

Credo, Part IV, "Almighty":
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for September 22nd 2019 (15th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Psalm 91

It would, I think, have been rather easy for me simply to pass over the word "Almighty": found in the first paragraph of the Apostle's Creed. Well: perhaps not so much choosing to "pass over" the word, but simply folding it into the word which precedes it, the word "Father". In effect, treating Almighty as merely the modifier—a crucial modifier mind you, but a modifier all the same—of the word "Father". Doing so would emphasize...

...would **rightly** emphasize...

...that when we Christians claim to believe in "God, the Father Almighty", we are not thereby offering a generic praising of all fathers let alone a generic endorsement of "fatherhood" let alone a stamp of approval for the patriarchy. On the contrary, by appending the word "Almighty" to the word "Father", the Apostle's Creed makes it clear that it is to a particular God and a uniquely endowed "Father" that we are thereby pledging our trust. With that we would be free to move on to the next statement, the one in which we speak of God as "Creator".

That I find myself incapable of treating the word "Almighty" in that way...

...at any rate that I find myself incapable of **limiting** my treatment of the word in that way...

...has much to do with the fact that it is a pretty fascinating word: a word which grows no less fascinating when we lift the curtain and consider the original Greek of the Nicene Creed and—even more astonishing—the original Latin of the Apostle's Creed. In the case of the Creed in Greek, it speaks of God as *patera pantokratora* which, like the English word "Almighty" roughly means the Father who "prevails over all." The Latin equivalent is even more telling: *Patrem omnipotentem*, Father omnipotent, Father all-powerful.

And I suspect that, for a handful of you, that heady word "omnipotent" may put you in mind of a wide-ranging assortment of science-fiction books and films! For my part, that word brings me right back to Philosophy of Religion 101, in which the whole notion of divine omnipotence was subjected to rather scathing analysis and critique. I can still recall the classic skeptic's riddle which rather cheekily asks the debunking question, "Can the allegedly omnipotent God create an object so heavy, that He is unable to lift it." Think about that question for a minute...because it's a real "heads I win/tails you lose" sort of business. If God **cannot** create such an object, God is clearly not omnipotent; if God **can** create such an object, God ceases to be omnipotent once

that too-heavy-to-lift object sees the light of day. For a contentious atheist that's a rather neat "game-set-match"!

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Well: As we all know in our bones, life is much more than a philosophical parlor-game and—yes: to speak of God's omnipotence, to speak of God as "Almighty" raises questions which are perhaps less "clever" than the question of God creating an object too heavy for God to lift. Questions which, however, are far closer to the lived experience of believers and skeptics alike. The question I especially have in mind is one made all the sharper, when the noun "Father" is placed side by side with the adjective "Almighty". Assuming that we take as given the image of "Father" presented in Jesus' greatest parable...!

...the parable in which the father throws his dignity to the wind in order to run helter-skelter down the road to embrace his returning son, his wayward prodigal...

...if we take the Parable of the Compassionate Father (a.k.a. the Parable of the Prodigal Son) as our touchstone when it comes to deciphering the significance of what it means to call God "our Father", the implication of seeing that Father as "Almighty" are hard to evade. To put it sharply: if God is our "all-loving" Father, but is also *Patrem omnipotentem*—Father Omnipotent, Father Almighty—why is our world such an unholy mess?

There is in fact a veritable cottage industry of thinkers who have wrestled—and **still** wrestle—with what is known as "theodicy", a word best translated as "justification of God." Sometimes regarded as a branch of theology...sometimes regarded as a branch of philosophy...sometimes regarded as a bit of both, it's an enterprise which, despite its fancy name, specialized vocabulary, and technical complexities, attempts to address issues which actually impact everyone, especially those who have expressed their faith—their trust—in a personal God they regard as both loving **and** powerful. Why do bad things happen to good people? For that matter: why do good things happen to bad people? Why does life so often feel as if it's spinning out of control? Most poignantly: why is there so much in our world that simply fails to make sense...so much that falls wildly short of the standard we would expect of a world that comes to us through the creative energies of the God we worship as both all-loving **and** all powerful? It is a puzzlement, is it not?

