

Punishing and Compassionate:
Biblical Images of God Engaged as Resilience Narratives in Safe Liturgical Spaces

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Moving Toward Wholeness: Traumatized Texts and Bodies
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NOTE: THIS SCRIPT OF THE PRESENTATION IS INTENDED MAINLY FOR THOSE WHO ATTENDED THE CONFERENCE AS AN “AID TO MEMORY.” THIS CONTENT IS A WORK IN PROGRESS THAT I PLAN TO DEVELOP FOR PUBLICATION. –CGF

Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us today. Before beginning I have three announcements: In addition to the powerpoint presentation, there is a handout and a bibliography. In this age of zoom, with people participating from their own locations, there can be unavoidable distractions. Since I will be presenting concepts that are unfamiliar to many, I suggest that you reduce distractions as much as possible so you can get the most out of the presentation. I will be talking about trauma in various ways. If at any point in the presentation you feel uncomfortable, I urge you to do what you need to do to take care of yourself—that could mean turning off the audio or video, or absenting yourself for a time.

PRELUDE

I invite you to participate in a brief exercise to the extent that you are comfortable. Imagine gazing into the loving face of God or Jesus and being seen with love. Imagining this may not produce a visual image, but it may bring up feelings about God and God’s regard for you. How does it feel? Now, consider: How might past experiences of being violated by someone in ways that felt overwhelming, frightening, humiliating, and physically or emotionally painful affect someone in the following ways—If you are comfortable, respond to the zoom poll for each with either, agree / not sure / disagree: Such experiences can make it difficult for people to imagine being seen and loved by God. Such experiences can leave people with some distrust of God.

My perspective on spirituality is shaped by years of ministry, especially in prison settings. In preparing to preach on biblical texts there I often asked myself, “If this is good news, what can make it hard to believe it?” Today I would like to explain how certain effects of traumatic stress can become barriers to believing that one is seen and loved by God, and to explore how we as Christian community can create safe liturgical spaces that support people in reducing those barriers. Specifically, how might biblical images of God, some as punishing and others as compassionate, be combined for this purpose?

INTRODUCTION – Trauma, Resilience, and Liturgy

Today we have considered trauma and resilience from several perspectives. Defining elements of trauma include that it overwhelms ordinary coping strategies and leaves long-lasting harmful effects in the person’s brain, mind, and body. One such long-lasting effect is to undermine our capacity to relate well in close relationships, including with God, by skewing *in negative, toxic* ways our assumptions about ourselves, others, the world, and God. Such toxic assumptions can make it difficult for us to believe we are loved by, or can trust, God, as well as other people.

One can talk about resilience as a personal quality that helps one overcome stresses and threats to psychological wellbeing, but this individual focus misses the enormous role played by a person's social and cultural environment. I will discuss resilience as a dynamic and interactive *process that enables* people to cope with psychological crises dominated by conflict in how they understand self and world, e.g., between *toxic assumptions* and healthier assumptions. Such a process of resilience is embedded in culture and can engage religious symbols and practices. The process can be ambivalent – able to employ opposing points of view to address distinct needs.

Words and images, including biblical texts, become resilience narratives when we use them to interpret the crisis by *symbolizing its meaning and organizing our experience in ways that support endurance and wellbeing*. Scholars have begun to recognize that many biblical texts are “traumatized”—that they were written and subsequently used by generations of the faith community as *tools for resilience* in the face of trauma.

I would like us to think about Christian liturgy broadly, not only as the Eucharist or Sunday worship, but as *any* privileged time and space in which the faith community encounters God in Christ through communal interaction.

Ministry professionals are increasingly aware of the importance of helping people to process losses of various kinds, including losses resulting from trauma. David Blumenthal (2002), retired professor of Jewish studies, has observed what many of us recognize: that many Christians have difficulty integrating anger into their spirituality, including liturgy. Christian liturgy often falls short in providing a safe space for voicing and validating not only pain but also the anger linked to loss, especially trauma. Psychologist Lisa Rudolfsson and theologian Fredrik Portin have pointed out that survivors of sexual abuse can encounter in Christian churches both failure to recognize the depth of their anger and simplistic expectations that they forgive the perpetrators who violated them (Rudolfsson & Portin, 2018). Christian pastoral theologian Andrew Lester (2003; 2006; 2007) and the late Old Testament scholar and Catholic priest Erich Zenger (1996) have suggested that the anger portrayed in biblical images of God and Jesus arises from love for those who have been violated. While affirming the need for caution when engaging anger in spiritual practice, including liturgy, Blumenthal, Lester, and Zenger advocate for greater recognition of the constructive function that anger can have, and the harm that is done by ignoring anger.

