

The Suffering of God

Who Is This Old Testament God?

St. John in the Wilderness

The Suffering of God – Session 1

Introduction

Prayer – Not the God we would
have chosen *

(page 87 in **Awed to Heaven, Rooted in
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Group Exercise - 1

- ✦ **When you hear of God in the context of the Old Testament, what images come to your mind?**
- ✦ **Choose a recorder for your group**
- ✦ **Choose someone to report your group's ideas**
- ✦ **Take 5 minutes**

Group Exercise - Responses

✦ Sampling of group response

- ◆ Wrathful
- ◆ Harsh
- ◆ Distant
- ◆ Big Brother
- ◆ Vengeful
- ◆ Warrior
- ◆ Paternal
- ◆ God of Moses – “I AM”
- ◆ Omnipotent

Quiz

- ✱ Please answer the questions by checking off where you think these images of God are found
- ✱ For your own use (You won't be graded!)
- ✱ Take some time with the answer sheet being passed out
- ✱ Discuss within your group
 - ◆ Did any of the images surprise you?
 - ◆ Did any of the images make you uncomfortable (perhaps just when applied to God)?
 - ◆ Did any image give you a new way to think about God?

Images/Metaphors for God Quiz

- ✱1. God is like a potter, working clay
- ✱2. God is like an eagle
- ✱3. God is like a rock
- ✱4. God has mouth for speaking
- ✱5. God can express emotions, i.e. rejoicing
- ✱6. God is like a mother hen
- ✱7. God is like a warrior
- ✱8. God is like a parent
- ✱9. God is like a shepherd
- ✱10. God is like a hunter, on behalf of lions & ravens

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1. Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.
Jer. 18:6

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2. As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, the LORD alone guided him; no foreign god was with him. Deut. 32:11

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3. Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me.

Ps. 31:2-3

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4. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the LORD. Num. 12:8 (TANAKH, JPS)

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**5. The LORD, your God, is in your midst, as warrior, who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.
Zeph. 3:17**

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6. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Luke 13:34

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7. The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name. Ex. 15:3

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8. When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

Hos. 11:1

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9. The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
Ps. 23:1

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10. Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert? Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?
Job 38:39-41

Purpose of *The Suffering of God*

- ✦ Increase our library of images of God
- ✦ Correct the notion that that Jesus' purpose was to "buy-off" a vengeful, cold, & inflexible Father-God
- ✦ Rehabilitate our perceptions of the Old Testament as scripture for Christians
- ✦ Point toward the coherence of OT images of God with the idea that "the power of God (is) manifested supremely through weakness" (p. xvi)

Quote

“Search the Scriptures, for in them you will find this God of the loveless, this God of Mercy, Love and Justice, who weeps over these her children, these her precious ones who have been carried from the womb, who gathers up her young upon her wings and rides along the high places of the earth, who sees their suffering and cries out like a woman in travail, who gasps and pants; for with this God, any injustice that befalls one of these precious ones is never the substance of rational reflection and critical analysis, but is the source of a catastrophic convulsion within the very life of God.”

Karen Drescher as quoted in *The Suffering of God*

What kind of God?*

***Chapter Subtitles are from The Suffering Of God by T. Fretheim**

Import of a Certain Kind of God

- ✱ Today's church tends to focus on *belief* in God
- ✱ Kind of God we believe in makes a difference in the actions of believers
 - ◆ What kind of God did participants in the Inquisition believe in?
 - ◆ What about the leaders of Jonestown?
- ✱ Problem of idol worship in the OT not just about statuary
 - ◆ "One can move directly to mental images which construct a false image of God and have the power of wreaking havoc in people's faith and life. Metaphors matter." p. 2

Common Images

Jesus

- ✦ Loving
- ✦ Compassionate
- ✦ Merciful
- ✦ Healing
- ✦ Forgiving
- ✦ Redeeming

God

- ✦ Holy
- ✦ Wrathful
- ✦ Powerful
- ✦ Just
- ✦ Lawgiver
- ✦ Judge

Consequences of this dichotomy

- ✿ **“People often seem to have a view which suggests that Jesus is friend and God is enemy. An understanding of the atonement gets twisted so that Jesus is seen as the one who came to save us from God.” p. 2**
- ✿ **Apostle’s Creed perpetuates the image of “authoritarian Father”**
- ✿ **Reading of and preaching on OT texts is neglected**
- ✿ **God’s involvement in the world is considered unimaginable**

Relationship of God & Jesus in NT

- ✦ **I and the Father are one. (John 10:30)**
- ✦ **The word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me. (John 14:24)**
- ✦ **All that the Father has is mine. (John 16:15)**
- ✦ **He who has seen me has seen the Father. (John 14:9)**

Conclusions from these texts

- ✦ **Texts have implications for our understanding of the meaning of the incarnation**
- ✦ **Scripture reflects continuity in the life of God**
- ✦ **Jesus' life tells us what God is like**
- ✦ **Metaphors for God tell us what kind of God we meet in scripture**

The background features a complex, abstract design with overlapping, semi-transparent shapes in shades of orange, yellow, and green. The shapes are curved and layered, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall color palette is warm and vibrant.

