

Josh Mangelson 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Carla Long 00:33

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host Carl Long and today you're listening to Percolating on Faith, where we talk about super, super, super smart things and I ended up feeling much smarter by the end of it. I don't know how you feel gentle listener, and I don't know how Tony and Charmaine feel by the end of it, but I feel smarter. So you're here with Charmaine and Tony Chvala-Smith. Hi, Charmaine. Hi, Tony.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 00:55

Hi, Carla. How are you today?

Carla Long 00:58

Good! It's so good to be with you. And today we'll be talking about protest theodicy and if you haven't listened to any of our other stuff on theodicy, as we've talked about your theodicy isn't theodicy and Augustinian theodicy. But today, well, before we jump into protests, theocracy, can you tell us what a theocracy? Is?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:19

You bet.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:19

Sure, sure.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:21

It's really important, because it's something we all do we all struggle with theodicy. And mainly what a theocracy is, is it's kind of a question, what is the relationship between God and the suffering and evil found in the world? That's kind of the primary question. And then we kind of broken that down into like four prongs of the question. So if you can probably identify times when you've asked these questions, why are suffering and evil so present in human experience and in the world? Why did God create a world in which suffering or evil are even possible? And what does this say about the nature of God? And this is one that probably is most familiar, why doesn't God protect us from evil and suffering? Or related to that? Where is God when we are suffering? And that last one is the main question when it comes to the theodicy we'll be looking at today, which is protests, the theodicy? Where is God when we are suffering? And so a theodicy really is a way of answering any one or all of these questions that I just mentioned.

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:46

And I think it's pretty important to recognize that a theodicy what whatever kind it is, is a construct. It's a way that a theological thinker tries to answer any of those questions by bringing into it the raw materials of theology, experience, tradition, reasons, scripture, and so on how, how do you bring all those together to come up with some sort of, I wanted to say satisfying response, but at least some sort of temporarily working response because as a construct, none of these the theodicies are perfect, they all have flaws in them. And in the end, when you're with suffering people or when you are suffering, probably the last thing you really need is a construct.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:30

somebody's telling you Well, if you just think this way, yeah,

Tony Chvala-Smith 03:34

What you need is presence, you need you need something, you do need to be loved and accepted. But there does come a time when when you we I want to think about these things. And so these various theocracies give us ways to hold different theological pieces together, as we attempt to come up with some sort of way of saying, Well, I can't answer all the questions, but at least here's a way to deal with it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 04:00

And just to appease to, that helps us to kind of be realistic is that typically we don't have a single theodicy, quite often we'll have we'll have picked pieces of different theocracies that work with, work with quotations around it in this situation, or as we're trying to struggle through what what has happened, or where is God in it?

Carla Long 04:25

So that's why I've actually really, really enjoyed this because I feel like in some ways, when you're going through something rough and like you're trying to figure it out, you know, like all of these things just come to you. You're trying to figure things out, but this kind of like puts it in a little bit of a silo place so that you can likely like okay, I might be acting out of this one right now, or I might be acting out of this right now. And that maybe I'm not all that weird for acting the way I do in those kinds of situations. This has been really helpful for me.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 04:52

Yeah, I think that's really one of the roles of a theodicy is to give us a up place in which to stand in the midst of whatever the struggle is, or the uncertainty or the fear or the injustice or the natural disaster, you know, it gives us a place to, to stand for a while and know that other people have been there too. And that, you know, our questions or uncertainties, or even our certainties are not that they are not necessary, you know that. The question is, isn't just a question, it leads us somewhere, our certainty and uncertainty are leading us somewhere. And, and we don't have to just be caught, you know, in this quagmire of, of why, you know, just stuck there. So, in some ways, it's the big question with a theodicy is the why, you know,

Tony Chvala-Smith 05:53

Yeah. And so there's this today, the the one that's called a protest theodicy is what we're going to focus on. And actually where we're going to start is with some language of Scripture, that is language of protest. And so we'll, we'll see where we go from there.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 06:11

Okay, I'm going to start with Psalm 22. And something, something that's quite common in Psalms is that, and particularly psalms of lament is that there will be this crying out to God about injustice. And then quite often in the Psalms, there'll be some kind of resolution by the end of the Psalm where people are back to remembering Oh, well, God did come through in the past and that kind of thing. But in a protest theodicy, there isn't the resolution at the end. And so I'm just going to give you some of the parts of the Psalms, Psalm 22. That is, what a protest theodicy is about the complaining to God. About what what is so I'm just going to the first pass part of this passage, you'll recognize from other parts of scripture from the New Testament as well, so, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me? From the words of my groaning? Oh, my God, I cry by day but you do not answer. And by night, but find no rest." And so here's one of those places in this this Psalm, where it does that a little bit of a resolution, you know, it's like yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel, in you our ancestors trusted, they trusted and you delivered them to you, they cried, and we're saved in you they trusted, and we're not put to shame so and then it goes back and forth. But some other parts of this one.

