

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 00:32

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla long and today you're listening to percolating on faith. It's a series where we talk about stuff that's super smart. And I have a feeling that you always leave these podcasts feeling a lot smarter. I always do at least, we're here with Charmaine and Tony Chvala-Smith. Hello, Charmaine. Hello, Tony.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 00:54

Hello, good to be with you.

Carla Long 00:57

And they are our experts. As always, I get to ask the questions and they get, say the answers and I get to walk away feeling really good about myself. I don't know how you two feel, but I always feel good about myself.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:08

As long as we always have the option of saying, "I don't know." Cause then we're happy.

Carla Long 01:14

Yeah, there is always that option. I love that option.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:18

And I think I would say that being quote unquote experts on things that are mysteries is sort of an oxymoron, but hey, we'll go with it for today.

Carla Long 01:26

What did you just call me? Just kidding. So today, we're gonna continue talking about theodicy specific specifically the Jesus Narrative Theodicy, which we'll talk about. But before we jump into the Jesus Narrative Theodicy maybe we should give our listeners just a little recap as to what is a theodicy?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:47

Yeah. A theodicy is something that probably touches all of us when we are thinking about life and God, when we're thinking about the struggles that we have. And then when we're trying to get a bigger picture, a clearer picture of where is God in the midst of the really difficult times? And so a theodicy a good definition is, what is the relationship between God and the suffering and evil that are found in the world? And so theodicy is kind of a trying to approach it. We've got four or five questions that that kind of helped to shape a theodicy. And the first one is, why are suffering and evil, so present in human experience, and in the in the world in general? And then a second one is, why did God create a world in

which suffering and evil are even possible? You know what, so it's kind of helping us question, how do we see God? What do we see as God's purpose? Third question that helps us to get out of theodicy, or to create a theocracy is, what does this the idea that there is evil on suffering, say about the nature of God? And then there's kind of two questions here. They're, they're related. Why doesn't God protect us from suffering and from evil? Or, and this is another way of asking that question. It gives more options. Where is God when we are suffering? And so almost any theodicy is going to touch on these questions in one way or another.

Tony Chvala-Smith 03:35

So the word theodicy does not appear in the Bible. There's a word created by the German philosopher Leibniz, which we've said before and it was created in the 18th century, as the world was the Western World was experiencing the sense of progress and optimism. All kinds of bad things were also happening. And so there was an attempt to try and say, how do we make sense of belief in a benevolent God? And then also look at something like the horrible earthquake that destroyed Lisbon in the 18th century? How do we make room for that? And so, a theodicy, it's really important understand that a theodicy is a construct. In other words, it's a way that theologians put together scripture and experience and reason and tradition to answer questions about God's goodness in light of the evil and suffering humans experienced. So it's always important that recognize is a construct, and any attempt to turn a theodicy into a final answer is doomed to fail. So

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 04:40

and probably not fair to the Christian tradition as a whole.

Tony Chvala-Smith 04:43

Because if you think about people who've gone through horrible stuff, the last thing that they deserve to hear is, hey, I've got a package answer for you about why this happened to you. That's an absolutely crucial when you think about it, so So but We also have to try and figure out, we want to those of us who believe in a loving and gracious God, have to try to figure out as best we can, how to maneuver with that belief when we see such horrible, horrible things happening around us, sometimes in us, and sometimes to us. So the theosophy we're going to cover today, we had to make up a name for it. We've done some other ones that are recognized and like Augustinian, the Odyssey and Iranian and so on. The one we're going to cover today, you will find variously in a lot of late 20th century and contemporary Christian theologians without a name. But we have called it the Jesus Narrative Theodicy. And so what we're what we want to say about this theodicy is that theologians like Daniel Migliore, like Bradley Hanson, like the great German theologian, Juergen Moltmann, they are deeply committed Christian theologians from different from different perspectives, who wants to take very seriously two things, the horrible reality of evil and suffering in the world, for example, Moltmann had to had to process having been a German soldier in World War II, and having to then be faced with the reality of the Holocaust. How do I as a Christian process the stuff, so these theologians want to take very seriously, the suffering and evil are real, and they call into question the idea of the Providence and goodness of God. And on the other hand, they want to take very seriously Jesus's ministry and the story of Jesus as the center of the kind of quite diverse biblical witness and as the lens by which to try and make some sense of what what kind of God is it we're talking about when we talk about God and

suffering. And so these theologians will say, We, as Christians want to say it's the God who is reflected to us in and through Jesus. And that's how we're going to look at the problem of evil and suffering.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 07:00

So what they will do is they will take Jesus ministry, and the kind of many faceted witness of his identity that we find in the New Testament, as starting points. So they want to take seriously the story, that the story of Jesus his life, but also of His ministry, and let that be a place where we begin to ask the questions about suffering, and an evil.

