

## The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

*Grasping at Silk*

*Everlasting Arms and the Problem of Pain*

*Deuteronomy 33.17 (KJV); Ephesians 4.1-6*

Russ Dean, July 11, 2010<sup>1</sup>



### BEFORE SCRIPTURE

Any time I preach a sermon like today's, which takes an un-orthodox approach to an orthodox question, I feel the need to add a word of qualification – not because I am hesitant to offer a non-traditional opinion, nor because I am defensive about my position. But I am aware that all of us are not at the same place along our spiritual journey (and I'm not implying that my place in that journey is "above" anyone else's), that we are children and youth and adults, that we have different educational and life experiences, that some of you have been in this church for sixty years, and are accustomed to such preaching, and some of you are here for the first time today. As a pastor, I want to be pastoral, as well as prophetic, in my preaching – the last thing I want is for someone to be discouraged in their faith, or frustrated in the church, because they were not prepared to hear the kind of messages that Amy and I occasionally preach.

A good many years ago, I asked a friend of Amy's and mine, a veteran pastor, if you could ever really be honest with a church about what you believed. I asked this because in the church I served at the time I sensed that I could not be – that many of the people weren't ready for some of the thoughts I had be introduced to in seminary, that "Church," for many, did not include the idea of probing faith, only affirming it. This veteran of progressive-thinking Baptist churches answered a disappointing, "No... you can never say all of what you believe."

Maybe it was out of that disappointment that the words of the search committee that called us to this church 11 summers ago were so refreshing – they spoke of the priority of an "open pulpit," and the desire of the congregation to be challenged theologically and socially from the pulpit. I made an intentional decision before I first stepped into this pulpit that I would be honest, always, with you about who I am and what I believe. So I approach this sermon, on the difficult issue called "theodicy" – the conflict of evil in the world, along with an all-knowing, all-powerful God – I approach this sermon with pastoral caution, but with prophetic candor. You will not have to agree with me. But if you go from here thinking more clearly or more intently about who God is, and who God is in your own life, as I have done in preparing these words, then we will all be the better for it.

Thank you for this open pulpit. It is an immeasurable gift.

### SERMON

This sermon was prompted five years ago by a lengthy email. We had asked if there were issues or scripture passages which you would like to hear a sermon on, and her response said:

"Russ – I would like a sermon on reconciling the world we live in versus an all powerful and loving God..." After detailing a number of the human atrocities that added to her confusion, she

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<sup>1</sup> The sermon was originally preached on June 26, 2005.

suggested four possible responses. “I sometimes question how God can truly love human beings – yet inflict/allow such cruelties. My logic leads me to the conclusion that, either: 1) God is not all powerful (and thus bears no responsibility for these atrocities) because he only set the world in motion and cannot control the "free will" of its players; 2) God designed (or is at least willing to tolerate) the suffering of the individual or the many as part of some Master Plan; 3) God is some "Q"-like-being from Star Trek (i.e., the all powerful, capricious entity that enjoys playing with those lesser than he for his own amusement); or 4) Duality of God versus the Devil in a war of good and evil.”

How do you deal with the problem of evil? Is God all loving and all powerful? And how could there be evil if this was so? The question has been asked for millennia. I am hardly a newcomer to the show, nor am I a qualified theologian, but as your pastor I am happy to share with you my journey into understanding the nature of God.

Surveys routinely report that the overwhelming majority of Americans, somewhere above 90%, “believe in God.” As a pastor, I want people to believe, but I wonder how much we really ought to celebrate such overwhelming religiosity? Who is this God in whom most Americans believe? How does such belief affect their lives?

If the e-mail I just read is indicative of many believing Americans, I have to wonder if such looming questions about God do not actually negate (in practice) what most Americans say they believe (in theory)? In other words, if we don’t know whether the God in whom we believe “instills” pedophiles with evil and then allows them to rape and murder little girls... or whether God even cares about such tragedies at all... how could “believing” in such a deity make any difference to us?

I just said that as a pastor I want people to believe. I actually do not care if people simply believe in God or not.<sup>2</sup> Simply believing in God, in fact, may be part of humanity's greatest problem. Human beings have always had a remarkable penchant for believing in things that are un-true or un-real, or in things that simply make no difference. So, believing in an un-true, or an un-real God is surely worse than not believing at all. And believing in a God who makes no difference in our lives is the heart of a kind of practical atheism, which may be alive and well in our overwhelmingly "believing" America.