In this presentation I want us to consider how we can create safe liturgical spaces that draw on biblical images of God, both angry and punishing images and compassionate ones, engaging them as resilience narratives that can *process* anger and other difficult feelings, and *help people replace* toxic assumptions with healthy ones.

OVERVIEW: I will discuss...

- **PART ONE:** plain-sense v. metaphoric ways to understand biblical images of God
- **PART TWO:** The Mechanics of How Using Punishing Images of God alongside Compassionate Ones Can Support Resilience
- **PART THREE:** Creating safe Christian liturgical spaces that support resilience — Hebrew Bible resources and a Case Example
- **CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS**

PART ONE: plain-sense v. metaphoric ways to understand biblical images of God

Many Christians may have difficulty seeing violent biblical images of God as having any constructive use for faith. Before exploring a healing function for images of God as punishing, let's consider two ways that we can understand how biblical texts portray God: we can ask *whether or not* they are true, or we can ask *how* they might be true and *how* not true.

If we emphasize the literal or plain sense of the text, we might expect biblical images of God to describe God's essential, abiding character in ways that are either true or false. When people respond to biblical images of God like the Psalmist's prayer that God "break the arm of the wicked" with "that's not the God I believe in," the response might stem from the stance that *acceptable* images of God must portray an *essential characteristic* of God, one the reader considers to match who God "really is." This stance leads to mutually exclusive options for biblical images of God: God either wants to harm our enemies or wants us to love them; God either passionately punishes sinners or compassionately forgives them.

But is such either/or mentality a false choice? The incompatibility disappears when we emphasize the metaphorical character of the texts and ask not *IF* they are true but *HOW THEY ARE TRUE*. For instance, Psalm 23 uses the metaphor of a shepherd to convey God's care and protection; and people can feel compelled by this image. Yet, God is transcendent and so cannot be fully caught in any net of words or images, not even the image of the good shepherd. There may be days when the image of God as shepherd rings hollow in my heart because my pain is so great that for the moment the best I can do, like the complaints of Jeremiah, is cry out in gut-wrenching pain to God whom I feel has abandoned me.

To emphasize the metaphoric character of biblical images of God is not to deny their specialness as Holy Scripture with divine origin. Yet, to grasp how images of God both as loving and as punishing can support resilience, we need to consider *practical implications* of believing that the Bible has divine origin: What does this belief help us *do*? It helps us trust the biblical texts enough to allow them to help us trust God. By trusting God, I mean a disposition to move forward in the spiritual journey by being open and receptive to what God is doing, to how God is loving us, and to how God is challenging us *because* God loves us.

In our journey toward trusting God, we trust the biblical texts enough to let ourselves become vulnerable to those texts to *do things* with us: by letting them shape the way we organize and make sense of our experience, and construct our stories and identities; by letting them help us hold our pain, our anger, and our fear in ways that anticipate an encounter with God and the authentic awe, peace, and even joy that can flow from such encounters.

A major problem with violent biblical images of God is that they can be, and have been, used for serious harm. For instance, images of God killing the Canaanites so that the Israelites could take their land was used to justify the genocide inflicted by Europeans on indigenous people in the Americas. This problem highlights the importance of having competent leaders to help people in the faith community appropriate such images.

As a general rule, we can judge the adequacy and appropriateness of how we employ biblical images or any metaphors for God by the degree to which their use promotes right relationship with self, others, world, and God. We can readily think of ways that images of God as loving and merciful might do this. Next, I would like to explore how images of God as punishing can also promote such right relationships by reducing barriers to trusting God that have been internalized as a result of trauma.