Tony Chvala-Smith 07:29

And one thing we'll we'll get to a little bit later in more detail, but we're using the word story, they want to use the word story. This is not about dropping proof texts from the Gospels on situations and suffering. It's about the the reality that how we know about Jesus is in the form of the narrative, not in the form of proof texts, not in the form of text bombs you can drop. It's, it's in the form of a story in which the identity of the character of Jesus and the character of God are somehow narrated in that story of Jesus life, in ministry in death and resurrection. That's where they go, that's the lens that they go to, to try and make sense of suffering as much as you can make sense of it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 08:08

And they want to use it to reframe our approach to the problem of unnecessary suffering. So it's like, what can this lens what new things can this lens bring to our understanding?

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:22

So to begin with the the Jesus narrative theodicy rules out two common defaults.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 08:28

So what we mean here by defaults, when people find themselves in the midst of suffering, there's a couple of things that just because we pick it up in our culture, and popular Christianity that we often go to right away. And, and the Jesus narrative really, is in an argument against these two things throughout. And the first one is that we often go to is, I'm suffering because God is punishing me. And the second one is, I'm suffering because I wandered from God. And I'm not aligned with God's desires and wills. And so there are will, and therefore, bad things can happen to me. So these are just really, I think, many of us maybe all of us, when we're in the midst of a really difficult time. Wonder what what did I do wrong, that I fell into this place? And so those are two common things. And the Jesus narrative, challenges them both roundly. So that's, I think, important to understand. And one of the things to begin with is that Jesus suffers in many ways in his own life, right. And especially when he is doing God's will, and so that's a really good corrective to those theologies out there that say if you're, if you're having suffering of some kind, that's against you, well, Jesus on life says something completely different. And if you think about people through history who've been And we would say, really tightly aligned with God's will for the world. They suffered to people like Oscar Romero, for those of you who may be familiar with him. Mother Teresa, her sense of call took her into all kinds of suffering. Other people's in home, Martin Luther King, Jr. You know, broaden that, passiveness in Russia in the late 19th century that had to had to emigrate. So all kinds of people who are completely aligned with God's love and God's will find

themselves in situations of suffering, because they are living there. So, so the Jesus narrative really dismisses those ideas that are suffering is somehow because we're not close enough to God.

Tony Chvala-Smith 10:58

So this, this theodicy treats suffering as, like independent, from the question of whether God is close or far anything like that. It doesn't. In other words, this theodicy doesn't try to come up with a theoretical answer for why are you suffering? It takes it as a reality, and then does not try to come up with a theory that says, Well, it's because you did this, or because you did that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:23

Or if you only prayed like this, then you wouldn't have suffering or if you paid this much tithing, then you wouldn't suffer. You know, it's, it's doesn't go there.

Tony Chvala-Smith 11:23

But it takes all of its cues for that from Jesus himself. And so it's, it's based on a careful reading of the Gospels as, as you know, as for narratives about the life of Jesus. And then also other New Testament texts that kind of reflect reflect on who Jesus was, right.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:48

So if you look at specifics in Jesus life, you can see that suffering is a common part of his life and his human experience, you know, right from in Matthew, his birth, where his life is threatened, and that his family has to emigrate to, to Egypt, for safety. And then when they come back, again, and Matthew, they have to decide which area they're going to live in, according to how evil the governor is of that area. So they go to the one that's less evil, less likely to cause them pain. So and even in his teenage years, Jesus suffers as many high school middle schoolers or junior highers do with not being understood by the adults around him, you know, his parents not understand what he's about. And you know, so as you can see that the suffering is not it's not in for that for the Jesus narrative. It's not uncommon, it's a it's a part of life. Though there are kinds of suffering that are not acceptable that are that are that need to be challenged, even, you know, Jesus suffers because his followers are not very good at following.

Tony Chvala-Smith 13:17

And you got 12 guys who are dumber than a box of rocks actually. Like, oh, it just hurts to realize you guys are gonna carry this on after me. That's why I'm so glad about the women falling because they get that they get this better than you do.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:30

So the Jesus narrative accepts that suffering comes independently of our goodness or badness. And that's a really important place to begin. So this is the place where Jesus and suffering in the Jesus narrative come together. And that that is that while Jesus recognizes that some kinds of suffering are normal part of life, he actively sought to alleviate many kinds of suffering. And that alleviation of suffering, was a sign of God's love. And so sometimes that sign brought physical healing or emotional or psychological wholeness. And sometimes, that alleviating of suffer suffering look like loaves and fish,

where Jesus offered food for hunger and hope for despair. So the place where Jesus and suffering meet is in the alleviating it as a sign that God's power is at work.

