THE ABIDING PROBLEM OF EVIL

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
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> "The night is long, and I am full of tossing till the dawn. My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt; my skin hardens, then breaks out afresh. My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and come to their end without hope."(Job 7:4-6)

Someone told me the other day that he thinks that Harvard Square is the center of the universe. It seems to be just that for many people at this time of year. The long hot summer is over and the cool refreshing fall is beginning. Harvard Square is full of hope for the coming year.

I guess every college community is full of excitement just about now. Returning students, for the most part, are glad to be back. New students see all manner of challenging possibilities before them.

This Sunday, then, is apparently not the time to consider the abiding problem of evil. The words of Job seem to have a strange ring: "the night is long, and I am full of tossing till the dawn. My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt."

Yet I wonder if such sentiments actually are so strange. I wonder whether the excitement and enthusiasm of this time of year aren't tied somehow to an inner sense for the starkness and bleakness of life. I wonder whether most of us don't cast a worried glance out of the corner of our eye as we stride through a place like Harvard Square, or Kendall Square, or even an apparently idyllic little village like Wellesley.

In Harvard Square you notice scores of people disappearing into the subway, many of them with dull and rigid faces. And perhaps you think for a moment of the sometimes deadening routines of life. In Kendall Square a man comes up to you and asks you for a quarter. And you think for a moment perhaps of what that fellow probably used to be before he began to drink, why he's where he is, and what kind of a future, if any, he has. If you're in Wellesley, perhaps doing some shopping, you may notice how a certain mother seems to be quite insensitive to her children, as she virtually drags them through the store. And you think for a moment perhaps of the disruption which can penetrate into even the finest of families.

So I say, in the midst of the excitement and enthusiasm of this time of year most of us can at least begin to understand the words of Job. Some may even know right off what it means to toss and turn throughout the night.

And, of course, we all read. We are aware that beyond our own personal ills, however great or small they may be, a large segment of the world exists in agony. Listen to the prayer of little Ruthie, as narrated by John Steinbeck in his Grapes of Wrath. Ruthie prays: "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. An' when she got there the cupboard was bare, an' so the poor dog got none. Amen." The prayer of a small child who knows what it means to be hungry.

As we all know, that prayer is no less relevant today than it was in the 1930's of the Grapes of Wrath. Just the other day, for example, the news services carried the story of a Mexican village whose corn crop had failed and whose people were dying at the rate of one hundred a day.

Evil is a reality in our world. Anyone with eyes to see has to see that.

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This might seem like an obvious thing to say, but it always hasn't been so, nor is it always so today. Two centuries ago, for example, philosophers and theologians happily were able to contend that ours is the best of all possible worlds and that evil is only a passing quality of this world which helps the good to shine forth all the more, and which will soon disappear.

In our own day you still can encounter people who share a similar view. This is one of the striking features of the essays of William Hamilton, one of the prophets of the godless Christianity. For Hamilton God is dead, but America the Beautiful lives. He exults in America, since here "optimism is still possible." He sees a bright future for us, with things continuing to get better.

You'd think he never heard of World War I and World War II, thermonuclear bombs, concentration camps, napalm, apartheid, or water polution, not to mention two-thirds of the world's growing population which goes to bed hungry every night.

Interestingly, this tunnel-vision optimism of theologian Hamilton reflects a strain of thought which has been evident in American Protestantism for some time. All you have to do to get out of problem situations, we have been told, is to think positively. We Americans even have a Sunday School ditty for this kind of positive thinking:

Sing and smile and pray,
Night will turn to day.
If you sing and smile and pray,
The clouds will pass away.

Now that's dribble. Pious dribble perhaps, but dribble nevertheless. You don't tell a terminal cancer patient that if he sings and smiles and prays night will turn to day. Nor do you tell a Vietnamese villager that if he sings and smiles and prays the clouds will pass away.

Contrary to our tunnel-vision optimists, evil is a reality in our world, an abiding reality. It simply can't be wished away or ignored, as if it didn't exist. "The night is long," says Job, "and I am full of tossing till the dawn. My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt; my skin hardens, then breaks out afresh. My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and come to their end without hope." Job sees things as they are.

When you see things the way they are, you have a number of recourses.

You might try to get away from it all. You might join a monastery or set yourself apart in a utopian community. But I guess most people will admit that this kind of resolution of the problem just doesn't work. Earthquakes and famines and plagues and wars spill over into monasteries and uptopian communities. Evil plays no favorites.

In central Greece, in a place called Meteora, there is a score of monasteries, each built on a towering pinnacle of rock. The monks used to have access to the outer world only through a basket tied to a long rope lowered down the cliffs. Today most of these monasteries lie in ruins. The few that remain are empty, except for monks who sell trinkets to the tourists. Those ruins and those empty monasteries are symbolic of the impossibility of escaping the reality of evil. Escapism, in the last analysis, is no better than tunnel-vision optimism.