PART TWO: The Mechanics of How Using Punishing Images of God alongside Compassionate Ones Can Support Resilience

To understand the mechanics of how using punishing images of God alongside compassionate ones can support resilience requires grasping that different images of God can meet distinct needs in people, and in the complexity of the human mind and heart, such distinct needs can exist simultaneously and at different levels of awareness. Some of those needs are primary and lasting—like being safe, seen, and loved. Experiencing God’s love provides foundational motivation for trusting God and supports the faith community’s essential purpose: *to cultivate right relationship with God, themselves, and others*. It follows that, among biblical images for God, compassionate ones are *primary*.

To support that primary need, at times we can need other things. One such secondary need is to address the toxic assumptions that result from trauma and become barriers to relating to God. As already noted, when we are violated, we often internalize meaning in the form of toxic assumptions about ourselves, others, the world, and God. These toxic assumptions persist in us not just as conscious ideas, but often outside our awareness as the frames through which we experience life, coloring and shaping our daily experiences. For instance, if I have been violated in the past, I might feel that it happened because God does not love me, and I may interpret present struggles as evidence that God does not love me.

Being violated intentionally by humans tends to have deeper and more lasting toxic effects than accidents or natural disasters because how people treat us can strongly affect how we understand ourselves. It can produce shame: the persistent and painful feeling that I lack worth and dignity, that there is something wrong with me.

In general, toxic assumptions resulting from trauma are linked to the embodied memory of the traumatic events and especially the perpetrator. They are resistant to change because of the emotional intensity with which they were internalized.

I will focus on two kinds of biblical images of God as punishing: (1) God punishing perpetrators of violations against God’s people; (2) interpreting violations enacted by humans as God punishing God’s people for their injustice.

Both kinds employ the following basic mechanism that can help erode toxic assumptions linked to our memory of the perpetrators who violated us, and replace them with healthier ones. Two aspects of images of God as punishing make them effective: (1) their *emotional intensity* helps us access our own authentic emotional responses to the trauma that had to be suppressed, like anger, and it helps us challenge the internalized and emotionally charged image of the perpetrator linked to the toxic assumptions; (2) their *symbolic and dramatic character* allows the emotional intensity of the images to remain at a distance to reduce likelihood that we might be overwhelmed or retraumatized, and it helps create a compass of meaning and morality to challenge the toxic ways we interpreted the stressful events and to offer healthier interpretations.

Without anyone being harmed, the punishing images of God combine with compassionate ones to help us believe that, despite how the human perpetrators overpowered and violated us, they do not have power to determine who we are, the dignity we have, or what their violations of us mean for us. We do that in relationship with God, the ultimate compass of meaning and morality. How does each kind employ this mechanism?

IMAGES OF GOD PUNISHING PERPETRATORS DRAMATIZE BOTH THAT SUCH VIOLATIONS ARE WRONG AND THAT THE PERPETRATORS DON’T CONTROL THE PEOPLE’S DIGNITY, MEANING, OR IDENTITY.

When the ancients prayed with these images, they may well have hoped that the people who violated them would be punished by God; but we can recognize that the effectiveness of using the images in a process of resilience does not rely on what actually happens to the perpetrator.

Using such images today as resilience narratives should occur: (1) only in safe spaces that ensure no one will be hurt; (2) with guidance of professionals who are competent in this are—therapist, spiritual director, or ministry professional; (3) in ways appropriate to context, differently in group therapy than Christian liturgy. It increases the effectiveness of these images to have trusted, empathetic witnesses join with the survivor in affirming that the violation was wrong and that God supports the survivor’s dignity, identity and meaning.

Interpreting violations enacted by humans as punishment from God can work in several ways. It is common, in the aftermath of being violated, for survivors of trauma to react by assuming guilt for causing the violation:

ASSUMING RESPONSIBILITY FOR BEING VIOLATED HELPS PEOPLE SURVIVE THE OVERWHELMING SENSE OF CHAOS AND ASSERT THEIR AGENCY WHEN BEING OVERPOWERED. TO IMAGINE THE VIOLATION AS DIVINE PUNISHMENT IS A WAY OF ASSERTING RESPONSIBILITY FOR WHY IT HAPPENED.

WHEN THE BIBLE INTERPRETS VIOLATIONS ENACTED BY HUMANS AS DIVINE PUNISHMENT, IT SHIFTS AGENCY FROM THE HUMAN PERPETRATOR TO GOD AND SO DRAMATIZES THAT THE HUMAN PERPETRATORS DON’T CONTROL THE PEOPLE’S DIGNITY, MEANING, OR IDENTITY; THIS THEN ALLOWS FOR RECONTEXTUALIZING THE IMAGE IN WAYS THAT EMPHASIZE IMAGES OF GOD’S LOVE.