Tony Chvala-Smith 07:50

Yeah, so this is still in Psalm 22. "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart is like wax, it is melted within my breast, my mouth has dried up like a potsherd. And my tongue sticks to my jaws, you lay me in the dust of death."

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 08:14

"For dogs are all around me, a company of evildoers in circles me. My hands and feet have shriveled I could count on my bones, they stare and gloat over me, they divide my clothes among themselves. And for my clothing, they cast lots." So these are all these, you know, very real complaints to God about the situation in which the author finds themselves. And then Job is another really great book to get some of this protest to God, about the situation as it is. And so I'm going to so Tony, you want to read the beginning?

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:55

Sure. Job seven. "Do not human beings have a hard service on Earth, and are not their days, like the days of a laborer, like a slave longs for the shadow, and like laborers who look for their wages? So I'm allotted months of emptiness and nights of misery are pointed to me. When I lie down, I say, when shall I rise, but the night is long, and I'm full of tossing until dawn. My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt. My skin hardens then breaks out again. My days are swifter than a weaver shuttle, and come to the end without hope."

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:39

Yeah, this is hard stuff and I'm just going to skip over to nine. Job nine and in all of these this is where Job is pleading his innocence where it while his friends say oh, there's all this bad stuff that happened to you. You probably deserve it. You probably did something wrong. And he's, he's saying no, no, this is unfair this this isn't right at all. So this is 9:17 through 19. "For he crushes me with a tempest, meaning God and multiplies my wounds without cause. He will not let me get my breath and fills me with bitterness. If it is a contest of strength, he is the strong one, if it is a matter of justice, who can summon him? Or who can subpoena him? I am blameless. Let's see, I'm good. I live with my life. It is all one. Therefore I say he destroys both the date the blameless and the wicked. When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks the calamity of the innocent. The earth is given into the hands of the wicked. He covers his eyes. of its he covers the eyes of its judges. If it is not he who then is it. So it's like God is not standing for what is just, and my situation is a sign of that."

Tony Chvala-Smith 11:13

So so this, this is like now turning one's anger one situation towards the one who's imagined as the source of IE God, I got this, this is on you, God, right is is what Job was saying, and all this and I can't, I can't escape you. But this is on you, and you're not doing anything for me.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:34

And this this latter, this next one points to another part of protests, theodicy which is we can't even get an answer from God, we we there's nobody to hold God accountable for what God isn't doing. So, "For God is not a mortal as I am, that I might answer him, that we might come to trial together. There is no umpire between us who might lay his hands on both of us. If he would take his rod away from me and not let dread of him terrify me, then I would speak without fear of Him. For I know I am not what I am thought to be. So you're getting this sense of this terrible inner turmoil? And this sense that where is God? And how could this be is how could this even happen?"

Tony Chvala-Smith 12:22

And the sense there in that last part is that God, you're you're you're so you're so horrible to me that what we really need here is a referee. You have somebody to decide to mediate.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 12:33

Yeah, and to bring justice for what you're doing, or what you're not keeping from happening to me. So. So there's all of that. And then and, but we're very familiar with some one of these passages that's used in the New Testament, Jesus own words at his death, which is "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" And I think that brings this very much home to all of us. But one of the things about a protest theodicy is that it comes primarily from Judaism, modern recent Judaism.

Tony Chvala-Smith 13:13

Right. And so this, this type of theodicy is really attributed to post-holocaust Jewish thinkers, though quite a number of Christian thinkers have picked picked it up too. But thinkers like a Elie Wiesel we're going to share some of his book Night here in a minute. Richard Rubenstein. Oh, there's, there's several others. Cohen, whose book, "The Tremendum" is really an important book on this topic. So there's a number of these Jewish figures after the Holocaust who have said, I'm still a Jew, I still think

there's a God. But how do I reconcile that with what just happened to us in the 20th century? Where was this God, that we have tried to love and serve and be faithful to where where did this God go? And why is this God so silent and all this so? So protest theodicy then arises out of that experience, Arthur Cohen's book called *The Tremendum*. The that, that, that horrible thing, the tremendous thing that happened, I think that makes us shake, is that's that's a, a title worth worth looking at. But the idea that the Holocaust is this thing that shakes everything loose, including our faith, that God is actually good, or just so that's, that's where protest theodicy is trying to head.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:35

So it will make us uncomfortable, but it will probably also resonate with some of our own experience. You know, at this point, I think about the Uvalde shootings. And, you know, that's a question that comes up for many who who were there who have been impacted by it who've lost loved ones? Where, where is God? Not in the killing of innocent children. And why? Why? Why was it allowed? So it's it's very relevant to our present realities.

