

Steve Jungkeit
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Text: Isaiah 40: 1, 11, 27-31
April 26, 2020

“God Does Not Kill: A Sermon in the Time of Corona”

Here’s a story that I recall sharing with some of you a long time ago, but it’s one that’s taken on renewed significance during this crisis. About twenty-five years ago I made my first visit to the Middle East when I took part in a three-week travel seminar to Israel and Palestine. While I was there, I had the chance to meet Father Elias Chacour, whose book *Blood Brothers* had been required reading for the seminar. Chacour will be familiar to many of you – he’s spoken from the pulpit here in Old Lyme, and our Tree of Life journeys have often visited his school in Ibillin. But he was new to me at the time, and I was impressed with his decades long attempt to win a reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis. When his talk was over, he signed copies of his book. Nearly everyone in my seminar waited to have him sign their own copies, and in each one, he inscribed the same message. “God does not kill,” he wrote, and then signed his own name.

After the talk, members of our group boarded a bus, where a heated dialogue broke out. It seemed that Father Chacour’s inscription was challenging to some among us. They were rather devout readers of the Bible, and for them, that phrase, “God does not kill” contradicted some of the most well-known stories in all of the Bible. Had not God wiped out the entire population of the earth in the story of the flood? Did God not bring down fire upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah? Did God not require the killing of animals – how many sheep and rams and doves were slaughtered in the Hebrew Bible? Did God not send plagues and pestilence among the Egyptian captors of the Hebrew slaves? Was Pharaoh’s army not drowned in the Red Sea? And wasn’t it true, according to a widespread and widely held theology, that God didn’t even spare his own Son, but sacrificed him in order to redeem human beings? For a few of the people in that college seminar, a cursory reading of the Bible revealed all they needed to know: God killed all the time, over and over again. Sure, it was extreme, but killing was simply a part of God’s repertoire of course correction and punishment against a wayward and often wicked population.

Still, Father Chacour’s phrase seemed indisputable. It was in keeping with what I knew to be true of Jesus himself, and it was in keeping with what I believed to be true about God as well, despite the way those old stories portrayed God. And though I wasn’t able to articulate it back then, after some courses in biblical interpretation and theology, it wasn’t hard to put forth a different understanding of the Bible, one in which ideas of God developed and grew over time. If in Jesus we come to understand something of what God is like, who, after all, submits to being killed rather than inflicting it, and who forgives his killers from the cross rather than smiting them dead, then it becomes possible to reread all the earlier stories of divine violence as records of a community struggling to understand what divinity means, and opening themselves to new insights as they proceeded. That’s one of the implications of the 40th chapter of Isaiah, which we heard a little earlier. It’s the seed of an imagination that will grow over several centuries, where

God comforts, but does not kill, where God holds the world, rather than punishing it, and where God enters the world as a participant, accompanying human life, rather than standing at a distant remove. “God does not kill” - it was also a crucial insight that helped me to crack open my understanding of God, that helped me to reread the Bible in a new way, and that helped me to bend theology away from accounts of divine violence, toward an understanding of divine mercy and divine accompaniment. Elias Chacour was instrumental in that journey for me, and I’m grateful that several years ago, I got to tell him so when our Tree of Life delegation met with him.

I share that story because it represents a tension that many people of faith have felt within themselves during this sojourn through the time of Covid-19. I’ve heard a few folks in our community give expression to it: why is God doing this, they ask. Others among us have moved into a different understanding of God, but in a moment of crisis such as this, we sometimes revert to an earlier understanding of God, one that still lives in our unconscious somewhere, or deep in our guts. Might it be, we wonder, that God has visited this plague upon humanity? Might it be that God is testing us, or warning us, or punishing the world for some unknown transgression?

There are, of course, countless preachers out there who are quite certain about the transgression, and are quite happy to supply the remedy. One of the acute temptations among people of faith is to begin listening to those voices. They provide something we all crave in moments of crisis – to make sense of things, to find reasons, to justify. But the result is an accumulation of half-truths, clichés, and outright falsehoods. Pastors hear them all the time, and grieve all the more when people who are already suffering assume, somehow, that God is responsible for their trouble, paying them back for a real or imagined wrong, or is simply working out some divine inscrutable purpose. The classical biblical refutation of such thinking is found in the book of Job. When Job’s friends lead him to take inventory upon his own actions to see if an explanation for his suffering might be found, Job rightly responds: “Your maxims are proverbs of ashes, your defenses are defenses of clay” (Job 13: 12).