Experienced as a human act, the violation communicated the survivor’s lack of value. When agency for the violation is transferred to God, the images of God punishing the people can then be contextualized in wider symbolic programs that prioritize restoration of relationship and emphasize images of God as compassionate and supporting the survivor’s dignity, identity, and meaning.

PART THREE: Creating safe Christian liturgical spaces that support resilience — Hebrew Bible resources and a Case Example

To spark reflection on how Christians can create safe liturgical spaces that support resilience I’d like to explore: (1) a core liturgical *dynamic of resilience* attested in the Hebrew Bible, (2) how the book of Jeremiah and Ps 18 integrate punishing and compassionate images of God in symbolic programs, and (3) a case example.

An array of markers in the HB point to a basic liturgical dynamic with robust resilient capacity that I call an *elastic matrix of grace*. For this idea, I build on the work of Claus Westermann (1974; 1981) and my teachers Jon Levenson (1985; 1994) and Gary Anderson (1991). Merriam Webster defines a matrix as “something within or from which something else originates, develops, or takes form” (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2021). This elastic matrix of grace has the capacity to hold and validate the full range of the people’s experience—including loss and trauma—while fostering development of a healthy relationship with God and solidarity with each other rooted in healthy assumptions.

It works by constructing a polarity between the celebration of *life* and of *death*: in the Israelite worldview death is not just biological death. Experiences of bodily and social suffering—including physical illness, imprisonment, and isolation from loved ones—are understood as a participation in death. By contrast, experiences of bodily and social wellbeing—birth of a child, return to health after sickness, freedom after imprisonment—are understood as participation in life.

The tension that the community experiences between these two poles creates a liturgical environment that has elasticity to expand its capacity to the degree necessary to hold feelings that can arise from loss and trauma: fear, anger, sadness, and feeling alienated from God and community. At the same time, its elasticity seeks to draw people back into close and favorable relationship with God and community, doing so in a way that goes *with* rather than *against* the grain of our human sensibility. Even when protest and feeling alienated are in the foreground, this liturgical matrix maintains in the background a continual invitation to trust God's loving presence. It provides space for the movement of God's spirit, or grace, to shift feelings toward relaxation of anger and emergence of acceptance, peace, and eventually joy in God's loving presence.

At the pole of life and praise, Israel affirms God's love and favorable regard for them as a foundation for believing in their dignity and goodness. *It celebrates traditions* of God's creating and re-creating the world and the people of Israel through history by defeating threatening forces; in *the present*, material sustenance and physical wellbeing become symbols of God's love, seen as continuations of God's ongoing creative activity. Importantly for creating resilience: *Even if oppression continues*, the liturgical appropriation of images of God defeating oppressors creates resilience by helping people appropriate healthy relationship with God as the ultimate source of their dignity, identity, and meaning, which cannot be controlled by present oppressors. Linking present wellbeing to traditions of the distant past (like the Exodus story) prompts liturgical expressions of gratitude, praise, and commitment to God through which the *community helps each other to believe they are loved by God*.

At the pole of death and lament, Israel acknowledges honestly that the losses and stresses of daily life can become barriers to believing in God's love and favorable regard for them. In the *foreground* people express negative feelings associated with loss and suffering. In the *background*, the matrix holds the possibility of trusting God to restore relationship with God and to bring about material wellbeing, even if this is deferred to the future. Shared activities like weeping, fasting, wearing sackcloth or torn clothes, and crying out in lamentation to God for help validate feelings such as sadness, frustration, fear, and anger. Such shared expression acknowledges that *suffering feels isolating*; yet using prayers *communally* to express a sense of God's absence or unresponsiveness—and even angry protest at God—can also cultivate *solidarity* and mitigate people's isolation.

Can suffering be *explained* in ways that affirm God's love for the people? The Bible is ambivalent. The Bible portrays God's love in *four ways that suggest some explanation for suffering*, and yet, in other ways that suggest experiences of suffering are *inexplicable*. Even when explanations *address* people's struggle to understand WHY their loving God would allow suffering to happen, the explanations' *metaphoric character* becomes clear when we see that the *same situation* of suffering can be explained by *multiple* rationales that are *not logically compatible*. For instance, as we shall see, the book of Jeremiah uses all four explanations to interpret the link between God's love and the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and subsequent Exile.