Tony Chvala-Smith 14:45

So the Jesus narrative theodicy would always reject any kind of like ethical passivity before suffering. It's just you following the example of Jesus you don't just say no, that's just, that's just going to happen and just have to let it be. I can't do anything about it. You know, the example of Jesus in the four gospels is to attack it, whatever in whatever form it is. So that's a really important thing to take from this from this theodicy is it calls those who follow Jesus to active, actively resisting forms of evil and suffering the world and trying to alleviate them rather than passively just accepting them as, quote unquote, God's will, which this theodicy says it's not. It's not that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 15:27

And then we've come up with eight points, and we've got a little title for each of them, that helps show some of the characteristics of this theodicy.

Tony Chvala-Smith 15:35

So the first one in this theodicy, it's about the character of God, as community, right? And so. So this is really important, this approach to theodicy does not start with like presumed abstract qualities of God like omnipotence, omniscience. And so in other words, those terms that people commonly apply to the word God, this theodicy doesn't start there. Because those are abstractions. But this theodicy is working from who is God revealed to be in the story? Not as a philosophical abstraction separate from it. So don't start there. It starts with the story of Jesus. And mostly the story is found in the four gospels, but it will use other parts of the New Testament in the Bible as part of that larger story. And then what it looks for is like, what cues does Jesus in this story reveal about the nature of God? So one of the key things that narrative theosophy will point out and you'll find this in Moltmann, in Migliore Hanson and others is that the God that Jesus reveals, is communal, right? They're always, there's always Father, Son, and Spirit at work and all three gospels, right? So the community of what we call the Trinity is really important here. What the story shows, then is that God in essence, is not like a solitary, isolated Monarch out there somewhere who's omnipotent, that Rather, God is to use the language of the story, God is the Abba, to whom Jesus prays, and who through Jesus sends the Spirit to his disciples. In other words, God has always viewed as a community and that's, that's really important because a community exists through mutual love. And so at the, at the heart of the Jesus narrative theodicy approach to the problem of suffering evil is that God is love. God is mutual love, revealed in this relationship that we are invited into, that's really important.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:44

So that kind of leads into our second one, which we've titled God acts most clearly in the world, through love. And, and this theodicy says no to the idea that all things happen, and especially bad things happen, and are caused by God because they're caused by God. And this goes back to the retribution theology. That was really common in the Old Testament, but that also has been picked up by some Christian denominations, where basically, if bad things are happening to you, it's punishment for your bad behavior. And retribution theology basically says, if you do good, you get good. If you do bad, you

get bad, so if something bad is happening, well, we know who to blame. And obviously, it's so, but this, this theodicy is saying no to that, and we've kind of indicated that already.

Tony Chvala-Smith 18:39

And so Jesus actually critiques this, this theodicy in two places in the gospels versus in Luke, and Luke chapter 13. Right at the start, Jesus, Jesus says to his hearers, you know, you know, those Galileans that Pilate, the Roman military governor murdered as they were trying to offer sacrifices, do you think do you think they they suffered? Because they were more more bad than anybody else? No. They didn't. And then he follows up with and those those people in Siloam 18 people who were killed when a tower fell on them, do you think that that happened? Because they were more wicked than anybody else? No. The no, in both cases is an immediate rejection of the idea of a simple cause and effect, something bad happened to you must be your cause it, in fact, what he says what he says in both cases is the text reads, but unless unless you all repent, you'll likewise perish. Now he's not trying to say there that God's going to do this to you because he just said God doesn't do that. Basically, as the British New Testament scholar TW Manson, in his classic work from mid 20th century on this on the teachings of Jesus, he says, what this is about is urgency. Right? Things happen in life. Bad things happen. They're not caused by God, smiting you, any things can help And life is tenuous. And so there's an urgency to respond to Jesus message about the kingdom, here and now. Right? Don't put it off. Wait. That's what this is about.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:09

Don't waste your time trying to figure out who's more sinful than you are. And who's more deserving of this suffering than you are.

Carla Long 20:17

But it's that is so fun!