Nor is it "our" puzzlement simply because of the insertion of one isolated word in a creedal statement. Go no further than the wonderful 91st Psalm: a Psalm which makes such extravagant promises of God's protection, that even the devil chooses to make use of it when tempting Jesus in the wilderness. As both Matthew and Luke testify early on in their respective Gospels: *Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written..."*

...and here the devil, who most certainly can and does quote scripture says to Jesus, lifting two quotes from Psalm 91:

...*"He will command his angels concerning you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone."*ⁱⁱ

My point is simply this.

By referring to God as Father **Almighty**...the Creed is not creating a challenge we would otherwise be able to evade. On the contrary: our biblical heritage—a heritage which, after all, helped give birth to our Creeds—is very clear about the protection and blessing promised to God's people. But then why, so often, does neither blessing nor protection materialize? Why, so often, do things fall apart? Why, so often, does the centre fail to hold?

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Here's a fun fact!

Although our scriptures do not hesitate to ascribe great power—ultimate power—to God who is consistently presented as the Source of all that was, that is, of all that ever shall be, the actual title "Almighty" is not encountered all that often in the Bible. In the Old Testament, for example, the title "almighty" is often encountered when God is **first** introducing Himself to a character such as Abraham or Moses. Once God shares God's proper name with that character—the name JWHW—use of the word "almighty" then tends to recede into the distance. The one exception to that rule, however...

...here comes that fun fact...

...the one exception to that rule is found in the book Job! Now: there's a pretty good reason why that is so, since Job is set in the pagan rather than in the Jewish world, so that the people in that book would not be familiar with God's proper name...so instead they refer to God as the "Almighty". And yet...ironically...and quite wonderfully: Job is the Biblical book, *par excellence*, that deals with the pursuit I described earlier. Theodicy...the pursuit by which we mortals attempt to "justify" the ways of God. And trust me: it isn't pretty...and it doesn't end particularly well.

Recall the set-up for the story told in Job. God is in chambers, so to speak, with the heavenly court...when the "Satan"...who comes across in Job as kind of the "loyal opposition"...tells God how disappointing humanity has turned out to be. God uses Job as a counter-example: an example of how wonderful humanity can sometimes be. At that point God and Satan enter into a little bet in which God withdraws protection from Job, to test just how faithful a devotee Job will turn out to be under less happy circumstances. Well: no sooner does disaster strike Job, than all kinds of friends show up to offer comfort. For a while they have the wisdom to sit with Job and keep their mouths shut. Eventually they do what most of us would eventually have done; they

make the mistake of speaking...and boy, do they have a lot to say, by way of justifying what God has done to Job. As readers, however, we know that all of those explanations are wrong, because Job's friends all find ways to blame Job for something that we—who possess inside information—realize is not Job's fault. Job has suffered not because of any wrong-doing on his part; he has suffered because God and Satan decided to turn him into a test-case. And yes: while it is certainly true that the book Job can be—and has been—interpreted in countless ways, surely one thing all interpretations ought to be able to agree upon is that theodicy—the human enterprise of attempting to “justify” God—is an enterprise that ought to be undertaken with a great deal of hesitation.

That is certainly the perspective of David Bentley Hart, a theologian who insists that theodicy is a branch not of theology, but of philosophy! Nor, for Hart, is that simply a territorial issue: a theologian protecting his turf against encroachments from philosophy. No, for Hart this is serious business.