Tony Chvala-Smith 15:16

If you want to get into the feeling of this, so I can't think of a better place to go than an Elie Wiesel's memoir "Night". As a young teenage boy, he and his family are, they live in Hungary, as the Nazis are, the Nazi evil is descending on Europe. And they are carted away to Auschwitz. And then he's eventually his father eventually moved to Buchenwald. But his book, "Night" was a was a kind of a memoir of what happened. He survived, right? None of his family did, but he survived. And so in his book "Night", there's a couple of scenes worth going over right now, I think that will help get help us understand that protest theodicy is protest towards God, right? It's not only protest about the evil happening to us, but it's protest towards God, that this could happen at all. So there's this scene in which a few a few that now are in a concentration camp, and a few a few of the inmates have had been discovered to have smuggled some weapons and among these inmates, is a small boy. So the and then the Nazis are going to go in to hang them. And so this little scene says, "The three condemned prisoners together stepped onto the, onto the chairs. In unison, the nooses were placed around their necks. 'Long live liberty!' shouted the two men, but the boy was silent. 'Where is merciful God, where is he?' Someone behind me was asking." So the whole camp has to watch this, right? "At the signal, the three chairs were tipped over, total silence in the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting caps off, screamed the head of camp. His voice quivered as, as for the rest of us, we were weeping, cover your heads. Then came the march past the victims, the two men were no longer alive. Their tongues were hanging out swollen and bluish. But the third rope was still moving. The child to light was still breathing. And so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes, and we were forced to look at him at close range. He was still alive when I passed him, his tongue was still red. His eyes not yet extinguished. Behind me, I heard the same man asking, "For God's sake, where's God?" And from within me, I heard a voice answer where he is. This is where hanging here from this gallows. That night, the soup tasted of corpses." That that scene is just so overwhelmingly powerful. It's probably for many readers, this book one of the most memorable scenes from from "Night", but it's important to understand that Elie Wiesel was training to become a Rabbi training in Jewish mysticism. As a little kid as a early teenager, he is totally devoted to his faith and to God and to following the Torah and to being the best and most spiritual Jew he can possibly be. And so this is this is this is the, his his faith is dying right in front of us on this page, or at least it's, it's changing.

It's changing in a very powerful way. And then just a few pages over there's another scene that takes place at Jewish New Year Rosh HaShana. And so,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:01

Maybe a little bit more background is, you know, this is he's a teenager and already he's seen 1000s of deaths of people all around him for for no good reason, other than their Jewish or in the way of the Nazis in some way.

Tony Chvala-Smith 19:24

So in this this next scene, then it's it's the eve of Jewish new year in the fall of Rosh Hashanah. And Wiesel says that "Night was falling rapidly all all the all the Jews in this camp have been gathered into like a square that's in the middle of the camp. And night was falling rapidly and more and more prisoners kept coming from every block suddenly able to overcome time and space to will have both into submission. 'What are you oh my God?' I thought angrily. 'How do you compare to the stricken mass gathered to affirm to you their fate, their anger their defiance. What does your grandeur mean master the universe, in the face of all this cowardice, this decay and this misery? Why do you go on troubling these poor people's wounded minds their ailing bodies.'" And so then they go then the leader goes into the the New Year liturgy. Blessed to be the almighty the voice of the officiating inmate it just become audible. At first I thought it was the wind bless it be God's name 1000s of lips repeated the benediction bent over like trees in a storm, bless it be God's name. Why, but why would I bless him, every fiber in me rebelled, because he caused 1000s of children to burn in his mass graves, because he kept six crematoria working day and night, including Sabbath and the Holy Days? Because in his great mighty and created Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and so many other factories of death? How would I say to him, 'Bless it Be thou Almighty master of the universe, who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as our fathers or mothers, our brothers and up in the furnaces, praise me thy holy name for having chosen us to be slaughtered online altar.'" So that's a sample of what's going on. And in young Wiesel, he's taking part of this important Jewish ritual, but in the midst of a death camp, and so how can we even talk about God here, God were, what do we mean by God? So that's the kind of experience then that is behind a protest theodicy. And all of all of them that I know of kind of reflect the same sort of God, you're God, you're there. But man, are you silent? And unhelpful?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:47

Yeah. And what shall we make of that? So that so we'll go on now to look at what is some of the content and meaning of a protest theodicy. And, as we've noted before, and other times when we've dug in deeply to theological matters, we often look to Migliore, in his book, "Faith Seeking Understanding", and he has a brief description of protest theodicy that wraps a whole lot of things up. And so we just want to, to draw on that because it's, he says it so well.

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:22

And so here we're just reading from pages 130 to 133, from Migliore, where he's talking about protest theodicy. He basically says "This is the name given by John Roth to his own position, which has as its basis an inspiration in the witness and reflection of the Holocaust survivor and author alien the cell. Jewish theologians Richard Rubenstein and Arthur Coyne may also be considered representatives of a protest theodicy, assuming with the Bible, a very strong view of the sovereignty of God. The tendency

of this theodicy is to question the total goodness of God. There is simply too much tragedy, injustice and murder in history. We must be honest to our experience, and to God and thus quirl with the all too familiar refrain that God is love." That's part of what he says then in Migliore goes on. So, this is a theodicy with no easy answers, but with the honesty of what earlier believers would have considered blasphemous questions, and with the determination to be faithful to God, even when it appears that God has ceased to be faithful. So that's that's Migliore, he really respects this theodicy I mean, it's not his per se, but he respects it. And says, in some ways, you just can't argue with this. Consider considering its source.

