

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
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Sisters and Brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, the road to becoming a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (the ELCA)...

The road to becoming an ordained pastor in the ELCA is two-fold...

An individual of course must go through seminary—the academic part of the journey...

A student must complete all the academic requirements, including seminary classes, teaching parish, Clinical Pastoral Education, and internship...

And a student must go through a candidacy process...

And the candidacy process towards becoming a pastor involves working closely with the candidacy committee in one's synod...

The candidacy process indeed begins even before a person enters seminary.

An individual in the candidacy process first goes through a period of discernment, whereby an individual contemplates whether they are being called to become a pastor.

This period of discernment involves conversation with one's home pastor, and involves acknowledgement of one's home congregational council regarding the individual's gifts for ministry so as to affirm the individual's call.

And the discernment process involves the individual's home synod, and the candidacy committee of that synod, which either grants or withholds entry into candidacy and into seminary.

An individual who is granted entry into candidacy, begins their study while also continuing to maintain close ties with their home synod's candidacy committee.

The first year of seminary then is sort of a probationary period for the candidate whereby, if all is going well, the candidate then receives what is called “endorsement” by his or her synod’s candidacy committee.

Following endorsement, the candidate continues their studies, again keeping close ties with their synod’s candidacy committee—routine check-in’s and so forth.

And then comes the final year of seminary, in which the candidate has to complete what is called the “Approval Essay,” as well as satisfactorily complete a sit-down interview process with one’s synod’s candidacy committee.

The Approval Essay entails a number of questions, which change each year...

The candidate responds to the questions in essay form.

Questions might include things like “What would you do if such a situation emerged in your congregation?” And a particularly challenging situation would then be described.

Or another question might be, “Please respond to the following Biblical text and explain how you would preach this text in a congregation you were serving.” And then a particularly challenging Biblical text would be given.

And then the interview would follow the Approval Essay and would be conducted by the candidate’s synodical candidacy committee which of course is comprised of a number of seasoned pastors from one’s home synod, who are there to make sure the candidate’s theology is sound, that they have all the practical training necessary to lead a church, so on and so forth.

So, the candidate has to be ready to respond to all sorts of demanding questions posed by the committee—questions that may emerge from the candidate’s Approval Essay, or other questions the candidacy committee poses at that time.

All this is to make sure the candidate is competent to serve as an ordained minister.

Suffice it to say, this period in the candidacy process is extremely stressful, because a candidate at this point has completed all their seminary training, has jumped through all the hoops, and just hopes and prays that they get the stamp of approval from their candidacy committee.

Sometimes that doesn't happen; sometimes a candidate is told by the candidacy committee that they have to do further study or another internship, or more self-care like counseling or who knows what, before they will be approved. So, again, it is a very stressful time for candidates.

PAUSE

Now, I bring all this up, because of our text today from Isaiah 45:1-7, was on the Approval Essay, my classmates and I needed to complete for our candidacy process.

Particularly, the question on the Approval Essay dealt with Isaiah 45:7, and how would one explain this text in a Bible Study or in a sermon.

I don't remember exactly what I wrote in my response. But apparently, it was sufficient, such that I was approved.

But what are we to make of this text, which says, "I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the LORD do all these things"?

At first glance, this is rather troubling theologically, isn't it?

To think that our God not only is the actor behind all the good things in the world, the gentle rain to nourish the earth, the plants and animals to populate the earth, the gift of God's Son for the salvation of the world.

Not only is God the actor behind all the good things in the world, but God is also the actor behind all the tragedy and disasters that plague the world—natural disasters like earthquakes and floods, famines and disease, wars and conflicts.

What are we then to make of this passage?

Well, as we learned in seminary, this passage in Isaiah may have emerged at a time when Jewish theology was for lack of a better word "evolving," that is "changing."

You see, before there was this thing in theology called monotheism, the belief in only one God...

Before monotheism, there was something called "monolatry," which is the belief in many gods, but as the people of God, the Jewish people only worshipped one God, Yahweh.

In other words, the ancient Jewish people acknowledged that the other peoples around them had their own gods, that they existed, but still the Jews only worshipped their one God Yahweh.

But then something happened. For you see, in the ancient world it was believed that when different peoples went to war with each other, the individual gods of those peoples also did battle in the sky above.

And so, if your nation defeated the opposing nation, that must mean that your god had defeated the god of your opponents.

And scholars believe then that the Jewish people moved from monolatry to monotheism because the Jews kept losing their battles with foreign nations, and so their god kept losing as well.

And rather than worship a “loser” God, the Jewish people said to themselves, “It is not that our God is a loser, but that we must have done something to upset our God and that is why God is punishing us by letting these foreign nations destroy us.”

And so in the mind of the Jewish people all the other gods disappeared, and only Yahweh existed now, and thus the Jewish people moved from monolatry to monotheism.

All because the Jewish people could not stomach the idea that they worshipped a “loser” God.