Then there are the people who look the reality of evil squarely in the face. Job is one of them. Ivan Karamazov is another.

Dostoevsky has Ivan narrate a number of stories, one of them concerning a child

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of eight, a serf boy, who happens to throw a stone and hurt the favorite dog of a certain Russian general. Ivan Karamazov is silent for a moment, and then he says: "Listen! If all must suffer to pay for the eternal harmony, what have the children to do with it, tell me please! It's beyond comprehension why they should suffer, and why they should pay for the harmony."

This is a decisive question. Is there an eternal harmony? Does the reality of evil, when we see it squarely, fit into the greater scheme of things nicely and neatly?

The orthodox theologian whose speech appears in our Old Testament Lesson today, thinks that it does. To him evil is from God, a step along the path of life. "Behold," he says, "happy is the man whom God reproves; therefore despise not the chastening of the Almighty."(Job 5:17) For this theologian evil is a kind of fatherly discipline. It fits neatly into the greater scheme of things. The idea is that God uses evil and suffering to refine us, as fire refines a precious metal. And one day, pure as gold, we will arrive in heaven. That seems to explain why we encounter evil -- a seemingly rational explanation.

But what about Ivan Karamazov's question? What about the suffering of children? Can we speak of an eternal harmony when children suffer?

According to Job, we can't. As he says bitterly not concerning children, but concerning himself: "O that my vexation were weighed, and all my calamity laid in the balances! For then it would be heavier than the sand of the sea!"(Job 6:1-3) For Job the weight of evil is just too much to fit it into a neat, rationalistic picture of life. Job is too burdened to know anything about any eternal harmony.

What are we to say, then?

We could say with Archibald MacLeish at the end of his play, JB: blow on the candle of the heart. That is, muster all your energies to live a human life, in spite of the reality of evil. Blow on the candle of the heart. This is the answer given by many modern writers.

Surely we want to listen to these men. Surely, too, we want to see ourselves energized so as to be able to live genuinely human lives in the midst of the evils of the world. But is it enough to look to our own resources? Is looking in a mirror at ourselves nearly an adequate solution? Or is the weight of evil just too much for this world to bear? Isn't man so small and evil so large that by and by the vitality of human life is sapped?

Perhaps, then, we should do more than look in a mirror at our own resources. Perhaps we should try to see <u>through</u> the glass darkly. Perhaps we should look for resources from beyond ourselves, even though they are dimly perceived.

In their own ways both Ivan Karamazov and Job do this. They call out to God. They protest to God. They lament before God. They try to see through the glass darkly. They turn to God for the final resolution of the problem.

Yet somehow their call remains largely unanswered. As Job says, "My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and come to their end without hope." But there <u>is</u> more. Evil may sap the vitality from human life, it may turn our world into a dry and parched place, but that's not all. The story doesn't end with men like Ivan and Job waiting for God.

Consider the experience of the widow of Nain, which is described in today's Gospel Lesson. Perhaps the widow from Nain was feeling like Job. Probably she was. Her only son had died and was being carried to burial. She was full of the enervating

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tears of grief. But in her case, unlike Job's, resources for life came upon her from the outside. "And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, 'Do not weep.' And he came and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, arise'."

The New Testament sees through a glass darkly and sees the Father of this universe pouring new life into this world in and through the man Jesus. It's as if here, in this person, a fountain has burst forth in a parched and dry land. Jesus says to the widow's son, "Young man, I say to you, arise."

Now let's be clear what kind of an answer this is. It doesn't do away with the abiding reality of evil. If you are in doubt about that look at the Cross and hear Jesus say, My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?

Nor is it an answer which is self-evident. Similar claims have been made for other men. For example, a story much like the story of Jesus and the widow of Nain is reported in the biography of a first-century Hellenistic philosopher named Apollonius. He was reputed to be a healer, and he later came to be an object of cult worship, in a way not altogether different from the way the Church exalts Jesus. Hence when we focus our attention and devotion on Jesus, as the Messiah, we aren't doing something that's obvious and self-evident. Our's is a decision fraught with risk. Once again, we see through a glass darkly.

But we do see. Or we claim we do. We see with the eyes of the widow of Nain, as well as with the eyes of Job. We see that God is pouring his own eternal life into our parched world in and through the One who is called Christ. We see that one day that divine life will somehow transform every segment of this universe: wherever there is wasteland vegetation and flowers will spring up.

See with these eyes the next time you stride through Harvard Square or Kendall Square or the village of Wellesly, and you cast a worried glance at the disruptions of our world. See with these eyes the next time you read about the agony of our world. Look through the glass darkly.

The new life pouring into our world through Christ and his Resurrection gives us the energy we need to live creatively in a world beaten down by evil. It also gives us the energy we need to hope for the final dissolution of all evil and the transformation of all things.

"And he came and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, arise'."