#1: Suffering can be unjustly caused by humans. Based on traditions affirming God's love for Israel, this rationale prompts petitions to God for help and imagines God's violent confrontation and punishment of enemies, often as a means of rescue.

REMEMBER: IMAGES OF GOD PUNISHING PERPETRATORS DRAMATIZE BOTH THAT SUCH VIOLATIONS ARE WRONG AND THAT THE PERPETRATORS DON'T CONTROL THE PEOPLE'S DIGNITY, MEANING, OR IDENTITY. Stories like that of the Hebrew people crying out to God when they were oppressed by Pharaoh in Egypt, provide images with which the people in the present can identify as they cry out to God during distress.

Jeremiah declares that because the Babylonians and other nations unjustly violated the people, God will punish them violently. Chapters 49-51 use fiery images to show God condemning and punishing Babylon and other nations for being the agents of injustice when they destroyed Jerusalem and violated Israel, expressing God's anger on behalf of the traumatized people.

#2: Suffering can be caused by God as just punishment understood to be an educational corrective, a transitional means to strengthen relationship with God. Such punishment is based on the people's breaking the terms of their covenant with God.

REMEMBER: ASSUMING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE VIOLATION HELPS PEOPLE SURVIVE THE OVERWHELMING SENSE OF CHAOS AND ASSERT THEIR AGENCY WHEN BEING OVERPOWERED. TO IMAGINE THAT THE VIOLATION WAS DIVINE PUNISHMENT IS A WAY OF ASSERTING RESPONSIBILITY FOR WHY IT HAPPENED.

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Jeremiah claims it was actually *not* the Babylonians, but *God* who enacting those destructive events, doing so as justified punishment, but with the ultimate purpose of restoring healthy relationship with the people. In various ways throughout the book's first 25 chapters, Jeremiah asserts that God is using the Babylonians to punish Judah for their social injustice and idolatry. Yet, the traumatic events are also interpreted as only the first stage in a process by which God is re-creating Israel anew with a better capacity to live in relationship with God (e.g., Jer 6:19; 18:1-11).

#3: Suffering can be caused or allowed by God *unjustly*, leading to *protest* against God. Here the *elasticity* of the matrix of grace *holds another tension*: Voicing protest validates the people's anger to the point of claiming that God unjustly allowed the suffering; this calls into question whether God *actually is loving and responsive* to the people's needs. Yet, protest against God in the Bible is generally linked to the possibility of reconciling the relationship; people are bold enough to protest against God because God is presumed to love them and so that they can anticipate God would want to fix the aberrant situation of unjust suffering.

Jeremiah claims that God inflicted the punishing destruction *unjustly* on at least some of the people. In many of Jeremiah's so-called "confessions" his voice represents the people in protesting against God and implying hope that God would return to relationship with them.

#4: *Finally*, as an explanation *not* of *what caused suffering* but of *what it's for*, suffering can be an occasion for God to express love for the people by joining them in their grief.

Jeremiah considers the purpose of the suffering as an occasion for God to express solidarity with the people in their suffering. Representing God, the character of Jeremiah gives moving expression to how God suffers with the people. Kathleen O'Connor (2011) observes that most of the language in Jeremiah 8-9 expresses God's empathy for the people, as here:

Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people! (Jer 8:22-9:1)

Jeremiah's mixing of explanations is not strictly logical, but consistent logic is not the point. The ambivalence supports resilience by organizing and systematizing people's experience in different ways, addressing multiple needs.

The Bible *also* symbolizes suffering by allowing it to be inexplicable, focusing on God as awe-inspiring. Biblical awe toward God entails feeling simultaneously a trusting attraction, and fear linked to the unknown. The fear aspect of biblical awe does not envision God as sadistic. The combination of attraction and fear promotes accepting "life on life's terms." This awe is felt bodily as exhilarating—like being in free-fall yet feeling we will be ok, like the rush of a roller coaster ride, or like the "wow" aroused when we admire beauty. Within the elastic matrix of grace, such bodily experience can foster an encounter with, appreciation for, and trust in God that allows us to shift toward feeling *at peace* with the *inexplicability* of things, including suffering. Like *mindfulness* practice, "leaning into a stance of awe" can help people to relax their anxiety and negative judgments. A stance of awe fosters concretely expressing confidence in God's love through *willingness to trust God by letting go* of a need for causal explanations, of a need to judge suffering as either deserved or not, of expectations of how things will turn out; and *by continuing the faith journey*.

