

Why We Can't See the Answers in the Back of the Book

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March 5, 2017

Genesis 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

Academically speaking, geometry was my Waterloo. That's where my breezing through school came to a crashing halt. Geometry gave me a good dose of humility and a lifelong fear of math.

This was not math's fault, of course. I recognize math as a vital discipline that underlies all the technological marvels of our age. And I'm always pleased to learn of students who excel at math. But I was not so lucky. Math and I had a falling out in high school. And it was, I believe, because the answers were in the back of the book.

Maybe it was a concession to the "new math," then the rage. But for some reason, my geometry textbook had answers to the homework in the back. And while the teacher forbade us to look at the answers, that had about as much impact as God telling Adam and Eve to lay off the apples. Inevitably, I would rush through my homework with the aid of the answers in the back. I convinced myself that I could learn geometry simply by reviewing the answers, rather than struggling to find them for myself. Alas, it wasn't so. I fell farther and farther behind until pretty soon I was drowning in a hostile sea of circles, triangles, and trapezoids.

You might think I learned my lesson. I didn't. Because whenever life turns bewildering or cruel or mean, I still want God to show me the answers in the back of the book. But from what I can tell, God isn't much on such "new math" of the Spirit. God still teaches the old fashioned way: By giving us some guiding truths to live by and then waiting lovingly and patiently while we struggle to find the answers for ourselves.

If it's any consolation, God didn't cut Jesus any slack in this department. On the heels of his baptism, Jesus wasn't permitted to plunge ahead with his mission, a cocksure savior with all the answers. Instead, Matthew writes that "the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." In other words, this wilderness test was God's doing.

There, in that barren basin of a desert down by the Dead Sea--where nothing stirs beneath a punishing sun save for an occasional scorpion--Jesus wrestles with who and what he is called to be. Ironically, as the struggle unfolds, the one surprisingly absent, is God; the one with all the answers is Satan.

Indeed, Satan speaks for most of us as he puts words to our hidden hopes and fears: "Dear God, turn these stones into bread: make my problems disappear!"

"Dear God, exempt me from the consequences of my actions when I act in risky, self-destructive ways. We both know I'm your special favorite."

"Dear God, give me the fame and fortune I so richly deserve, no matter what the cost."

Yes, truth be told, the God most of us look for, long for, and gravitate toward when stuck in our own wilderness trial, is the God of miracles and magic. As it turns out, that is the God Satan, rather than Jesus, believes in.

The Greek novelist, Nikos Kazantzakis, wrote of coming upon a cocoon in a tree, just as the butterfly was struggling to emerge. For a long while, Kazantzakis watched in fascination. And judging from the server-crashing multitudes on Facebook, waiting for April the giraffe to give birth in the New York Zoo, this fascination with nature continues.

But eventually, Kazantzakis grew weary of waiting and began blowing on the cocoon, hoping to warm it and speed the butterfly's debut into the world. Sure enough, the miracle of metamorphosis began to unfold faster than nature intended.

But when the butterfly emerged from its cocoon, its wings were folded back and badly crumpled. The butterfly tried valiantly to unfold the fragile wings, but lacking the strength, it shriveled up and died. Kazantzakis observed that by sparing that butterfly the ordeal of emerging from its cocoon, he decreed its death.

Maybe that's why God doesn't let us see the answers in the back of the book. Maybe it's only as we learn and stretch and grow that we get better and stronger. And maybe that's why as we struggle to shed the sticky cocoon of the past and become somebody new, God doesn't seem as present and attentive as we would like. After all, as Matthew tells the tale, it's not until Jesus passes his test in the wilderness that the angels show up to lend comfort and aid.

So as the bewilderment and pain press in upon us, maybe we wonder with the Psalmist, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" (Psalm 13:1).

Amid the loneliness and betrayal, maybe we cry out with Jesus on his cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34).

But again and again, the scriptures answer, "Count it all joy when you face trials of any kind because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4). As a friend once reminded me, "God is not interested in creating dependents; God is interested in growing disciples," that is, people like Jesus. And that takes courage and chutzpah and time.

Now I know if you're in the middle of an impossibly difficult period in your life, none of this makes that any easier. If you're in the grips of an ever-deepening depression, or if the old demons of addiction and dependency have come calling, or if a beloved family member or friend has betrayed you in a hateful, hurtful way, having all this re-framed as the growing pains of the soul

offers scant relief. And that's the rub. God's goal is not first to make us *feel* better but to make *us* better. It is Satan who offers quick relief in the wilderness through magical thinking and flimsy promises of deliverance. By contrast, Jesus models the determination to see this thing through in the assurance that God is faithful. And that in due time, God will wrench some new growth and good from something that is ugly and despicable in itself. Like it or not, that's the way the God who draws near in Jesus, works: by calling forth yet another Easter, from yet another cross.