And so to the question of how or why God could allow an outbreak like this to occur, we must stand firm: God does not visit calamity upon individuals or populations to teach them lessons. God does not punish real or imagined slights by making people sick, or by spreading a plague. God does not kill. In answer, we respond that God has nothing to do with the spread of this virus. That has everything to do with biology, with epidemiology, and with global travel networks. But God might have everything to do with how we respond to the virus.

See if this makes sense to you – it’ll sound kind of dense for a second, but it’s important. In medieval theology, there was a distinction drawn from Aristotle, between primary and secondary causality. Primary causality is when one object acts upon another object: a gust of wind blows, a tree with weakening roots topples, and it does so in such a way that it clips the corner of a house. One thing leads to another, and then another, and so on. Or closer to our present situation: a protein molecule, a virus, is absorbed into a body through the mouth or the nose. Once in the body, it’s absorbed by cells, which then mutate into multiple aggressor cells that attack other healthy cells. The body responds internally, fighting off the attack, or succumbing to it. It’s a chain of biological reactions. That’s primary causality, and it’s as true of illness as it is of car accidents or weather patterns. One material element acts upon another, and it produces an effect. Primary

causality is the domain of the physical sciences, and we all do well to pay it careful attention.

Secondary causality is another domain entirely. It's where divinity, God, and faith come into the picture. The natural world operates according to the laws of causality, a virus runs its course, and disasters are visited upon the good and the bad alike. Faith, prayer, creation itself – these all have to do with attributing another order of signification to the course of things, to the bare material of human life, praying that beneath or perhaps within all that tragedy there is a mystery of love, a power of love. Life happens, but compassion and care happen as well, and they move us to respond. And in that response of love and care, God comes to be. It's not unlike the book of Genesis, where God takes preexisting matter and shapes it into a world with a word. In the same way, as people of faith, we're enabled to speak a word of love, a word of affirmation, a word of hope that creates a possibility where no possibility existed before, that creates a way where there previously was no way, that quite literally creates a world where there had not previously been a world. Secondary causality, then, introduces another level of signification into things, gives them a different meaning, and insists that life is so much more than the bare, cruel facts of nature. We're moved by the cry of pain, something calls to us from within that flux, and we respond. And there, in our response, God comes to be. God is the name of a gentle and persistent whisper of love, an insistence that calls forth a new world in the darkest of times, that makes life stable and bearable. Matter and nature exist. But God insists, as one of my favorite theologians puts it.¹

That's why arguments or so-called proofs about the existence of God always leave me cold, shrugging my shoulders with indifference. But demonstrations of God flood me with the assurance and conviction that God is real, that God is present, that God is with us. That's what I felt when I learned about Elias Chacour's work in Palestine and Israel, and his insistence that God does not kill. But it's also how I felt when I read about an order of nuns in Philadelphia during the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918. In October of that year, the Red Cross warned that there were not enough nurses in the city to take care of the sick, and so the Archbishop of Philadelphia put out a call for help. Some 2,000 nuns answered that call. They mobilized throughout the city and treated patients from across the city's stricken population: immigrants from all manner of countries, black families, Jewish families, and the city's poorest residents. They washed sheets, served food and medicine, and brought things to patients – most especially a comforting presence. Twenty-three of the sisters lost their lives as a result of their care. But most made it out alive, where they were later commended by the commissioner of health in Pennsylvania, who noted that, were it not for the care of the sisters, a good many more people would have died. "I have never seen a greater demonstration of real charity or self-sacrifice than has been given by the sisters," the commissioner said. The article concludes by noting that "the sisters quiet, determined selflessness is what is needed now... (as we are asked) to give up comfortable routines for the sake of the vulnerable, and (to help) patch over the constellation of individual holes in our ragged social safety net."²

¹ See John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

² See Kiley Bense, "We Should All Be More Like the Nuns of 1918," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2020.

As small but noisy groups begin to agitate for their own individual liberties, no matter the damage wrought, we need to remember the sisters of 1918 now more than ever. We need to remember their selflessness, and their willingness to use their own freedom for the sake of the vulnerable. And we need to remember that in such moments, God exists as a secondary cause in the world.

God does not kill. Not through accidents or natural disasters. Not through illnesses or plagues. God didn't bring Covid-19 into existence, and we're not going through this because God is accomplishing some occult purpose, known only to God. But God *is* with us – in every outstretched hand, in every kind word, in every selfless and generous act meant to help the vulnerable and afflicted. God exists as a comforting presence, strengthening the faint of heart, giving strength to the powerless, helping us to run without weariness, to walk without fainting, to mount up with wings like eagles.