What I think is important, maybe even essential for us – if we are to experience the fullness of our humanity – is for people to know God. To experience God. To love God. And I believe that a God who allows pedophiles, or who has no apparent concern for their victims, is not worthy of our worship, much less our love.<sup>3</sup>

So, who is this God, in whom most Americans believe? What is the nature of God, especially given the suffering and pain that the world all around us has known for eons? And is this God worthy of the best that we have and are?

I need to say this about language – whatever, wherever, whomever God is, God is ultimately beyond our fullest understanding. Even things we do understand are sometimes beyond adequate description, so we need to recognize that the words we speak

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<sup>2</sup> *But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder" ( James 2.18-19, (emphasis added)).*

<sup>3</sup> This continues an extended argument in my preaching, i.e., that faith should not be understood as "belief" (as mental assent to some idea(s)), but that faith should be practice, experiential, tried and tested, lived experience rather than intellectual experience. I sometimes remind people that "orthodoxy" literally means "right praise" – which has more to do with right worship (and by extension, right acting/living) than with the "right believing" the word has come to connote.

of God will always fall short. St. Augustine once said: “If you have understood it, it is not God.”

I say this because it is necessary to recognize that even the best words we have of God, are human words. Even our biblical words are words mediated by human understanding and interpretation and are, therefore, incapable of fully defining God.<sup>4</sup> What I believe is important about theological words, then, is not so much what they say of God (for what can we really know of “God”?), but what they say of the people who use them to describe God, and how those words, in turn, move us to respond to the God they describe.

Ludwig Feurbach was a critic of belief who said that “God” was simply a projection of humanity – just an idea that was the conglomeration of the best, most important human ideas, projected out onto a supernatural being. I do not hold with Feurbach that such a projection means God is just a human invention. God is. But I do believe we create the image of the God who is, with our words. So let us listen to what our words of God tell us, not so much about God, but about ourselves. And let us use our words of God carefully.

For most people, in most times and places, the very idea of God is mostly associated with the word “power.” What is God’s most basic nature? (God who

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<sup>4</sup> I believe that the biblical words, themselves, are human, i.e., they are born in the human experience of seeking to know and understand God. (I reject any form of “plenary verbal inspiration,” in which God literally dictates the words of scripture to the writers. I believe such an understanding lessens the importance and impact the scriptures can have on their fully human audience.) And, I believe that a second level of human agency comes to play as we interpret these words. (The doctrine of the Trinity is an obvious example: the word “trinity” is not found in scripture, the doctrine, then, is a human interpretation based on various words of scripture.)

“created...” God who “controls...”) God is all-powerful. Is this true for you? The very word “God,” is surrounded in an aura of ultimate power.

Humans came to this idea honestly enough. In ages long past, an unknowing and superstitious people believed that everything that happened, every single thing, came from the hand of God. The harvest was the blessing of a powerful God. The earthquake was the punishment of the same God. Health, wealth and prosperity were God’s favor. A disease that God could, but would not, heal was God’s judgment. It didn’t take Kings and Warlords long to figure out how to take advantage of such a belief. When a powerless people asked, in effect, “Who died and left you in charge?” The answer was clear. All power comes from God, who is all-powerful.

What has it done for the individual human psyche, and for our collective human soul, to have been told from time immemorial, that God is POWER? Especially when that message is preached almost exclusively by those in power? Especially when the idea has been enforced and reinforced by corrupt and abusive regimes, political and religious, abusing their power by claiming it as God’s power? What has it done to our experience of God? And what has this idea of God-as-power done to our own interpersonal relationships? (Do our relationships also revolve around the idea of who has the power?)

Charles Hartshorne says:

...”brute power” is an indirect relation, never a direct one. But it is none-the-less practically efficacious, for good or ill, and has to be reckoned with. The one thing we need not and ought not to do is – to worship it!<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The quotation has come to me through an indirect source, but I received the citation as: Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity*.