Tony Chvala-Smith 20:21

It's very clear in this text that Jesus is saying, No, the old retribution, theodicy, drop it. It doesn't apply the other places in John chapter nine, where there is the this is the story of the man who was born blind. And I have to be careful because one time I was teaching a class on it, and it Charmaine said afterwards, you remember that you remember what you said, "You said the man born blind from birth"

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:47

Just a little redundant. But he probably said it 20 times.

Tony Chvala-Smith 20:51

I did it 20 times, I had no idea. But so the man born blind. And the disciples say to Jesus there who sin this guy or his parents, or if there's the retribution theodicy, from parts of the Hebrew Bible. And Jesus said, Neither. And then goes on to say, this is this is this is to show the glory of God because Jesus is about to heal the guy, and this is going to show the glory of God as it's revealed in Jesus. In other words, as Raymond Brown says, in his commentary on the gospel, John, Jesus moves the whole question of why this man is blind away from cause and effect, and moves into divine purpose. What can God do with this? That's a whole different animal than so. So in other words, Jesus Himself in His

ministry in the Jesus story, said, no, no, no. When bad things have happened to people, this, this, this and this. It's not because they were worse than anybody else. Right. So yeah, you take you take that that whole calculation goes right off the table there.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:54

So then we have to ask, how does this Jesus narrative theodicy help us see suffering more clearly. And so one of the ways is that if God, if God has in the as revealed in the Jesus story is a community of love, then bad or evil things that happen as think earthquakes, diseases, tragedies, wars, they can't be seen as coming from God. Instead, the way we can tell whether something is coming from God or not, does it align with divine love? And so then, when we're looking at suffering, we're saying Where does love affect this? Rather than what hateful God created this? So, so this theodicy rejects the idea that suffering and bad things that happen are orchestrated by God.

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:52

So next point is our simple heading for it is God with us. And that's that's kind of the heart of the Jesus narrative. That's right at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, he you will be called Emanuel, which is "God is with us". But it's, it's it's the point of the whole, the whole narrative regardless of the gospel. So that the Jesus the Jesus story, affirms that God is always present, always accompanying creation, even in the midst of pain and loss. And sidenote here in Migliore's chapter on Providence and Evil, he refers to Karl Bart's idea of concourses, which is a Latin word of God, God is the accompanying God. God is not out there absent God is God is working it through with us, and thus experiencing suffering and pain and loss with us. So that the key for the senator standing in a in a Jesus narrative, theodicy is the cross or the crucifixion of Jesus. This is the honest this was a this is the cross of God the sun. Right, that's the Trinitarian theme. This is not a look at a solitary monarch out there, sacrificing a human being, this is God, the second person of the Trinity, entering into entering into loss, death, suffering and pain on our behalf. And so that's really central to this theodicy. So, that's, that's really kind of an IF key to, to how how this theodicy then empowers us to deal with suffering is we start with the recognition that God is present with us in it, regardless of what it is.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:32

Yeah, that God is not absent. So at every stage of Jesus's life, there were challenges and disappointments, including if we will go to the end of Matthew and Mark that, you know, oh, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" So, you know, this, that kind of suffering and that feeling of being deserted are things that the Jesus felt to. So Jesus life is an example that God is with us in all the suffering, rather than giving into the idea that if we have struggles, and God is not with us. The Jesus narrative communicates, I think quite clearly that God walks with us in our suffering, to help us not be consumed by it. And I think that's one of the, one of the places where a suffering causes so much damage is when it is all consuming. And so the idea that God is with us in it, sometimes God with us in our suffering does bring healing, or forgiveness. And there's all kinds of, of stories in the New Testament of Jesus being there for people who are suffering and bringing healing or bringing, I'm thinking of Zacchaeus the tax collector and find him finding forgiveness, but so that God with us does change things. And sometimes it simply tells us that we're that we're not alone in this struggle, because that's, that's the most isolating part of struggles at times is the feeling that we're, whether we think we deserve it or not, that sometimes the isolating part, but the idea that others can understand or that we

would be ashamed to tell other people that we are suffering, that that that aloneness in the struggle is eliminated in the Jesus narrative, because God already is there with us in that in the midst of that suffering.