Again Isaiah 45 v. 6 states, “...from the rising of the sun, and from the west, there is no one besides me. I am the LORD, and there is no other.”

And so, if there are no other gods, Yahweh must be the one who forms light AND creates darkness.

And if there are no other gods, Yahweh must be the one who makes weal and creates woe.

And so, here we have a glimpse into the evolution of theology.

Now, personally, I am not sure this change in theological thought is comforting, for we go from a “loser god” to a “wrathful god,” a god who brings his judgment upon his people with devastating effects.

Indeed, I would be quite hesitant to say that 9/11 was the result of God's judgment upon the American nation, even though some had interpreted the events of that day in that way.

And I would be hesitant to say that God brought God's judgment upon Israel on October 7th for the sins of Israel, although certainly some have no doubt interpreted the events of that day in that way—seeing the Palestinians' incursion into Israel as God's judgment for how Israel had all but confined Palestinians to Gaza under what had been the most challenging living conditions.

No, I personally would never interpret events in our world, whatever those events might be, so as to say that this is God's judgment upon God's people...

...because I could not worship a God like that.

And it is interesting to note that our Lord Jesus also defied this kind of thinking, this kind of thinking in which God judges and condemns people for their behavior.

PAUSE

In the Gospel of John, chapter 9, there is an interesting story about a man born blind.

And Jesus' disciples ask Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?"

You see, the disciples subscribe to that theological position that unfortunate events, like blindness, are the judgment of God.

But then listen to what Jesus says, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned: he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

And here then Jesus takes another step in the evolution of theology. "Evil, or misfortune," however we want to call it... "Evil and misfortune," Jesus says, "is not God's doing. But God can use what is broken in the world for good."

It is the same message we see at the end of the book of Genesis, whereby Joseph says to his brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good."

Joseph's brothers had sold Joseph into Egypt, remember, but then while in Egypt Joseph rises in power, and by his wisdom, is able to provide food to all the world

during a time of famine, and in the process Joseph rescues his family from starvation.

There is no need for God to invent evil and woe in the world, human beings can do that all on their own. Where God's steps in, where God intervenes is to bring about good from that evil and woe.

Yes, Jesus makes us rethink our theology once more. And indeed, I believe there is a reason why Jesus says of himself, "I am the Light of the World."

I believe Jesus is responding at least in part to Isaiah 45:7, where God says, "I create light and darkness, I make weal and create woe."

Jesus says, as God's Son, "Nope, I am ONLY about Light, and good things."

Jesus sees God the Father differently from his Jewish forebears. God is about light, at least in his Son Jesus.

PAUSE

And so, where does that leave us today?

Well, in short what we have been talking about all along here is something called "theodicy," which is all about trying to understand, "Why is there evil in the world, if God exists and God is good?"

And it is a question that has stymied human beings since the existence of human beings.

Why do we have wars like those in Ukraine and in the Middle East?

Why is the United States plagued by gun violence and mass shootings?

Why has our human species over the centuries engaged in such things chattel slavery, genocide, human trafficking, and the like?

Why do we behave like that? Are we human beings inherently evil? Or is God unable, unwilling, or unsympathetic so as not to respond to evil?

There is a quote from Archibald MacLeish that addresses this question and provides an answer, whether it is helpful, I leave that up for you to decide. It is for me, anyway.

The quote comes from MacLeish's play called J.B., which is based on the biblical story of Job, which is a story in its own right about the problem of evil in the world.

But in MacLeish's play there is a scene in which the character Nickles (that is, the Devil) says these words,
 I heard upon his dung-heap
 That man cry out who cannot sleep:
 "If God is God He is not good,
 If God is good He is not God;
 Take the even, take the odd,
 I would not sleep here if I could
 Except for the little green leaves in the wood
 And the wind on the water."

Again, MacLeish is getting at what we have been talking about:
 If God is really God, then God created both good AND evil, and so God is not good.
 And if God is good, then God can't be God because evil exists somehow outside God, which can't be if God is God. Take the even, take the odd—however you spin it, it doesn't work, says MacLeish.

And so, human beings can't help but be disillusioned with the world, MacLeish says.

In other words, How then can we even find peace enough to sleep in this world? I would not sleep here if I could...

Except, except he says, "for the little green leaves in the wood, and the wind on the water."

Except for the beauty of this world keeps us hopeful.

And "beauty" I would define as people who serve their neighbor in need, like the work we do with Family Promise...

And "beauty" I would define as people who serve their neighbor in need with some fifty or so community meals...

And "beauty" I would define as people who gather for worship here to sing God's praise...

And “beauty” I would define as a cross, where even though a gruesome death took place, reveals the unfathomable love of God for this world, warts and all...

God loves this beautiful world, loves us his beautiful people, so much that God dies for us...and yes that is beautiful.

And, yes, that “beauty,” God’s beauty as seen on a cross, may not ultimately answer the question about the existence of evil in the world, but I pray that that beauty gives us and all people enough hope to carry on. Thanks be to God.
AMEN.