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:22

Yeah, it in a way it's it's being theologically honest about the realities that we see and not trying to find lovely little band aid answers that will make us feel good, but it's facing it on head on heart on to the the, the terrors the things in in reality and world.

Carla Long 24:12

And how flippant does it sound to say, Well, don't forget, God is love when you're facing all of these terrors and horrible things like that's, that feels that that feels like nobody will ever understand what you're going through. It feels like you're just alone in the world. It makes it way worse, rather than better.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:30

And when you are faced by hate, that can't be turned away. That you Yeah, how do you say, Oh, well, God is love or it's going to be all right. And you know, it isn't. It hasn't been and it won't be. So what where do you go? What do you do with that?

Tony Chvala-Smith 24:50

And what do you do with this? I think this is Wiesel's situation, what do you do with these two realities? On the one hand, you can't shake that there is something called God, on the other hand, you can't get rid of the image of Nazis, machine gunning babies. How do you how do you hold those images in yourself? Those images and whatever is left of that faith? Yeah. How do you hold that together?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:17

And maintain sanity in the midst?

Tony Chvala-Smith 25:20

Yeah, so you protest, right? So So you use the voice of Job, the voice of the psalmist, who lament? You, you you lament without adding little hopeful sections in.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:34

Right? You don't do the resolution, you let you let the rawness, the uneasiness stand.

Tony Chvala-Smith 25:42

So we can, you know, we'll just walk through some other themes of protest theodicy. Basically, we've covered a few already that, that protest theodicy does not typically say there's no God, but it questions

about whether God is just or fair or good, or even able to act. And so God for protest theodicies like this silent partner who's always just watching on but never does anything. Right. And so that's, that's a really difficult part of it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:18

And what it's challenging is this. This sense that some would have that, that divine goodness will always show up in some somehow magically make things okay. And it's acknowledging that that doesn't happen. So it's, it's wanting to put that out there. And then protest theodicy protests against God, it is, it's like a prayer, protesting the one you're praying to. The protest is directed to God about God's in action, God's silence, or God's indifference or, or that sense of God being distance, especially in the face of justice, injustice and suffering. And it all also protests, those pat religious answers that ignore the reality of God's inactivity in the midst of this harmful, harming unjust world.

Tony Chvala-Smith 27:22

Now, you're not going to get away with saying, well, everything happens for a reason to any of these theologians there. They're going to they're going to pillory that immediately based on their experience and show how how vile that statement actually is. Right? So one of the things about this The Odyssey is that it insists that evil is real, and it continues to persist in the world, we can't deny that we can't deny that the reality of evil. And that something like the human evil that created the Holocaust, just just it just cannot be dismissed or forgotten. You can't sweep it under the rug. These theologians most of whom don't, a lot of them are probably no longer alive. Certainly Coyne isn't and I think Rubenstein isn't but but they would be, they would be utterly, and vocally mortified with the idea that we're somehow going to control textbooks in schools, so that kids don't have to read about, about race based slaughter, like like the Shoah, or racism in America. So one of the things that they're going to as part of the protest is making sure that you insist that you keep rubbing people's little, little, little comfy noses in actual evil of the world.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 28:38

Making people recognize this is real, it's not a figment of my imagination, evil is real and then implied, and really more explicit, that we must face it, we are called to do something about it. And so in in this theodicy, human beings must rely on their own resources. It's crucial that we act in ways as Richard Rubinstein would say, that we make the most of our limited existence, you know, whether our lives are long or short, we have this obligation to make the world a better place because that's how it will happen. And so this means working for for social and personal good, and seeking justice. Now here, not in some something far off the best that we can, and especially that we help each other clearly see injustice, name it, challenge it, do something about it. Our ideal of God and our knowledge of God in this theodicy help us imagine what justice is. And then it gives us i eyes to recognize enjoy service. So it's this sense of who God is, teaches us what justice is, even when we even when we're shouting at God for for not bringing that justice into the places where we want it. That sense that idea of who God is teaches us what justice is so we can recognize and act against injustice.

Tony Chvala-Smith 30:25

So this theodicy going back to Migliore here, it, it forbids us, especially it forbids religious people from hiding behind cliches, religious cliches are images of God is one who's going to that's going to come

and bail it out and fix everything. And you know, as we as the Migliore reading is, Migliore says that the all too familiar refrain that God is love. Well, this theodicy says, No, you can't, you just can't go around saying that, because there's so much lovelessness in the world, it's really hard to connect, and, and in love always acts for the well being of others. So what what kind of love is this, that God is if God if God does not help millions of innocent victims, and in a death camp, so I think that's an important part of this is that we're not we're not going to religify. suffering and evil. We're not going to not hide behind, you know, pretty little religious phrases that that keep us from actually facing the reality of the stuff that we're complicit into. Right. So that's really important here.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:36

It's part of the systems that that we benefit from, or in, undergird in some ways. And then in the, in the Spirit of the ancient psalms of Romans and of Job's searing questions about God. This approach this theodicy is willing to put God on trial. The only way to be faithful to God or one's concept of God is to call God out for inactivity or indifference. It's, it's like an obligation. And the point is to unequivocally name injustice, for what it is to strengthen our sensitivity to it and our resolve to make the world more just.