To further illustrate how symbolic programs can integrate multiple images of God to support resilience, let's consider the liturgical potential of the first part of Psalm 18 (NRSV), and a case example. I invite you to look through the Psalm text in the handout and see what catches your eye as I make observations about each section.

Vv. 1-2 set up the psalm as David's praise to God after escaping Saul's attempts to kill him; this allows the community who uses the psalm liturgically to identify with David, as someone God loves and rescues from death, and who loves God.

- *To the leader. A Psalm of David the servant of the LORD, who addressed the words of this song to the LORD on the day when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul. He said:*
- *I love you, O LORD, my strength.*
- *2 The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.*

V. 3 invites the community to join David in affirming trust in God for protection, symbolizing God's enduring love

- *3 I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, so I shall be saved from my enemies.*

Vv. 4-5 dramatize being afraid and overwhelmed by life-threatening forces; they invite the community to resonate with their own experience of being overwhelmed. Yet, the poetic imagery creates a distance from the threat, makes it more tolerable.

- *4 The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of perdition assailed me; 5 the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me.*

V. 6 gives a dramatic summary of how crying out to God effectively evokes God's favorable response.

- *6 In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears.*

Vv. 7-15 provide intense emotional detail of God’s angry and punishing confrontation of the life-threatening agents and so asserts God’s love for the speaker despite the suffering, even when God seems to have allowed the violation to occur.

- *7 Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry. 8 Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him. 9 He bowed the heavens, and came down; thick darkness was under his feet. 10 He rode on a cherub, and flew; he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind. 11 He made darkness his covering around him, his canopy thick clouds dark with water. 12 Out of the brightness before him there broke through his clouds hailstones and coals of fire. 13 The LORD also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice. 14 And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; he flashed forth lightnings, and routed them. 15 Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare at your rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.*

Vv. 16-19 recap the event emphasizing its final meaning: God loves (delighted in) me!

- *16 He reached down from on high, he took me; he drew me out of mighty waters. 17 He delivered me from my strong enemy, and from those who hated me; for they were too mighty for me. 18 They confronted me in the day of my calamity; but the LORD was my support. 19 He brought me out into a broad place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me [NAB: “because he loves me”].*

As a symbolic program, the psalm’s vivid imagery intertwines images of God’s compassion for the speaker and God’s angry punishment of the perpetrators of violence. It helps the community to symbolize that the oppression is wrong and to diffuse any toxic interpretation imposed by oppressors, loosening their hold on the suffering’s meaning. The evocative imagery can also be awe-inspiring, helping to shift those praying it toward a stance of awe from which to interpret the suffering in a way that affirms their dignity, identity and meaning rooted in God’s love.

But what about cases where people prayed to God to rescue them, and it didn’t happen? – “Where was God?!” The following case example illustrates how liturgy as an “elastic matrix of grace” can validate anger, challenge toxic assumptions, and from that experience of love shift the person’s perspective toward an ability to receive God’s love, and to draw their dignity, identity, and meaning.

The case of “Greta”

As part of field education for my MDiv over 30 years ago, I received training in pastoral care with incarcerated adults. My responsibilities included visiting a unit of women, and leading a weekly Catholic communion service there. During one service attended by two women, as we sat around a table one of them, whom I’ll call “Greta,” conveyed strong nonverbal cues that she was angry: her arms folded, a persistent scowl on her face.

The first biblical reading included these verses from Exodus 22:

You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans. (Exo 22:22-24 NRS)

In my brief preaching, I encouraged the women to “cry out” to God when suffering, even to complain and protest to God, because God cares about us. Then, I invited them to share their thoughts. Greta looked at me with her arms crossed and said, “so when I was being raped and I cried out to God to stop the rape, why didn’t he stop the rape?” That’s all she said. I took it in, paused to breathe, and inwardly turned to God for inspiration on how to respond. Then, looking in her eyes with empathy, I said: “God didn’t stop the rape. Can you tell God now how angry you are that God didn’t stop the rape?” Greta just rolled her eyes and didn’t say anything, and I continued with the service.