In an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* essay, Lorraine Murray writes about her struggle with cancer. She begins by relating her cancer surgery and treatments to the pruning of roses in her garden.

"The first time I pruned the roses, I thought I had killed them and I wept. But that spring the bushes surprised me by sending out hopeful green shoots that exploded into fancy blooms for months."

Now it is pruning time once again, but she hesitates, not wanting to hurt the roses: "I shift the clippers in my hand, stalling for time. I know they need it. If I don't prune them, there'll be no lovely blaze of flowers in the spring. But I can't explain this to the bushes. I feel like a murderer as I apply the sharp blade of the clippers to the tender green flesh. 'This is for your own good, I say, and then I wince at the emptiness of the words.'"

Is the same true for herself? Ms. Murray wonders. That some guiding hand is bearing her through the ordeal of surgery and the grueling chemo that follows.

"As I snip and trim . . . a branch hits my arm, the teeth sink into my flesh, and out springs a little stream of ruby red blood. I think of blood, and I reflect on this next week. Another biopsy, more waiting and perhaps more surgery and treatments, more doses of 'this may hurt now but it will help you later.'"

Will she be back next spring to see the roses? There is no way of knowing. But Ms. Murray closes with a prayer that like her beloved roses, her own ordeal of being snipped and cut in the

service of healing will bring new life: “Today I whisper to the roses the same prayer I say every year when the cutting is done. Keep on blooming. Continue the miraculous cycle of life, joy, agony, death, and rebirth. Don’t give up hope. And, God willing, I’ll see you this spring.

This is what Jesus is about during his own wilderness trial: Trying to trust, trying to believe, trying to hold on. He is fighting the temptation to trust his present experience more than God, for his pain, like all pain, turns the agony of the present into all there is.

So Jesus taps into an experience larger than his own. He turns to the scriptures, the textbook of the people of God. And there, he reminds himself, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that falls from the mouth of God.” Jesus commits himself to trusting the One who has the answers, even if he does not. Jesus doesn’t ask for magic, and he doesn’t get any. What he gets instead is the faith, hope, and love to persevere until he becomes God’s bright, shining new beginning for a whole new world.

If you find yourself in a desolate wilderness these days, don’t fall for the devil’s lie that God has forgotten you. Instead, let the scriptures point you beyond the present moment to the witness of God’s people through the ages. For Israel learned during her wilderness trial, what Jesus learned in his: That the things that matter most can’t be learned by peeking at the answers in the back of the book. No, the things that matter most--things like character and compassion and love--can be learned only in the crucible of hard-won experience.

Thankfully, at the end of the Good Book, there is the promise that someday God will provide the answers we seek: “And God shall wipe every tear from our eyes” (Revelation 21:4). I take that to mean that cradled on the heavenly Abba’s lap, we’ll be given the missing pieces of the puzzle and our anguished “whys” will finally be put to rest.

As Carlyle Marney wrote to John Claypool when Claypool’s 11-year-old daughter died of leukemia: “I take refuge in the fact that God has a lot to give account for.”

Or as Leslie Weatherhead suggested in *The Christian Agnostic*, we all need a desk drawer where we place life's most painful enigmas. That special drawer is labeled "Awaiting further light."

But for now, we walk by faith and not by sight. We walk by faith in the son of God who faced the wilderness before us so he could also face it with us. Now through a living relationship with him, we come to understand that God never draws near to hurt or wound, but only to rescue from the pain, some much-needed learning or growth or new beginning. As Jesus unpacks this truth in the Gospel of John, "I am the true vine, and my Abba is the vinedresser. And every branch that bears fruit the Abba prunes to make it bear more fruit" (John 13:1, 2b).

So pray God we can face our wilderness trials with Jesus' brand of faith and courage and with Lorraine Murray's prayer on our lips. It's the prayer she whispers to the roses, every year, when the pruning is done.

"Keep on blooming. Continue the miraculous cycle of life, joy, agony, death, and rebirth. Don't give up hope. And God willing, I'll see you this spring."

O holy Christ, we are grateful that we do not have a high priest, unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who has been tested at all points, as we are, yet without sin.

So we approach your throne of grace with boldness, confident that there we can find strength and help in our time of need (Hebrews 4:15-16). Amen.

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