

**“The God I Don’t Believe In (And the God I Do):
A Sermon on Nourishing our Theology”**

It was not what I was expecting to hear,
 Standing in line there at CVS with a birthday card for my mother,
 And my pint of milk, and a prescription for my son,
 But you have to pay attention, because theology happens everywhere.
 In this particular store the newspapers are stacked right next to the checkout lane,
 Meaning you can’t help but read them while you’re waiting.
 And so the four people ahead of me, all of our heads are cocked slightly
 To the right and tilted down as we read together the headline:
“Earthquake and Tsunami hits Japan; thousands feared dead.”
 This is still a day or two before the nuclear reactor crisis happens,
 Otherwise we would have been reading that, too,
 But this headline is enough; it’s enough to focus the five of us in line
 Despite the distraction of the peppy pop music coming from the store speakers,
 And the jumping, twirling children in the aisles,
 and the boxes of Easter chocolate waiting to be shelved.
 In other words, the headline is enough to focus us on how fragile,
 How accidental life can be at times.

And then the woman second from the front,
 sensing perhaps the need to editorialize,
 Says loud enough for all of us to hear:
Why does a God that is good let things like this happen?
 There is a pause, and then like popcorn around me,
 There are nods and murmurings of agreement – “mmm, hmmm” “yeah” “Yes”

And I know what you’re wondering; you’re wondering:
 What did you say, Nathan?
 Did you let them know there was a minister in line with them?
 Did you preach in CVS?!?
 And I hope you will not be disappointed when I tell you that I did not.
 Because, who am I to speak for God in line with my milk,
 My medicine, my birthday card?
 And really - who are any of us to speak, as in explain,
 why bad things happen to innocent people?
 Do any of us know, for sure?
 And so what I did was stand with those people around me
 And be a good listener for what was at the heart of their question,
 Their question asking why? Why God?

Those folks in line with me may not have known it,
 But they were asking an ancient question.
 And now I get to introduce us to a seminary word,

Because at the very least this sermon can help you with your Scrabble game.
 This word - are we ready? - that is called *'Theodicy,'*
Theo from the Greek meaning God, and *dicy* from the Greek meaning justice,
 As in, basically: God, it's time for you to explain yourself!
 As in: God, you need to justify why things happen!
 Why earthquakes? Why Tsunamis?
 Why tragedy? Why suffering? Why pain?
 The woman at CVS with me maybe didn't know it,
 but the question of theodicy,
 The question of believing in a good God in a broken world,
 was on her lips and in her heart,
 And she didn't and we don't need a seminary degree to think
 – here's another word – *Theologically.*
 Because pain makes theologians of us all.
 And now these are Barbara Brown Taylor's words,
 Whom I have been quoting from all year.
"Pain makes theologians of us all," she says.
"Because nothing questions our faith,
or our ability to manage our life, like pain.
And nothing makes us question the ultimate questions about the Holy
More than when we see pain or, especially, when we feel pain."

So, if you will permit me to say it, you who I know have many different
 Reactions in your pew when I say the word 'God,'
 Some of you leaning forward in anticipation, others of you leaning back,
 Leaning way back.
 I will tell you I have been thinking of God these last weeks,
 Watching with you the news of our brothers and sisters in Asia,
 Watching with you the news of our brothers and sisters all over the Middle East,
 And not watching, but remembering with you
 – as the flowers given in memory of Tommy Weaver today remind us –
 that this spring and summer
 Some of us are coming up on the first anniversaries of deep and hard loss.

I am watching and remembering all these,
 And I am standing in line in CVS with my other fellow-theologians,
 And I am thinking of my questioning and your questioning of the ultimate questions
 In the midst of the pain we see and feel.
 And so I am thinking of God.

And in thinking of God I find myself
 Going back in time to Our Lady of Lourdes,
 the Catholic parish of my childhood I have spoken of before,
 a wonderful parish in so many ways,
 A parish I am indebted to,
 But one that I remember chose to hang as it center's piece of sanctuary art
 A picture of that famous, let's say infamous, moment from the book of Genesis

When Abraham, father of Isaac, is instructed by God to take Isaac
 Up to the mountains and kill him as an offering.
 Abraham, distraught but wanting to show God
 that he trusts him completely, obeys.
 But just as Abraham is about to lift his knife,
 God sends an angel who tells him not to harm the boy,
 And to sacrifice a ram instead.

This is moment the picture captures
 – and now I want us to imagine a 15x10ft painting in front of the sanctuary –
 A painting of a baby-faced angel reaching out to stay Abraham's arm
 Just in the nick of time,
 Abraham's eyes full of pain and then relief,
 Isaac unaware of all that is going on
 Because he has his back to his father,
 And through the clouds, rays of sunlight shining down on the mountain,
 Down on Abraham's face, down on a now saved Isaac.

What kind of God asks such a thing?
 What kind of God is so insecure, so in need of fidelity and loyalty
 That God asks a man to sacrifice his only son?
 In so many words this is what I remember asking myself
 over the years as I sat in, kneeled in, and served as an altar boy in that church,
 The homilies of God's love being undermined week after week
 by the depiction of a God who was jealous and ready for violence.