Tony Chvala-Smith 26:48

This is a recent, a recent experience I heard that really kind of I think helps apply this. I heard a testimony about a young woman whose husband and little child were killed in an accident. So the woman who was mother and wife is now widow, and not a mother anymore. And so she was like, utterly, utterly devastated, as you can imagine, just app just like horrific pain from this. And there's it in her agony at one point. She found herself crying out to God in rage. And what she said was that suddenly in that moment, she found herself kind of out of nowhere embraced by love she had never known before. It didn't it didn't fix the loss, but it gave her a way forward. And this this assessment reminds me also of in Jürgen Moltmann's biography A Broad Place he shares the story of his how he became a Christian, in in a prisoner of war camp as a, a German prisoner of war, and how the guilt and pain and and depression that came over him and other other prisoners, when they, when they saw what when they saw pictures of the Nazi concentration camps after the camps have been liberated, and how how he just went into this in just a horrible, dark, painful place. But among the things that helped him out of that was reading the Gospel of Mark. And he says in his biography, that that place on the cross where Jesus says, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?" For him, when he read that that was the moment what you said, That guy knows me. Right? That that man knows me. And that was part of his whole process of coming out of that, and then actually becoming one of the premier theologians of the the late 20th century, and he's still writing there in the early 21st century. But so that that's the sense of being accompanied by a God of love. In the midst of horrible loss and pain, is is transforming. Is potentially transforming.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:10

So a fourth one, a fourth aspect of this theodicy is that God honors our freedom, not just ours, but the the freedom of others. And so, God in the Jesus story, respects creaturely freedom to say yes or no, to choose well or not, to be self centered or to be centered on others. So God is not a puppet master or a tyrant that controls everything. Because that would be contrary to love, which brings freedom. So freedom, but freedom includes the possibility of loss of harm from others decisions or actions and their negative choices. And then it It also means there could be harm from our own bad choices, consequences. However, God is not indifferent to the evil in the suffering. So even though we have the freedom to make bad choices or other people's freedom can impinge on us and bring harm. God is not indifferent. God cares about the suffering that we have. And we see that in Jesus combating all of those kinds of sufferings, whether the person had any control over it or not, illness, so many, you know, people that Jesus touches, because they're suffering with illness, of marginalization, and in the, in the gospels, is often women, or the poor, or marginalized, for other reasons. Do Jesus steps in where there has been violence or the threat of violence, his own disciples wanting to bring down fire on the Samaritans because they weren't very welcoming of him in them, or have trauma, and you think about Legion, and all of his inner demons that that Jesus is freeing him from, and then finally death, the fear of death. Jesus brings freedom of that from that kind of suffering as well with the assurance that the death is not the end of everything, that God is God beyond that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 31:33

And so on this point, that God honors freedom of Jesus narrative, theodicy is not then going to subsequently theorize about what God can and can't do on the basis of human freedom. That's off the table, because we're trying to work with yours is who God is in the story. And God in story appears to honor human choices and freedom. And so we don't, we don't then subsequently create a theory to right.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:56

God also then, is about alleviating the suffering of people.

Tony Chvala-Smith 32:01

The next point in this theodicy is, or our summary of it would be a vulnerable God who points to a new future. So if you think about it, love, love and vulnerability belong to each other. And so the story of Jesus reveals a God who becomes vulnerable. Right in Jesus life, at incarnate Jesus life becomes vulnerable to death, and to suffering, but out of love for the world. So at the same time, Jesus is Jesus who embodies the vulnerable, the vulnerable God, God, that word. Jesus preaches the coming of the reign of God, which is going to be God's reign of justice and love and inclusion, and the possibility of in the future. So, so God's vulnerability also includes, hey, there's another possibility ahead of ahead of you that the possibility of this different kind of world and so the glimpse of this new future then invites readers invites people in the gospels but invites us as readers to align our actions and choices toward it toward the reign of God. So again, this is not this is not a theodicy of passivity. It's a theodicy that calls its readers to, to action on the basis of, of a God who was vulnerably, loving, but also who's whose reign, who promises that the world can and will become different.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:27

So our next one is we've just titled God's new possibilities. God's new possibility, sorry, rather than death, will have the last word. And in the midst of suffering, we often need to know that what is now is not for always, that there is something to look and feel for beyond that. So the cross reveals that God is present in our suffering as the crucified God. But the Jesus story is also about Easter, and triumph over death. And so it's it's a way of saying God refuses to let suffering and death have the last word over creation, but that God is constantly making new possible new possibilities.

