God will reward us with good things. It's as if God is the tollbooth attendant, collecting our payment of goodness or kindness or self-sacrifice or hard work, and allowing us to continue unimpeded on the road of life. It follows that if something bad happens to us, then we must not have paid a high enough toll to God – we must not have been good enough in God's sight.

But we know life doesn't work that way, and God doesn't work that way. We proclaim each week that God loves us fully, even when we fail to live up to what we know is possible. Life delivers the diagnosis whether we've been good our whole lives or not. The regime changes and suddenly our life's work, and the wellbeing of so many people we have sought to

serve, is jeopardized by some teenagers with computers. It's not as if those suffering and starving in Gaza and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo didn't pay their toll of goodness, of faith to God. There is no rhyme or reason to the suffering that life delivers, no way of making sense of why some people are caught in the crossfire and others are safe, why some people get sick and others stay well, why someone's beloved child gets to thrive while another dies.

But that doesn't mean that God is absent, just that God's power might be working in a different way than we have been able to imagine. Because God does not ordain or allow our suffering. God is not a tollbooth operator, collecting our toll. But God is there at the tollbooth each night, making space for two strangers to meet heart to heart in the rawness of life.

Our God is there on the road with us, in the cold dark of a winter night. Our God is beside us at the hospital bed of the friend who will not live, weeping with us, wringing us out with grief and a praise song of love. Our God was in the songs and the footsteps of enslaved people as they ran towards freedom. Our God is in the courage of every soldier who finds the courage to speak out about what is happening in their names. Our God is in the streets with us, shouting and drumming and dancing and weeping for change and justice. Our God is in the flock of geese that I saw yesterday on a walk, calling to each other to stay connected as they cut through the air, attuned to each other's movements, and our God is also in the single goose that follows five minutes later, calling out to the others to say "I am here! I am coming!" Our God is in the wave that overtakes the shore, and in the butterfly that flapped its wings half a planet away to gather that wave. Our God is our collaborator, powerful and wild and surprising.

And so beloveds, this week, as we continue to live as best we can in this broken and beautiful world, faced with our own suffering and the onslaught of the news of others' suffering, let us dare to feel God's

presence in the cracks, on the dark road with us, reaching out a hand or many hands, not to receive our payment and mete out a reward or a consequence, but to offer love and courage and power and partnership in facing all that we face in this life, to offer a way where we might not have seen one before. God's power WITH us. Amen.