I sometimes get asked, because it comes with the job:
What kind of God do you believe in?
 And sometimes my quick, slightly sarcastic response is:
Well, how about I tell you about the God I don't believe in!
 And then in my mind I point back to that painting in the
 Sanctuary of my childhood, saying:

I don't believe in a God who needs me to prove how much I believe!
 And I don't believe in a God up in the sky, peering at me
 Like some Peeping Tom watching my every move!
 And now just getting warmed up, now just getting started,
 Now imagining myself back in that CVS line preaching I say:

And, I don't believe in a God that is all powerful,
 Who manipulates the world and my life and your life
 according to how hard we pray.
 And I don't believe in a God who as punishment
 sets the plates of earth's crust moving
 And then sends walls of water over unsuspecting life.
 And I don't believe in a God that divides cells uncontrollably,
 Causing cancer so that patients and families

can learn some important life lesson.
 I don't believe in a God who gives us only what we can handle,
 Because that implies there are no accidents, no mistakes,
 No tragedies, no death too soon, that everything happens for a reason,
 That's its all part of a plan,
 And that I don't believe.
 And certainly I don't believe, or at least I hope it's not true,
 That there is a God who is hearing me say all this and is getting angry,
 Getting defensive, saying: who are you, Nathan?
 Who do you think you are?

But at some point our lives cannot be led,
 and our pain cannot be confronted,
 with statements about what we don't believe.
 This is especially true for many of us who have come here from other religions,
 Other creeds, and other descriptions of God we could not stomach.
 Because regardless of what we say we do not believe or cannot accept,
 at some point pain makes with us an appointment,
 and we will have a choice about how we will confront that pain,
 about whether we will spend our time waiting in CVS asking:
Why? Why God?
 Or whether we will spend our energy answering
 a different kind of theological question, which is *when?*
 As in: *When* pain occurs, what will I do?

And so these last weeks I have been on the lookout for those moments
 When I have seen people respond to pain,
 Curious about what is revealed there, wondering where the Holy is.

So with you I have watched these last weeks
 Our brothers and sisters and children in Tunisia, in Yemen,
 In Egypt, in Libya and elsewhere respond to the pain
 Of too little freedom, no voice, no jobs, and no prospects
 With protests, marching, sacrifice and resolve.
 I have seen the photos of the boys not much older than my 10-year-old
 Standing with their fathers in the squares, refusing to go home,
 Modeling in many places, save for Libya, the principles of non-violence
 Given us by Ghandi and King.
 And more than that, I have seen Twitter and Facebook and social media
 Spark more change in four weeks than all our bombs and soldiers,
 And all Al Qaeda's terrorism, have accomplished in ten years.
 With you I am not always certain of the God I can believe in,
 But if God is the spirit of freedom,
 If God is the spirit of liberation and emancipation,
 If God is the God not in that painting from my childhood,
 But the God that is the loosening of the bonds and the releasing of the captives,
 Then I am prepared to say it: I believe in God.

And with you I watched in horror the destruction from the earthquake
 And tsunami in Japan,
 With you I stood if not in CVS reading the headline
 then at our television screens
 telling us whole villages were gone, whole communities,
 whole generations of families.
 We watched, and are watching still, as they struggle to cool
 The nuclear reactor.
 And with you I am reading they have volunteers waiting in line, waiting in line!
 To risk their own lives to go near that reactor so that others may live.
 And then with you I am reading that no looting has occurred in this country
 Since the disaster.
 And with you I am watching people from around the world rally yet again
 To help a people in need.
 I am not always certain of the God I believe in
 But if God is the courage we have seen these people present in the face of fear,
 If God is putting others before oneself,
 If God is the miracle of people found alive these many days later in the rubble,
 Then I think I can say: I believe in God.

What is God? Where is God? Do you believe in God?
 I am asked this all time,
 And sometimes I am more certain of my doubts
 than I am of my affirmations.
 Is it enough to say I believe in grace? Is it enough to say I believe in love?
 Because I watch some of you reach out for love when you are in pain,
 I watch some of you reach out when it would be a lot easier to stay home,
 Stay inside, make the pain go away,
 numb it away with too much work or too much wine
 Or bad television or, yes, bad theology.
 We've all done that, it's fair to say.
 But then a friend calls, maybe one of your ministers calls,
 Maybe someone you were least expecting shows up at your door,
 Maybe a word is spoken that you most needed to hear,
 And suddenly love is there and you are - there is really no other word -
 You are saved, saved if not for forever,
 than at least saved in the moment, and that is enough.
 And while I still am not certain of the God I believe in,
 If God is love, if God is love given and received between people,
 Then I prepared to say it: I believe in God.

And if all this sounds like fuzzy theology to you,
 If against the uncertainties of life what you say you need from your religion
 And your church are firm answers,
 I hope you will know that I understand.
 That I understand it may not be enough for us to tell you there here in these walls

We seek to respond to the theology of Why God?
with the theology of When life happens, how will we live?
I understand that may not be enough.
I understand it may not be enough to tell you in the poet's words *that it doesn't
Matter here if you believe in one God or many Gods or no God,*
What I want know is: can you live in this world with its harsh need to change you.
But I hope it is.
I hope it is enough.
I hope it is enough in this world awaiting spring,
In this world asking: why do bad things happen?
In this world where need each other,
and that needs by way an answer all that we can give.

Say with me Amen. And blessed be.