Anthropomorphic Metaphor

Black's Definition of Metaphor

- ◆ **Memorable metaphors bind the language of thought and emotion and give us perspective**

Selected Images of God

- ✦ **God as eagle (Deut. 32:11)**
- ✦ **God as rock (Ps. 31:2-3)**
- ✦ **God has mouth to speak (Num. 12:8)**
- ✦ **God expresses the emotion of rejoicing (Zeph. 3:17)**
- ✦ **God as parent (Hos. 11:1)**
- ✦ **God as shepherd (Ps. 23:1)**

Anthropomorphic Metaphors

- ✦ **Fretheim focuses on anthropomorphic metaphors for God**
- ✦ **Should be natural for Christians**
 - ◆ “The NT, far from being the culmination of a progressive spiritualization in the understanding of God, speaks of God unsurpassably enfleshed in the human.” (pp. 6-7)
- ✦ **No one metaphor captures fully the essence of God**
- ✦ **2 potential problems in the approach to metaphors for God**
 - ◆ Concentrate of the “otherness” of God
 - Result is a God with whom we cannot have a relationship
 - ◆ Limit God to the characteristics of a human being
 - Result is idolatry

Dangers of Metaphors

- ✦ **May focus on one, or a few, metaphors for God**
- ✦ **Metaphors exert a subtle power on our lives, forming our thoughts and emotions**

How Metaphors Can Help Us

✦ **Focus on what each metaphor adds to our knowledge about God**

✦ **Ex. 2 Kings 19:16**

- **Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; hear the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. (2 Kings 19:16)**
- **Why talk about God's ears and eyes instead of God's hearing and seeing?**
- **God gathers information about the world in a "real" way, like people do, but more so, and without human eyes**

✦ **Adds detail to the basic conclusions we draw after surveying all the metaphors for God**

✦ **Since biblical metaphors for God are drawn from the human arena, our theological vocabulary is enriched with secular ways of talking about God**

Carrying Capacity of Metaphors

✦ **Fretheim thinks of metaphors as having varying correspondence with God (p. 10)**

◆ **“Low capacity”**

■ God is like dry rot – Hos. 5:12

■ God is like a lion – Hos. 5:14

◆ **“Moderate capacity”**

■ God is a rock – Ps. 31:2-3

◆ **“High capacity”**

■ God is like a parent – Hos. 11:1

✦ **High capacity metaphors are drawn from the realm of human relationship**

✦ **Relational metaphors play a central role in our understanding of God**

Centrality of Interpersonal Metaphors

✦ “They (interpersonal metaphors) lend themselves to ‘a two-way traffic in ideas’. For example, the father metaphor moves not only from human fatherhood to God, but doubles back and helps shape the human father into the likeness of God....the understanding of the human as created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26) is of central importance here...Rather than accommodating God to the level of the human or raising human characteristics to the nth degree, the human is seen to be fashioned in the likeness of God. Hence, the human is seen in theomorphic terms, rather than God in anthropomorphic terms...The ‘image of God’ gives us permission to reverse the process and, by looking at the human, learn what God is like.” (pp. 10-11)

Role of Controlling Metaphors

✦ Certain aspects of human life are not appropriate as metaphors for God

- ◆ Death
- ◆ Embitterment
- ◆ Capriciousness

✦ How “controlling metaphors” work

- ◆ Limit the metaphors available
- ◆ Form a “‘canon’ within the canon” (p. 11)
- ◆ Act as a “hermeneutical key” (p. 11)

✦ Examples of controlling metaphors

- ◆ Ex. 34:6-7
- ◆ Sovereignty of God
- ◆ Grace of God

Conclusion

“Every metaphor finally needs to be qualified by the controlling metaphors of the community of faith. Thus, God is not simply father; God is a certain kind of father. God is a loving father, always (Hos. 11:1). And God is not simply mother; God is a certain kind of mother. God is a mother who will not forget her children, ever (Isa. 49:15).” (p. 12)

Bibliography

- ✦ Brueggemann, Walter(2003). *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.
- ✦ Fretheim, Terence E. (1984). *The Suffering of God*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
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