Tony Chvala-Smith 32:20

An interesting sidelight here would be, you know, during the Civil Rights movement of the 50s and 60s, one of the obstacles Civil Rights leaders had was the sense among lots of Christians that, well, we just have to wait on God to do this. And God will fix this and God's good time. And it's like, no, the good time is now, right. And if we don't, if we don't act on the basis of what we know about God's love and care for all Creation right now, and the the, then the injustice will, will persist and persist and persist. And so you've got to name it and call it out. And we're working on it right now.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:00

One of the things that this theodicy challenges on every front is the idea that if you just are religious, if you just do the right things, then you're promised an easy life, and success. And if you just hold the right set of ideas, then God is obligated to make your life you know, just coast right along, in through life. But, as Migliore puts it, there is no there is no there are no easy answers in this theodicy. But it does it overturns that idea that, you know, if, if you do wrong, you get bad, you know, if there's consequences if you if you're not religious enough. And so it, it, but in spite of the bad that has come to people, it refuses to give up on a belief in or being faithful to God, who, by some of these thinkers is imagined, as the infinite source of all being so they believe in God. They have this deeply rooted sense of being that there is a God. And so for them, worship and fully partaking in religious life is appropriate and is needful, but with no guarantees the doing that will make give you an easy life. It's it's it's the stark honesty about why we believe in God not not so we get something back that belief in God and acknowledging that is in its is its own thing, and that we need to separate our ideas and that somehow our our worship will get us something. So there's this very, there's darkness about it.

Tony Chvala-Smith 35:04

So that was one other point to make. And then then we'll pause and see, Carl, if you have any questions or observations before we go on to, but how do you preach a protest the Odyssey? And how do you pray a protest the Odyssey. But one other point is that protest the Odyssey refuses to give up

on the idea that humanity should seek to create a more just world. That's kind of embedded in it. And I think that's part of its Jewish and prophetic heritage. But there's no there's no predestined, glorious future that God will provide. It's not like, I whatever happens, it's all going to be good. You know, there's, there's a rainbow coming. It's not none of that, right? It's up to us, really. And not some kind of divine supernatural rescue in the future. So I think one of the relevant things about this, in our current time is that I have the feeling I've, I've sort of heard this, but I have the feeling that a lot of Christians don't take climate change seriously, because they, at some level, they think that God's going to just come magically and fix it for us, that Jesus is going to come and make the make the climate all better. And it's like, you're not reading the gospels very closely, are you and you're not paying attention to the whole narrative of the Bible. And you really ought to listen to these thinkers to on that. So if you know the term theodicy going back to the German philosopher Levinas from its two roots, God and justification how to justify faith in God in spite of evil, a protest theodicy would say, God is, but I'm not sure we can justify God in the face of evil, but what we can justify is our own our own meager little existence if we work to create a future where there's no more Auschwitzes, and, and, and no more, you know, for separation of children from parents, or you name the atrocity. As long as we were working for a future that limits that is the only justification there there really is. So that's, I think, part of this a valid part of this the opposite.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 37:13

Yeah. And I think it's something to hang on to the idea that without our effort, there won't be a better future. And I think that undergirds a lot of this particular theodicy,

Tony Chvala-Smith 37:26

So does have a high view of what human beings can do if they choose it. So the question is, can we choose it?

Carla Long 37:36

So it sounds like the belief in God is like central to this, is that true? Like the belief in God is absolutely central? Like you always still believe in God?

Tony Chvala-Smith 37:45

Yep. You're going to argue with and you're, you're going to put God in in the dark and, and you're going to be the prosecuting attorney here.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:00

And actually, one of the things that this theodicy constantly is doing is saying maybe some of our ideas of who God is or what we expect God to do for us are wrong. God is real. God is the source of all being, but maybe some of our expectations of who God is, have have messed up our, our perception of what life is about because

Carla Long 38:35

about like rethinking who got is after every single thing and deciding again, who God is. And is that a personal thing? Is that a community thing? How do people read decide who Gos is?

Tony Chvala-Smith 38:46

Well, yes, and yes, I think it's an important part of this. Because, you know, Jewish Jewish theology in all of its forms is very communal. So, so it would be yes, personal Yes, communal.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:58

And, and, you know, in Judaism, this was, the Holocaust was not the first time that this whole questioning has happened and needed to be processed as a as a people. But, you know, Elie Wiesel starts with his own experience, his own personal, the undoing of his ideas of God, and yet, at this deep place in himself, knowing there is a God, but the things that he had learned or been taught or taken in, they were not sufficient to understand where God is or how God is at work in the world.

