

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!”. And sometimes our hearts and minds say... “Really?” And both of those responses are possible for followers of Jesus. Sometimes we are living in a time of *clear faith and gratitude*. And sometimes we are living in a time of *restless questions and even complaint*.

We have indeed--when we are mindful--been the recipients of *such good things that surpass our understanding*. And sometimes we are especially aware of it...especially at pivotal high points of our lives...like I spoke of last Sunday...*the baptism of our grandchildren and children*...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...including moments of *quiet grace*...that lightly filter 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, sometimes the “things” we encounter in life...and in ourselves...are not so good...and are painful...and heartbreaking...and can 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 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...such piercing complaints...such as from Jesus himself...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 make it genuinely 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...so as 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 what I can say, in sympathy with that kind of Christian avoidance, is that this does touch on a vulnerability in Christianity which is worth acknowledging, plainly, and without fear: *Jesus never taught a systematic explanation of everything*. Now, there are long and deep theological discourses of Jesus in the Gospel of John. And there is of course the rather long Sermon on the Mount that also includes the Beatitudes. But mostly, Jesus told quite compelling but also cryptic parables. And he asked individuals direct questions like: “Why are you afraid?” “Who condemns you?” and “What do you want?” And he did not explain suffering...anymore than he explained why there is goodness.

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...unlike the imperial gods who endlessly require appeasement and blood...but was 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. But I continue to plunge into all these ideas...all this talk...both for 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 what, fundamentally, is very simple and yet profound, very personal and yet unavoidably vulnerable. And the best of these ideas keep bringing us back to the heart of the matter, which I can name in two points, just as the Bible does:

1. *The whole Old Testament never gets far from its most fundamental astonishment:* that slaves who were absolutely 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. And then...a whole lot of the Old Testament is also about...all the things that also go strangely wrong.
2. *And the whole New Testament never gets far from its most fundamental astonishment:* of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the unexpected gift of the Holy Spirit...all coming from a most remarkable man...who embodied this same God...who is indeed good. And then too...a whole lot of the New Testament is also about...all the things that also go strangely wrong.

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 things that go strangely wrong.

There is 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 on the cross. And we keep returning...in our vulnerability...to our defenseless gratitude...and our pained complaint...there...to abide in Jesus...he who lived and died... looking out upon a world of confusion and cruelty...in which despite everything...the glory of God keeps arising. And who 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...”