Tony Chvala-Smith 34:18

And then the final the final kind of point, and we said eight earlier but actually, originally (we combined the combined seven and eight timelines), they they actually belong together. But the last one is God is transforming power. And so we're and this is really comes out really strongly migliori but other theologians follow the stupid wherever human beings courageously protest injustice, or resist systems that cause suffering. And wherever, wherever we work to alleviate pain. God the Spirit is present with us. It's God the Spirit prompting energizing motivating calling prophetically leading us to do that, and this is the Spirit Jesus sent, promised and sent to his disciples. So this the Spirit works in us to transform the world for good. So this is really important. It's not just God and Jesus, it's God Christ's Spirit. Father, Son, Spirit. God, the origin, God, the word God, the transformer, all these things, working together this community, which is where we kind of started this summary. And this, this is the community in which we live. The communion with the threefold God, and living out of the power of the

Spirit Jesus has sent then gives us power to make differences and changes that will alleviate and change suffering in the world. And that standard, good way of saying this, God is lover, beloved, and power of love. That's one of Augustine's images of the Trinity. And so God works in the world and not as a dictator, but always through sacrificial love and self giving. But this is not inner and not passive. It's very, very active and can make just the most incredible differences in the future and in the world as we experience it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 36:15

So, Carla, any questions or observations or things you'd like us to clarify?

Carla Long 36:22

Well, that's it was a lot, but I have always appreciated, you know, when you talk about the Trinity, God, the beloved, the lover, and what did you say? (Loving) The loving? Yes, that's what I that's what I always said, the loving. So I, I think that we just can't say that enough. The fact that God is love, and the way we know, something is of God is through love. I feel like I need to say that every single day for the rest of my life, and it will never ever, ever be enough. So if what you're doing and what you're saying is not out of love, then it it probably can I say it's not from God? Is that what I can say?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 37:04

Or at least we might want to check where it's coming from? It it personal? Yeah, exactly.

Tony Chvala-Smith 37:13

I think what when the New Testament writer who wrote the first letter of John says the phrase God is love, even though Love is a noun, technically, what the author means is, it's a verb, right? God is Love is an activity. God, God is in motion all the time as this loving communion, who's trying to call us to make a world with less and less and less suffering in it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 37:38

And so one of the things that the Jesus narrative theodicy says is look. Look to how Jesus is living, look to what Jesus is doing. This is love in action. This is, this is God's commentary on suffering.

Tony Chvala-Smith 38:02

This theodicy does not give you an answer to questions like, well, how come this miracle happened here, but not here? It doesn't, it doesn't. And you know, as we're thinking about this, Jesus didn't heal everybody in the world. In during his ministry, he healed selected people and we why? We don't know. And so in other words, when you go that route, you're trying to head back towards a theoretical kind of construct that you can manipulate and control, when in fact, this is what's what's happening. What's happening in the Jesus narrative theodicy in the Gospels is that God in Jesus through the Spirit is showing a way to respond to the suffering and evil and tragedy and, and hatred and violence that are part of part of the life of the world and trying to show us that that can that can become something else. That's what we that's what we've got. So that's we work with.

Carla Long 38:52

And it's so easy. You made me think about, it's so easy to have those platitudes, you know, and, and I remember I remember a very specific case of I was teaching, and somebody's daughter had gotten in a car accident, and she could have been very, very badly hurt, but she wasn't. And the teacher's like, well, God definitely intervened. And in the same room, there was a person whose child had been killed in a car accident. And I actually saw it in her face, like, Why didn't God intervene for me? (Yeah, exactly.) And, like, those things are so easy to say. And then you don't even necessarily realize how much pain you could put on somebody else. At that moment. I just felt my heart dropped to my feet. It was such an awful moment.

Tony Chvala-Smith 39:43

Yeah, and so one has to be careful again, not to just proof text things out of the Jesus narrative. And when we say Jesus narrative, we mean the whole story, all four gospels, and you have to be careful not to

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 39:55

Put it into some kind of easy formula. Oh, well God must have blessed us. And and sometimes the second step is implied, you know that we deserve it more than somebody else. But But part of the problem in that in the situation that you're that you were describing, is that sometimes when we say things like that, we are assuming that this is a formula, even though no one may have said that. It's what we've picked up from our culture about how God works. And the idea that deserving people get miracles and undeserving people don't. And unless we're clear about what we're saying, then then we can sometimes not acknowledge that God may have been created, may have done a miracle in one place. If we leave that assumption open, that God does miracles for those who deserve it. So it's, you know, that's one of the things about a theodicy is that we say it's not clear. It's not clear what why suffering and evil always are there, and especially in this theodicy, and that, but that one of the things God keeps trying to help us see communally is that God does not wish suffering upon us. So even the person who has lost someone so that they can begin to hear that God is that doesn't mean God is not with them, you know what I mean? So that's, that's almost like, it's something we have to add on to, you know, we think God did something here and alleviated some suffering. But it doesn't mean that we're suffering persists God is not there.