Tony Chvala-Smith 39:40

It's like for these thinkers, best analogy I can come up with is Carla, have you ever have you ever got a thistle or a picker in your in a finger or a toe or foot like you were walking barefoot out, out in the farm field and you picked up a thistle and you can't find it? It's in there. It just keeps picking and picking you picking away you know what I'm talking about?

Carla Long 40:03

You know, I'm from Kansas, the answer is duh!

Tony Chvala-Smith 40:06

It's easy to find these in Kansas. And so it's like, God is like that got you would think that some of these theologians would say, their idea of God is now passing, it's stupid, it no longer holds water. They don't do they don't go there God, God remains this sort of picker in your foot. Always they're always saying I'm here I'm here I'm here. I really like to get you out, but I can't. And so it to the persistence of the existence of God is is in this the Odyssey. And yet, we're not going to be dishonest about the reality of the horrible evil we have had to face with you just being stuck in my foot and not helping me.

Carla Long 40:53

Well, I think that's actually the the second part I wanted to read mention that you've talked about is that, you know, there are people in the United States who want to take uncomfortable parts of history out of history books, because we don't want to make any child feel uncomfortable. And in my mind, I'm like, that's absolutely ridiculous. But you have given a definition as to why that's ridiculous. Because, you know, like, we're not creating thinkers and do'ers and be'ers, when we do that kind of stuff. We're creating people who don't even have a choice. And so I think that this is super important argument for keeping those, quote unquote, uncomfortable places in our history in our history books.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 41:36

Yeah, because if we don't know it, we can't act in a more just way, we will continue to perpetuate these unjust systems, and these things that kill people because of the color of their skin, or their gender or whatever. And, you know, it's this is this is a long honest view of reality, and finding what our part is, and questioning where God is in it. And I think the two really are, are hand in hand. And one of the conclusions is, we can't look to God to fix the problems that we are making. And if we don't know that we're making problems for each other, there's no fixing them, as you say, there's, you know, people

won't even know, you know, how, you know, it's for many people, knowing what happened in, in Tulsa, the wiping out of the successful black neighborhood, in Tulsa

Tony Chvala-Smith 42:43

1920s.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 42:46

We didn't even know about that, until, you know, sometime in the last five years, and it's like, Oh, my goodness, why didn't we know and there was no reparations. So there still has been no reparations for the people who were driven out or killed in that mob action. So if we don't know that we don't even aware of where it all it still is, in a society and where we need to face it and, and expose it, and call it what it is.

Tony Chvala-Smith 43:19

And you know, the Hebrew prophets are the ones who in in the whole Bible saw through the way, religion can become a form of self deception, right? Religious self deception is the worst. Because the resources that the religion could offer for mending and, and healing and doing things better, are obscured by the very act of lying about the reality of things. I mean, you know, we're recording this podcast in the United States, a country with with a heck of a lot of churches. How can a country with so many Christian churches be so violent, and so racist, and so open to living in self deception about the race about a whole bunch of realities? I mean, obviously, from the perspective of protest, the honesty, we're, we're afraid of truth, right? We're so afraid of truth that we would prefer mythologies we create and make us feel comfortable that to actually having some background by facing up to the fact we've got to make some serious changes. So So protests, the Odyssey, I think my view it has some of the genes of the ancient Hebrew prophets, speaking through it and it's, it's, you know, none of these none of these the Odysseys is not the be all and end all but there are things to learn from each of them. And this one has some things, especially to teach us today.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 44:44

In some ways, its conclusion is that God's inaction not fixing this not saving people. is what makes us look honestly, at what is aand what is the legacy of human hatred, distrust, and, and evil and greed, and all of those things.

Tony Chvala-Smith 45:10

I think, you know, for another angle, one might say, Is God inactive? Or is God actively letting us be what we want to be? If God is actively letting us be what we want to be, then we ought to pay attention to what we are, what we are,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 45:30

And what we're doing to each other.

Carla Long 45:31

Now, that sounds like what a good parent would do. Right? Like, I guess you have lessons to learn. And if you want to dive headfirst off of the couch, I guess you're gonna learn a lesson. No, I'm just

kidding. But you know, like, that sounds like what a parent would do. It's like, you need to learn these lessons. And I'm not going to always jump in and save you every single time. I'm not going to do it. So that that sounds more likely to me.

Tony Chvala-Smith 45:53

And being what you want to be will show up who you really are.

Carla Long 45:59

That's all, oh, man. That's usually hard in the parent position, too, though, too, isn't it? I wonder if God I wonder if God has a hard time with that. Or if God's just fine with letting us do really silly things?