But, worship power we have. For ages “might makes right” has been not only a personal motto, and a rallying cry for nations – but it has also become central to a universal theology. All abuse of power can be, and usually is, justified by the invoking of divine legitimacy. If God is power – then Power is God.<sup>6</sup>

Let me speak as plainly to you as I can today, if in my unorthodox way! Because I believe the impact of such language and belief have done immeasurable damage, in all times, to human beings (and our life together), I have chosen to believe that God is not all-powerful. I believe that God is not all-powerful, if we have to conceive of that power as a literal power, that brute force or strength that enables God to push around things and control people at God’s own whim (or even at God’s own infinite knowledge).<sup>7</sup> I believe that God does not have such power.

When I read the creation narrative, no longer do I hear the voice of God speaking from a distance, commanding life. I hear God’s voice within, whispering amidst the chaos, “There is something more. Something better. Come. Live. Learn. Love.”<sup>8</sup> When I read the stories of Israel’s often-brutal conquest of its enemies, no longer do I hear God’s voice commanding the slaughter of all – even women and children and animals. I hear a people, bent on their own destruction by their own insecurities and hatreds. I hear them speaking their need for power. And I hear them speaking this misplaced need onto God’s

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<sup>6</sup> The theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether uses the same logic in her feminist theology: “If God is male, then the male is God.”

<sup>7</sup> My theological argument is against equating God and POWER, so it matters little to me if God sends hurricanes on a whim (the action of a kind of “Q figure” of my e-mailer’s Trecky reference), or if God sends, or allows them, due to a greater divine knowledge (the so-called “big picture” that we humans are incapable of knowing). My argument is against POWER as the defining characteristic of God.

<sup>8</sup> Clearly, I believe the story of science and the story of scripture are not incompatible (see last week’s sermon, “t=0 and counting: Lessons Along this Darkened Path”), but I believe a God who calls out life, from within the natural order, is more compatible with a current understanding of cosmology than a God who literally “creates,” residing and containing a power “beyond.”

lips – which have been silenced by their fears. When I hear people proclaiming God’s dramatic and divine interventions, their prayers answered, their miracles received... I also hear the deafening cries of the nameless, faceless millions, who have stared into the night wondering where the God of power was – and why such a God had passed them by.<sup>9</sup>

I simply cannot reckon in my small mind the traditional answers of a theology that needs to maintain the omnipotence of God (for God’s sake<sup>10</sup>) – when such answers leave so many without comfort and without hope – crying in the night... hating themselves for being unworthy... or turning in anger from the God who could, but just would not. I simply cannot reckon in my small mind a “big picture,” that is big enough to justify the suffering of millions. I simply cannot reckon in my small mind a next life that makes all the death and injustice of this life excusable.<sup>11</sup>

So I choose (because words may actually be all-powerful!), I choose to believe and say that God is not all-powerful, if we have to conceive of that power as literal power, that brute force or strength that enables God to push around things and people at God’s own whim. I choose to believe with Dr. Frank Tupper who taught my class in

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<sup>9</sup> I worded this sentence carefully because I do not deny outright all claims of “miracle.” As I will say later, I believe God works in every possible way. Life is filled with surprising and unexplainable events (“God works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform.”) I simply want to recognize that for every one claim of a “miracle” (by an “all-powerful God”), there are untold experiences of the silence of God. Should we not listen to this “weight of evidence”? I am seeking a theological proposal that will validate the claims of “miracle,” but in a framework that better answers what I have called the unanswered “cries in the dark.”

<sup>10</sup> Because, as I have said, I believe our language “creates ‘God’” it seems to me that we are now at the point of having to defend the “god-ness” of a “God” (a concept of God) we have created! If we are always defending that “god-ness” (usually very defensively), how will we ever let God just be God? Letting go of the concept of “omnipotence” does not let go of God – in fact, it may be the only way for us to ever come to really know the God of Jesus Christ (who was clearly not a God of “power”).

<sup>11</sup> I can and do conceive of a next life – simply not one that justifies incalculable suffering.

systematic theology that “God always does everything God can do.”<sup>12</sup> Every word counts for Dr. Tupper, and every word is a sermon in itself, but let me briefly expound.

God – I believe there is a Spirit *above all and through all and in all* (Ephesians 4.6), and that Spirit is the source of life and light and love.