Tony Chvala-Smith 41:55

Yeah. That's just so important. And it's important for people who are in ministry to remember that going into hospital rooms, in emergency rooms and into funeral homes and in situations where people are facing all the seasons of suffering that are part of life, it's it's really important to not not take in text bombs, but to take in the image of one who shows us that God is with us regardless. That's I think that's very important. So what we'll do now, Carl, is we'll we'll finish up, I'll share briefly about how to preach the Jesus narrative, the Odyssey instrumental and this up with how to pray Jesus narrative theodicy. So that's kind of been our pattern. So. So I will say, again, as I will say, each time that we don't preach theodicies really (not a good idea.) Not a good idea. No, no, at least per se. Because you have people sitting in a congregation, or sitting in front of a zoom screen congregation, or however you want to put it, who are who are dealing with absolutely immense pain in their lives, or loss or whatever. And so the pulpit is not the place for theoretical, theoretical theological, I call them elixirs that claim somehow to fix things, or give you the final answer on why this happened to you or to somebody you

love, just to be very careful about that. In this case, with the Jesus narrative theodicy, a key thing to do is to let the story be the story, and not try to isolate passages. Now this is complicated because we use the Lectionary and the Lectionary does kind of isolate passages from the gospel each Sunday. But remember, the Gospel writers didn't write passages, they wrote narratives. And so whenever you're using a passage, especially when the passage touches on questions of suffering, evil, make sure you read it in the literary context as part of the story. That's going to be very, very helpful for using it well. And then, I think in terms of the Jesus of the Jesus narrative, remember that the the most Jesus most common form of self reference, is that really obscure phrase, Son of man, right. And Son of man, in his in his language of Aramaic could mean a human just simply human being, Jesus, the human being, and he's also the suffering Son of man, the suffering human being. So keep in mind that that following Jesus is not supposed to get us away from suffering. Like somehow it's, it's a it's a magic bullet, but we're following a human being who in his ministry suffered with and for others, that's just, that's part of that. Not being alone in it. The Jesus story helps us helps remind us we're not ultimately alone, regardless of what we're facing. Next thing is don't shy away from the sacrifice stories, the stories about Jesus dying for us for our sins or whatever. However, it's really important to, I think, to learn how to preach those texts and stories through the lens of a suffering God that who suffers with and for us, not a punishing God, who somehow you don't want to get trapped in the assumption that, that the phrase died for us. It means one particular thing that somehow Jesus took took what we were supposed to get, and isn't that marvelously loving. That's, that's one theory of atonement. There's many different ways that those atonement texts are cast. And so you have to, you have to be careful not to just shy away from a story where Jesus talks about Himself as a ransom for many, or the text speaking of Jesus, who will who will die for us. In lots of ways, what's being said there is that God, the Word, God with us is entering into the stuff that we fear the most. Entering into our own experiences of loss, death, dying, pain, suffering, agony, and so on. So if you shy away from cross language, you're going to cut yourself off from a resource that can really help help us connect to a crucified God, which which means a God who really understands the human condition, and has is is embedded in the human condition. So um, remember that we're preaching the Jesus narrative, preaching a text that allows us to use the Jesus narrative theodicy. We're preaching, we're preaching a profound mystery. God, the Eternal Word became flesh, God, the Eternal Word as flesh wept. God, as the Eternal Word was tortured, and bled and died, was murdered in public.

Tony Chvala-Smith 46:49

God, the Word was raised from the dead. There's this, this incredible mystery there that can touch the mystery of our own suffering, right? Anybody suffering on anything has deep element of mystery in it. And so here's the divine mystery, kind of intersecting with the mystery of human experience. And finally, I think the thing that really moves me deeply is the idea that the gospel stories all record that the risen Jesus still had the scars on him. There was a British poet who wrote a poem after World War One. The poem is titled Jesus of the scars. And a World War One is 100 years ago, and more now, but it was absolutely devastating for a whole generation was devastated. Millions of casualties, all kinds of war wounded, that came back, you know, to recover. Church churches were undermined by their support of this or that side in the war. They undermined themselves by that and but this this poet Edward Shillito, wrote this poem called Jesus of the Scars. And I'll give you a couple stanzas of which I think, which to me speak very deeply to what the Jesus narrative the theodicy is trying to say. And

these two stanzas go like this, by the way that this story is, the poem is situated in kind of Jesus appearing after his death and resurrection. And at these stanzas go,

Tony Chvala-Smith 48:21

If when the doors are shut, thou draws near, only reveal those hands that side of the line. We know today what wounds are, have no fear, show us the scars. We know the counter sign. The other Gods were strong, but thou was weak. They rode, but thou did stumble to a throne, but to our wounds, only God's wounds can speak. And not a God has wounds but thou own.