Most of us will recall the awful news to which we awoke on Boxing Day in 2004: news of the ghastly tsunami that hit Indonesia and the region surrounding Indonesia, a tsunami that is thought to have killed over 20,000 people. Hart published a few days later, a much discussed column in the *Wall Street Journal*, in which he shared his response to the horror of that event...a column he eventually turned into a slim book. ⁱⁱⁱ And the point Hart makes in that book, is that it is obscene for us—in the aftermath of an event such as the 2004 tsunami, or **any other** human tragedy—that it is obscene for us to offer armchair explanations that seek to justify God. At best we will come across as no better than Job's so-called comforters, offering empty words and vacuous explanations in the face of human anguish; at worst we will offer explanations which—far from justifying God's ways—will simply amplify the impression that God is prepared to use whatever means necessary to accomplish God's will, regardless of the human suffering that might entail, regardless of how many eggs need to be broken in order to finalize the omelette. By contrast, Hart argues that the only justification for which we—as Christians—need to look, is the promised completion of the work God has begun in and through creation, in and through Jesus Christ. When God's promises have been fulfilled, then and only then, will we know that the Almighty has been vindicated: not through human cleverness, but through the loving power of God's own hands.

And you know: if Hart is on to something—and I believe that Hart most certainly is on to something—it's important to acknowledge that God's power—at the end of the day—is no less critical than God's love. We worship God not as some well-intended “mad-scientist” who views us as the ultimate “experiment”, one which might very well end badly. No: we worship One who has made promises...One whose good intentions in and of themselves would be of no greater comfort than our good intentions were they as empty as so many of our good intentions turn out to be.

For that reason, I am always struck—when reading the ending to the book Job—struck by the way in which God appears to bully Job when God finally speaks to Job from the whirlwind. Had I been assigned the task of writing that book, no doubt I would

have chosen to emphasize God's love for Job, with God assuring Job that despite all the bad things that have happened to Job, he's still God's favorite. That, of course, is why I was never asked to write the book. The far better—but far less comfortable ending—involves God speaking not of love but of power: God's power in creation and over creation.. And surely—surely the real point here—has less to do with bullying Job, than with impressing upon Job that “it ain't over till it's over”: that God's power, active from the beginning, will be active in the end. A point, incidentally, not unlike the point made...

...made by the one and only **New** Testament book in which God is frequently referred to as the Almighty. Which New Testament book I hear you ask? None other than the Bible's final book: Revelation, a book which—perhaps more than any other Biblical book—takes as its theme the end of all things...and yes, the drama by which the Almighty will, at the end of time, make good on the words of that most delightful of mystics, Julian of Norwich—whose own promise has echoed down the ages. “All shall be well...all manner of things shall be well.”

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A final thought.

I have just cracked open a book by Alan Kreider who, for many years, taught church history and mission at a Mennonite Seminary.^{iv} In that book, he tries to account for the remarkable growth (what he describes as the “improbable rise”) of the Christian Church during its formative years within the Roman Empire. Kreider argues that a key ingredient in its “growth” has to do with the practice of patience, which the early Christians exemplified in ways that caught the eye of their pagan neighbours. There is, I think, much to recommend that notion. But here's the thing.

Patience is a prerogative of a **hopeful** people. If I ultimately believe that my future resides strictly in my own hands, patience would be a rather foolish luxury. But if I trust that my future ultimately rests in the hands of One who is both perfectly good...and perfectly powerful...

...which is to say, powerful enough to fulfill the promises made in love...

...in that case patience—far from being a foolish luxury—is shown to be **the** way to which we are, in fact called. Not the counterfeit patience of those who prefer to sit on their hands and do nothing...rather the authentic patience of those who do what they can...but are content to leave the rest in the hands of the good God. And you know!

At the end of the day that's all we have the right to ask of the Almighty. Not parlour tricks: not demonstrations of an omnipotence so great that it can create an object even God cannot lift! No: that's silliness. Not the “love of power”...rather the “power of love”. How much power? Enough to usher in that day when the God of

love—Father Almighty—will be all in all. That’s more than enough for this day...more than enough for eternity.

And glory be to God...whose power working in us can accomplish more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God...in the church...and in Christ Jesus, from generation to generation: now and forever more. Amen!

ⁱ Luke 15: 11ff

ⁱⁱ Matthew 4: 5, 6 & Luke 4: 9-11

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Doors of the Sea: Where was God in the Tsunami*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005)

^{iv} *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2016)