Tony Chvala-Smith 46:10

Well, so we can go on not to want to have these practical pieces need to be so I'll speak for a few minutes on how to preach a protest theodicy and Charmaine will then lead us in how to pray a protest the Odyssey. So, and as you you will hear me say each time, we don't actually preach a theodicy, right? The the message of the church is not a theodicy or a theology. The message is the good, the good news of Christ. And so we don't preach a theodicy per se, especially because you have people sitting there, right in front of you on Sunday morning or on Zoom, however you're doing it, who are who could be dealing with immense, immense loss and pain, and absolute horror in their lives. And so the idea that somebody you know, I'm going to give you a recipe for fixing this is actually a horrible idea. So, but, on the other hand, we don't want to shy away from the questions of evil and suffering that are real and face. And so, one way to preach or protest the Odyssey or to let it inform preaching is, don't shy away from the psalms of lament. And even from those songs that curse enemies. When, when the lectionary brings them up. The only problem I could think of with the lectionary is that it gives you a multitude of choices and you start looking at the text for a given Sunday. And if you find yourself always gravitating to the happy texts, then protest theodicy is something to help you grow with. And so if the lectionary if the lectionary leads us to difficult songs of lament, or what are called the imprecatory, Psalms, the Psalms in which enemies are called out and cursed, that's, that's worth that's worth working through and trying to deal with. Don't shy away from preaching on Good Friday, if you're asked to preach on Good Friday, especially when the text is that what's called The Cry of Dereliction that Charmaine quoted earlier. "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Good Friday is the place where Christian theology where the gospel or the story of Jesus can engage very deeply in the kinds of questions and struggles that a protest theodicy is dealing with. Don't promise happy endings in sermons, right? It's all going to be better. We're going to tie it all up in a nice bow. And then then we're going to go eat that pork roast that's been cooking, or whatever it is, right? So no, it's okay for the sermon not to have a happy ending, but to have a challenging ending or an unresolved ending. That would be in alignment with a protest theodicy. and then take up seriously and reflect in our sermons on the brutality of history. The Holocaust, the killing fields racism, and white supremacy, sexism, and misogyny. You know, we want to bring the full range of human misery, unapologetically into conversation with the Good News. The Good News is not meant to be an elixir that somehow makes you not deal with the bad news of human experience. Rather, the Good News wants to come into conversation with that an off rush, a different way to live and be and then, of course, avoid the pie in the sky. They're in a better place. There must be a reason all that stuff. This is the these this is the theological equivalent of nitrous oxide at the dentist's office. This is the gas that puts you out,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 49:51

Or that makes us feel okay no matter what.

Tony Chvala-Smith 49:53

Makes you feel, I'm I'm so happy. I'm so happy I was at church today. No, the sermon, the roots of the sermon in our churches, is the Prophetic announcement in the Hebrew Bible. And those are not, those are not happy speeches. And I'm not talking about going in and preaching a downer, I'm just saying, there are things, the things to be aware of our tendency always to want to coat and cover and shield and not deal with the realities of life. So that's some things, things to keep in mind, if trying to use the resources of a protest theodicy in preaching.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 50:28

And I think Carlos, something you just you were saying earlier about people struggling with these horrible things in their lives, and then going to church and everybody's pretending that that never happened. That's not real. And that somehow, if you're struggling with it, there's something wrong with your faith. To hear the protest part, we went to a funeral of a young woman who, who died, and without any, nobody knew nobody knows why that happened. And she died in her sleep. And, and the preacher was angry at God. And it was at first very uncomfortable. And then it was like, Oh, my gosh, of course, this, this is a part of how we bring God into this conversation, is to say, God, where were you? How could you let this happen? It was very, and, and I assume others too. But for me, I took that with me. And let this not be something that just made everybody feel good, who came to this memorial service. But some, it's like, God is with us in those hard questions in those places where the pain won't heal. And people need to know that, that there's not something wrong with them, because they can't figure out where God is in the midst of something awful. And I just think it's so important that there's that kind of honesty.

Tony Chvala-Smith 52:17

And, you know, just further reflection on that. I have no idea what Jesus resurrection body is like. But one thing I know about it, it still has the scars on it. And so that belongs with God for eternity. And so God, the God that we worship and serve is not a God who is unscarred or immune to our scars.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 52:42

So our last piece here is how to pray a protest theodicy or I would say how to let protests theodicy help us pray more honestly. And so my first note would be, don't apologize to God for our sense of what is truly just so we embrace and articulate what is just. And in in this prayer, we're reminding God and ourselves of what is good, so that it can be embraced, but also what is the evil so that it can be rejected? And I just want to note here, that there is a difference between what is truly just and what is simply an inconvenience or annoyance to us, in which case, our prayer would just be whining, rather than upholding justice. But the for this one, don't apologize to God for our sense of what is truly just and let that guide our prayer. And then also let the wrongness of the situation come through in our prayer, don't try to code it with religious fluff. So here's a couple of examples that kind of get at those two things. God, I am heartbroken. I can't find you in my pain. And nothing makes sense. How could this happen? When I try so hard to do what's good and right. And then another example, God, this injustice