Tony Chvala-Smith 48:57

This is just an absolutely breathtakingly haunting poem about the wounded God, who is the only God who could really actually make sense to us. And it connects me finally to that great statement of Bonhoeffer when he was in prison, "only a suffering God can help."

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 49:16

So how can this theodicy and some of its understandings help us pray? And to help us pray? I would say honestly. So just a few starter lines that might get us there. "God, I'm struggling now. I'm tempted to think my struggles prove that you are not with me. But I remember how difficult Jesus's life was. And I'm assured you are already with me." Another, "God my distress and fear tell me I cannot go on. But help me trust you will be with me even if I can't." Another, "Jesus, you understand. Spirit, give me courage to be honest about my weakness and limits." And another, "Lover of the lonely. I don't like these unsettled feelings. And I agonize over the losses in my life, especially my broken relationships. Thank you, Jesus, for the stories of your friends who hurt or betrayed you or deserted you. Help me find forgiveness and healing with them." "God, today is dark and my struggles threatened to suffocate me. Helped me remember Jesus's images of your reign of love, inclusion, and a new future." And then my last one, "In my heart and soul, God, you have planted outrage at the injustice is ingrained in this world systems. Spirit gives me courage to use my voice and my very being to create room for your goodness in the midst of the world's hate. Amen."

Carla Long 51:25

Amen. Indeed, thank you, both of you for this I, maybe it's because I'm a Christian, but I felt myself really resonating with this theodicy more so than the others that you've gone over. And I'm not saying they weren't Christian. (That's fine.) I feel I felt, I understood this, I feel like on a deeper level, so I really appreciated hearing about that. And especially that you you kind of get to look at the Gospels in a whole different way. You know, our story, this when we preach on the Gospels and tell stories and about, you know, Jesus's life, and a lot of times it's really done in like this kind of happy, chirpy, positive way sometimes, or like Jesus tipped the table, and this is why this happened. That was awesome. So there's all the justice stuff, too. And this is more of a bit of a kinder, softer suffering. I don't know, maybe I'm wrong. But this that's how I heard it, at least

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 52:15

I think in that regard it lets us be more honest, honest about maybe that we don't have answers for everything, but also honest about what suffering does to us.

Tony Chvala-Smith 52:28

Because we all know that, sadly, church is one of the places where we have to keep our suffering silent in the most, at least we think we do. And that's, that's a horrid mistake, based on images of how good people should be and how church people should be, and everybody should be happy. But it's really, it's really has nothing to do with the gospel, and doesn't have anything to do with Jesus. Right? Who requires us simply to be honest before God?

Carla Long 52:57

Yeah, well, I just so appreciate hearing about this. I really have enjoyed listening to all these different types of the Odysseys and like, understanding suffering, and all these different kinds of ways and putting a name on it has been really helpful for me, like I've really enjoyed that. Thank you so much.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 53:13

And we've said this before, and probably will say it again, is that typically, we have a mix of theodicies we, we may have borrowed some things from different ones that fit or work for us at different times in our lives. But it does keep that conversation going inside ourselves and with God and in the community. So that we don't, so that we don't fall into having to act one way or look one way, in the midst of suffering, whether it's ours or somebody else's.

Tony Chvala-Smith 53:46

And I think at this point, we have maybe two more to cover we have, we'll cover what's called process theodicy which is a theodicy that comes out of a School of Theology called process theology. And then we will do what we call what are called liberation theodicy. And I think that will be our last one liberation theocracies have a few points of contact with the one we dealt with today. Whereas process theodicy has some points of contact contact with the the protest one we did before. So, so two more to two more to reflect on.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 54:19

And both of them are kind of new. Actually, the Jesus narrative one is kind of new in the bigger theological schema. They're, they're more modern.

Tony Chvala-Smith 54:33

And the Jesus narrative one you could say because of its focus on the Trinitarian nature of God is part of the 20th century's recovery of the doctrine of the Trinity in both Catholic and Protestant theology, which is a story for another time and probably a story not for a podcast, because I guarantee you, that would be a long, boring story.

Carla Long 54:53

Oh, well, you two always seem to find a way to make things interesting and fun, so I bet you could make it fun. Well, thank you so much for for that and I'm looking forward to hearing the last two theocracies and learning even more about it. So thank you, you two.

Josh Mangelson 55:16

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