

Every year, on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, the same *prayer* comes back around as the Collect of the Day. And every year, the opening words of that prayer make me pause...if I don't let myself rush past them:

“O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding...”

It is possible to receive these words with an *exclamation point*—or a *question mark*.

Sometimes our hearts and minds say “*Yes. Amen!*”.

Sometimes our hearts and minds say... “*Really?*”

Both of those responses are possible for followers of Jesus.

And it is not unusual to find ourselves living in the midst of both responses--with *faith and gratitude*...and with *restless questions...and even complaint*.

When we can be mindful, we have indeed been the recipients of *such good things that surpass our understanding*. And we can be especially aware of it...at pivotal high points of our lives. I spoke of this last Sunday, reflecting on *the baptism of children and grandchildren*...when the love of God and the love of one another can be so palpable and clear. The awareness of God's goodness can happen in so many ways...and more often than not it can be in moments of *quiet grace*...when grace lightly filters down toward us...like rain or dappled sunlight through the trees...and a peace overcomes us again...of the inexplicable goodness of God...that surpasses all human understanding.

And then, we also encounter the things in life...and in ourselves...which are not good...and are painful...and heartbreaking...and which can even be horribly destructive. And we cannot easily at all say: “Yes. Amen!” But we may more likely say—perhaps without saying--“Really?” We don't see that response in the lessons today. But that kind of question mark is repeatedly in the Bible and there are, for example, psalms that bluntly say “O God...really?”

When I was trying to bring to mind some of those verses and I googled “biblical complaints against God”, I was struck by what came up instead: “Overcoming the Habit of Complaining” or “The Sin of Complaining”. It took some work to find the resources that actually were willing to identify...within the Bible...the complaints of God's people...and even the complaint of Jesus himself on the cross...quoting from Psalm 22: “My God, my god, why have you forsaken me?” Apparently, the most popular writings on the internet about a faithful response to heartbreaking and horribly destructive things in life are all about *avoiding* an honest and truthful response to God. Let the user beware.

I have long noticed a nervousness...a jitteriness...a defensiveness...that can rise up in Christians...like that...when confronted with the things of life...that are truly hard to take...and that make it hard to pray:

“O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding...”

Instead, we are easily likely...to rush to an explanation...to try to quell the complaint...and as rapidly as possible...try to get back to gratitude...as if the possibility of complaint is...in itself...unfaithful. Which I do not believe is true.

But I can sympathize with that kind of Christian avoidance...because it does touch on a nerve in Christianity...a place of real vulnerability that is worth acknowledging, plainly, and without fear: *Jesus never taught a systematic explanation of everything*. Jesus did have a lot to say. And he also asked hard questions like: “Why are you afraid?” “Who condemns you?” and “What do you want?” But, Jesus did not *explain* suffering.

Instead, he called listeners' attention...to the lilies of the fields and the birds of the air...to children...to good Samaritans...and faithful widows...that testify to the glory of God. And he spoke of a God...who is unlike the imperial gods who endlessly require appeasement and blood...but who is like a good father...who knows how to give good gifts to his children...who attends to lost sheep...and the last that they may become first. And so Jesus himself embodied an astonishing trust in a different God...and invited others to enter into his trust...by joining him in calling upon "Our Father". And, wherever he went he laid his hands on suffering. And resisted the proud. And he himself suffered.

Christianity has developed many sophisticated ideas over two thousand years...many very helpful ideas...and many not-so-helpful ideas [like you can easily find on the internet and can unknowingly assume represents the truth of Christianity]. I continue to plunge into all these ideas...all this talk...both for my own self...and for you. This would seem to be the calling of my life. But all those ideas—even the best ones—can sometimes obscure the heart of the matter:

1. *The whole Old Testament never gets far from its most fundamental astonishment:* that slaves who were absolute nobodies in Egypt...were "seen" by God in their misery...and despite all the imperial powers of Egypt... set free...by a God wholly (and holy) unlike any other gods then known...a God who is good.
2. *And the whole New Testament never gets far from its most fundamental astonishment:* of the resurrection of Jesus from the cross and death and the unexpected gift of the Holy Spirit...all coming from a most remarkable man...who embodied this same God...who is indeed good.

There is an innocent...child-like...yet very smart...returning of the whole Bible to these two great astonishments...and the biblical witnesses just will not let them go...despite all the evil, sin, and death that persists.

There is a determined confidence in the goodness of God...still mixed with lament and complaint...that believes that the goodness of God...known in these two crucial events...is the most trustworthy truth...of the world...and calls us...to goodness like God...and to lay our hands...on suffering too.

Christians are inescapably vulnerable here...as vulnerable as Jesus in his suffering. And we keep returning...in our vulnerability...to our defenseless gratitude...and our pained complaint...there...to abide in Jesus. He lived and died... looking out upon a world of confusion and cruelty...in which despite everything...the glory of God keeps arising. And he lived again...by the goodness...of God...who is greater than the world....making it possible for us to still pray:

"O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding..."