

HANDOUT

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

Christopher Frechette, ThD, MSW, MDiv

Moving Toward Wholeness: Traumatized Texts and Bodies
A Virtual Conference

Wesley Theological Seminary – Friday, October 29, 2021

PRELUDE: Reflective exercise

INTRODUCTION: Trauma, Resilience, and Liturgy

- ❖ One long-lasting effect of trauma can be toxic assumptions about ourselves, others, the world, and God, that can make it difficult to believe we are loved by and can trust God or other people.
- ❖ Resilience is a dynamic and interactive process embedded in culture that enables people to cope with psychological crises dominated by conflict in how they understand self and world.
- ❖ Resilience narratives are words or images used to interpret the crisis by symbolizing its meaning and organizing our experience in ways that support endurance and wellbeing.
- ❖ Christians have difficulty integrating anger into their spirituality, including liturgy.
- ❖ Anger portrayed in biblical images of God often arises from love for those who are violated.
- ❖ How can we create safe liturgical spaces that engage biblical images of God as resilience narratives that can process anger and pain, and help people replace toxic assumptions with healthy ones?

PART ONE: Plain-Sense v. Metaphoric Ways to Understand Biblical Images of God

- ❖ Two ways of understanding how biblical texts portray God: (1) asking whether or not they are true versus (2) asking how they might be true and how, not true.
- ❖ While emphasizing the metaphoric character of biblical images of God, we maintain belief in the Bible's 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, continue the spiritual journey, let go of necessary losses, and be open to what God is doing.
- ❖ Caution: Violent biblical images of God can, and have been, used for serious harm.
- ❖ We can judge the adequacy and appropriateness of how we use any metaphor for God by the degree to which that use promotes right relationship with self, others, world, and God.

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

- ❖ Different images of God can meet distinct needs in people.
- ❖ Among biblical images for God:
 - Compassionate ones are primary because experiencing God's love and protection provide foundational motivations for trusting God.
 - A secondary need is to address the toxic assumptions that result from trauma and become barriers to relating to God.
- ❖ I 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 share the same basic mechanism:
 - Two aspects of images of God as punishing make them effective to address toxic assumptions:
 - their emotional intensity
 - their symbolic and dramatic character

- Combining punishing images of God with compassionate ones can help us believe that, despite how the human perpetrators overpowered and violated us, they do not have power to determine what those experiences mean to us, who we are, or the dignity we have. We do that in relationship with God, the ultimate compass of meaning and morality.
- ❖ 1. IMAGES OF GOD PUNISHING PERPETRATORS DRAMATIZE THAT SUCH VIOLATIONS ARE WRONG AND THAT THE PERPETRATORS DON'T CONTROL THE PEOPLE'S DIGNITY, MEANING, OR IDENTITY.
- ❖ 2. It is common, in the aftermath of being violated, for survivors of trauma to react by assuming responsibility for causing the violation:
 - ASSUMING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE VIOLATION HELPS PEOPLE SURVIVE THE OVERWHELMING SENSE OF CHAOS AND ASSERT THEIR AGENCY WHEN BEING OVERPOWERED.
 - TO INTERPRET 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.

PART THREE: Creating Safe Christian Liturgical Spaces that Support Resilience—Hebrew Bible Resources and a Case Example

- ❖ An “elastic matrix of grace”: a liturgical dynamic in the Hebrew Bible with robust resilient capacity.
 - A polarity celebrating life and death, as understood broadly in Israelite culture, creates a tension that can hold and validate the full range of the people's experience, while fostering a healthy relationship with God and with each other rooted in healthy assumptions.
 - Its elasticity...
 - expands its capacity to hold feelings, including isolation, that can arise from loss and trauma.
 - gently draws people back into close and favorable relationship with God and community.
- ❖ The Bible is ambivalent about whether suffering can be explained in ways that affirm God's love.
- ❖ The Bible portrays God's love...
 - in four ways that suggest some explanation for suffering, and
 - in other ways that suggest experiences of suffering are inexplicable.
- ❖ 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:
 - Because the Babylonians and others unjustly violated the people, God will punish them violently.
 - It was not the Babylonians, but God who enacted those destructive events, doing so as justified punishment, but with the purpose of restoring healthy relationship with the people.
 - On at least some of the people God inflicted the punishing destruction unjustly.
 - The suffering was an occasion for God to express solidarity, joining in the people's suffering.
 - *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 8:22-23)
- ❖ A different way of symbolizing suffering focuses on God as awe-inspiring and inscrutable, allowing experiences of suffering to be inexplicable.
- ❖ Biblical awe for God...
 - includes simultaneously a trusting attraction, and a fear linked to the unknown.
 - feels exhilarating like a roller-coaster rush or the “wow” aroused by beauty.
 - can foster an encounter with God that allows us to let go of what we need to let go of.

❖ Psalm 18:1-19 (NRSV; Hebrew/NAB verses 1-20)

- Verses 1-2 set up the psalm as David's praise to God after escaping Saul's attempts to kill him; in present liturgy, this allows the community 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.*
- Verse 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.*

Dramatic telling of rescue from overwhelming stress:

- Verses 4-5 dramatize being afraid and overwhelmed by life-threatening forces and invite the community to identify from 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.*
- Verse 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.*
- Verses 7-15 provide intense emotional detail of God's **angry and punishing confrontation** of the life-threatening agents and so asserts God's love 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.*

Summary and concluding interpretation

- Verses 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 integrates 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 diffusing any toxic interpretation imposed by present 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 case of “Greta”

CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS:

- ❖ Biblical imagery of God as angry and punishing must be engaged carefully and competently, but failure to offer safe spaces to engage those images keeps vital resources for resilience from people who need them.
- ❖ 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?