A week later I returned to the unit, and as I walked in, among the women in the large open area, I saw Greta notice me and immediately start walking quickly toward me. As she got closer, I was surprised to see that her affect was different. She was smiling and radiated excitement. When she reached me, before I could say hello, she blurted out: “Well, I told him! But I told him if he was mad back, he had to be mad at you, because you’re the one who told me I could tell him!”

How might a process of resilience have been happening for Greta? The prior week together we had created a safe liturgical space from which she went forth, feeling able to express to God her anger about how God had not stopped the rape, and something changed. The *fact* of the rape—which had occurred prior to her incarceration—could not be changed, but her *experience of the memory* of it, and how that memory *affected her relationship* with God changed dramatically. Greta experienced a shift from death to life: *from* the pain and isolation of having to keep her anger about what had happened to her outside of her relationship with God; *to* the freedom to honestly represent herself to God, and to be validated by the community in doing so.

I suggest that the Exodus passage’s integration of imagery of God punishing oppressors played a significant role for Greta, even though she never talked about what God might do to punish the perpetrator of the rape. Even though it was in the background, integrating this punishing image into a safe liturgical space allowed it to dramatize in an evocative way God’s care for Greta. This integration would have helped to present God as an ally to Greta in her anger over what happened to her so that she felt safe to express it honestly to God. Thus, to diffuse toxic assumptions linked to the rape, reducing the shame or self-blame that she may have internalized, restoring some sense of solidarity in the faith community, and increasing her capacity to trust others and God.

I suspect that the act of expressing her anger also constituted for Greta an experience of awe that helped her let go of the need for an explanation and so to become able to find some peace in trusting God. In the following months of weekly conversations, Greta talked with me about her faith journey. The case of Greta illustrates that even when the person was *not* rescued, using images that portray God punishing the perpetrator can play a part in a multifaceted program of interpreting suffering, affirming in believable ways that God loves and cares for the person.

CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS:

I began by noting that trauma can leave people with significant barriers to relating to God, themselves, and others, and that Christians have difficulty integrating anger into their spirituality, including liturgy. Excluding anger from our spiritual and liturgical practice comes at cost. When we engage biblical imagery of God as angry and punishing, we must do so carefully and competently, but failure to offer safe spaces to engage those images keeps vital resources for resilience from people who need them. I have attempted to describe a limited, healing role that biblical images of God as angry and punishing can play in Christian practice when integrated with images of God as compassionate. For survivors of trauma, the result can be to validate their feelings and help to free them from toxic assumptions linked to the trauma, supporting capacity for healthier relating.

I conclude with some questions that I hope might prompt your creative reflection:

- ❖ How might Christian liturgy employ a wide range of expression—music, visual art, gesture, preaching, prayers—to create a set of symbols that supports resilience by doing the following?
 - *coordinating* punishing images of God with compassionate ones, keeping the compassionate ones primary
 - *embracing* the tension between seeing material wellbeing as evidence of God’s love, and letting go of expectations about material wellbeing or explanations for suffering
 - *accessing* both the community’s traditions of God’s historic saving activity, and the community’s current witness to God’s saving action in their lives.
- ❖ How might we create liturgical spaces that:
 - gently facilitate remembering and symbolically expressing elements of stressful memory and feelings in ways that feel tolerable and not overwhelming, and can also challenge toxic interpretations and promote healthier ones?
 - establish a respectful tone for interaction, cultivating empathy and compassion, and enhancing awareness of—and working to challenge—racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia?
- ❖ How might we create liturgical spaces for gatherings with limited size and group composition to ensure greater safety for sharing sensitive personal experiences?
- ❖ In larger gatherings, how might we raise difficult topics related to trauma and offer basic education to support people in validating feelings and challenging toxic assumptions?
- ❖ How might we support resilience by integrating preaching and other aspects of creative communal liturgy with pastoral care?
- ❖ How might we enhance training of ministry professionals to increase their competence in supporting resilience through liturgy and other modes of pastoral work?
- ❖ What questions might be coming up for you?

Thank you!

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