is taking lives every day? How can you let it go on? Where are you Will you not help us as we tried to make the world safer for the vulnerable? Another piece of a protest the Odyssey is that we must be hyper vigilant about not blaming the victim in the midst of obvious injustice. This is a another one of those things that we do in religious circles but also in culture in general. of well, you know, that happened to them because you know, they weren't very attentive or see how they looked or what they were wearing or where they were. And we, we have this tendency to blame the victim. And so with protests, but with protest theodicy there's no room for that. So an example might be God, why has this happened? This person did nothing wrong. This action dehumanizes them and breaks them. Where are you? What can I even say to them about where you are. And then another point here is to just say, you know, you're in our thoughts and prayers. Which is, you know, it's a good good and fine term. And sometimes it's very sincere. But to just say that, in a protest theodicy is meaningless unless it's accompanied why by concrete action that brings healing or justice or hope. So, a prayer possibility there. God, I cannot see you in the situation. And I'm not sure what I can even ask have you. But I feel the unfairness, the injustice and the evil that it creates. God helped me bring light here, hope here, and to have the courage to stand with and for this person, and for justice. And then the last little note, often in times of great injustice, or in feelings of abandonment by God, we don't have words, we don't know what to say. And we're maybe afraid that if we pray from our anger or hurt or abandonment, that we'll do something wrong. And so sometimes we are afraid to pray from those places. But I would suggest if you don't have words for praying, from the injustice and the abandonment, to go to the Psalms of lament, we looked at Psalm 22 Earlier, or to Job's defense of his innocence, or to the lamb the lament section, that's in Community of Christ Sings and there's actually a segment hymns 198, to 205 are laments. And there's some things there that are so much like what we've just been talking about. This isn't hymn 204, The Storm Comes to Honduras, to Nicaragua and towns, El Salvador felt anguish rains came crashing down. Oh, God of wind and water, who made the sea and sky amid such great destruction, we ask a mournful why? It gets at the heart of it. Another of these hymns of lament is Senzeni Na?, which is hymn number 200. And it's two phrases repeated. And this This helped, just some context. This was an apartheid marching protest song in South Africa, challenging apartheid, this kind of racism there. And in the in the phrases there are "What have we done? What is our sin?" repeated over and over. And it captures to this honest facing of injustice that you will find in a protest theodicy

Carla Long 58:47

Wow. I'm so glad you brought up Senzeni Na. Oh, well, that's how I Yeah. Because are we saying it proper? And I don't know, because I remember it was on the power of one soundtrack. And I love the book, The Power of One about PK, and he was, you know, he's living in South Africa. And they and I remember I was a child, and I had the soundtrack. And I was listening to the song. And I just remember crying through it. And my mom's like, what's wrong? I'm like, I don't even know. I don't even know what's wrong, but it was like so moving. I remember, we don't sing it in our hymnal the same way they sing it, which makes me really sad, but because I can always hear that soundtrack. But thank you so much for bringing that up and for talking about the songs of lament we have in our hymnal and I really appreciate hearing the prayers. I do want to say, Charmaine, I feel actually personally attacked by the whining prayer comment.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 59:39

As I was writing it down, I just I thought about myself and it's like, oh, there's times when it's like, oh, you know, drama queen. Oh, it's so unjust. And then it's like, oh, no, it's just inconvenient or annoying. And, and in a culture of privilege, yeah, times we do not recognize the difference. So I did have to put that in there. So that, when it's truly about injustice.

Carla Long 1:00:03

I think that's very wise of you. Why did I get that parking spot? God? What is going on today? One of those. That's not helpful. That's not a whiny prayer. Yeah, definitely a whiny prayer. Well, I'm really grateful for this because when we talked that we are going to do a podcast on protest theodicy, I was like, I was thinking, you know, the song war. What is it good for? I thought it was that kind of a protest? Which it kind of is. Yeah, yeah. So I've learned a lot. Thanks for that. And I really, I really appreciate that it comes like it's more. It's a modern theodicy and not a modern theodicy all at the same time, right? Because it's the Jewish, it's part of the Jewish religion, but like it came out, it feels like after World War II, which is really

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:00:52

Really articulated.

Carla Long 1:00:54

That's a better way to put it. Interesting. Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate it. Was there anything else you wanted to say before we stopped?

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:01:04

That the God, the God of the Hebrew Bible is a God who can be argued with. And so that's important, too. It's it's not it's not blasphemy. It's not unfaith it's not being unrighteous, to push back on God or one's conceptions of God or what one's tradition has said about God and say, Hey, this doesn't square this is not squaring with the reality I'm experiencing right now. Because if I can jump ahead to medieval Christianity, God is truth itself. And so truth itself is never going to be afraid of hearing our truth.

Carla Long 1:01:43

I like that. I like that medieval Christian Christianity is not so not so dumb. after all. I'm just,

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:01:49

So glad you didn't say that when you have us for History of Christian Thoughts, Carla. Five points from Gryffindor right there,

Carla Long 1:01:58

I'm not gonna say I censored myself a lot in your class, but maybe I censor myself a little bit. And you're. Well, I really appreciate him for this today. Thank you so much for sharing that with us. Charmaine, Tony, you're pretty awesome. Thanks again.

Josh Mangelson 1:02:20

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