Always – God is.<sup>13</sup> God doesn’t choose when to be God and when not to be God, or how much God to be. God is always God.

Does – I believe God can and does act in this world, that God is part of the world – the heart of all reality. Always working. Always acting. Always doing.

Everything – always working every angle, leaving no stone unturned, looking for any space, however surprising, serendipitous, unexpected, unexplained, to bring grace.  
(Life.)

God.

Can – here’s the word that catches most folk – the idea that God cannot.

Logically, I think we have to choose whether we will believe God will not, or God cannot, and I have come to believe that the latter, though unorthodox, is a more life-giving understanding.<sup>14</sup> There are some things God cannot Do – but what God can do...

God always does!

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<sup>12</sup> To be fair to Dr. Tupper I should say that, despite this claim, he still believes God is omnipotent. At the creation God “chose to limit God’s power,” according to Dr. Tupper. God “could” do anything, but if God were to do so, the world as we know it would cease to be (the world as we know it). Defending omnipotence in this way seems to me an example of defending the “god-ness” of which I have spoken. The practical point of Tupper’s theology is that the God of today, the here and now, is not “all powerful.” Why the need to defend a “god-ness” that is omnipotent in theory, yet limited in actual practice?

<sup>13</sup> “God said to Moses, “I am who I am.”” Exodus 3.14. This “divine name” (Yahweh), is derived from the Hebrew verb form of “to be.” In my attempt to explain this, I often translate the name as, “I am-is-are-was-were-be-being-been.” God is action, being itself. God simply is. The great twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich speaks of God, not as a being, but as the “ground of all being.”

<sup>14</sup> I have difficulty escaping the moral implications of a God who “can” but “will not.” And the explanation that “God sees or knows in a different way, a bigger picture,” just does not work for me – remember that for me, the language is more about us, our logic, our understanding, than of concretely defining the Mysterious God.

Yes, I believe that God is not all-powerful – but I have come to believe that if God is that brooding spirit the scripture tells us about, still bringing order from the waters of chaos and light from darkness (Genesis 1), if God is that inner voice that both “afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted,”<sup>15</sup> if God is the voice that sounds like a Galilean peasant calling us to *love our enemies* (who really are our neighbors (Matthew 5)), if God is, truly, that one Spirit that is *above all and through all and in all* (Ephesians 4.6), if God is the *energy in all things, working to bring good* (Romans 8.28), if *God is love* (1 John 4.8)... then God is the only real power there is.

God. Is. Love.

What more could we want God to do?

Because a mother’s labor of love had been so demanding, when that little voice cried out in the night, a father rose from his slumber – usually clueless, often helpless. Stumbling toward the growing cry, and reaching beneath that little body, wracked with discomfort or fear or frustration, putting his arms underneath, he pulled his son close, forehead to forehead, rocked him gently, caressed him smoothly, and whispered the only words he could offer in that dark night: “Daddy is here. It’s OK. Daddy is here!”<sup>16</sup>

When the son grows to maturity, he will learn – maybe surprisingly, maybe with great disappointment – that there are some things his father simply cannot control, some

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<sup>15</sup> According to a quick internet search, the quotation belongs to the late Chicago author, Finley Peter Dunne (d.1936).

<sup>16</sup> Though I have essentially eliminated the usage of God as “Father” from my language, for reasons of gender-inclusivity, I thought this personal experience an appropriate illustration, and I thought of Jesus’ almost exclusive use of the Aramaic, “Abba” (father) in reference to God. Though Father imagery has many problems, as feminist theologians have noted, it seems to me that the metaphor is strong and appropriate – just as earthly fathers are not all-powerful, but whose love is in so many ways defining for us, surely the same can be said for a “heavenly father” – who does everything God can do, yet whose presence defines us, sustains us, gives us strength for the journey!

things he cannot do for him. And he will learn, if he is honest, that he would not want a father to have that much power, even if he could. But as a full-grown, mature adult, the little boy at the heart of every man, the little girl at the heart of every woman, needs to know the feel of those arms, underneath, and the sound of the voice: *Be not afraid... For I will be with you* (Isaiah 43.1-2).

May it be so!