

# Who is like thee? - divine omnipotence and human suffering

By Pastor Mary Anderson

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Isaiah 40:21-31

"WE HUMANS KNOW our language cannot communicate the greatness of the divine, but we try anyway. We love to use the prefix omni, which takes a common adjective and expands it to the size of the universe: omnifarious, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, omni-loving, omni-merciful, omni-cool. The omni words are reserved for God and God alone.

The prophet Isaiah has an omni-tough assignment. He's been called to proclaim hope in the midst of despair, to tell the exiles in Babylon that God is on the way to deliver them just when they have begun to seriously doubt it. In this great sermon, the preacher argues that the one who created the vast universe and all that is in it has the power to restore the Hebrews as a people. It is a tough sermon to preach, because in the midst of their captivity the people are wondering how their God can be omni-anything when they are so miserable. How can they be the chosen people and the demoralized people at the same time?

In a risky but effective homiletical strategy, Isaiah proclaims the greatness of the Lord in contrast to the insignificance of the people. Who are they to question God's ways, God's abilities? Earlier in this sermon he asks, "Whom does God consult for enlightenment? ... Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales." Here is a metaphor of our smallness compared to our omni-everything God

Today preachers can make the same point with new knowledge of the billions of galaxies beyond our own. The universe is beyond our comprehension, and we wonder how much we still have not discovered or experienced. We realize that we are the speck of inconsequential dust on the scales, as Isaiah described.

This prophet is a master at putting God and humankind in perspective. He asks wonderful rhetorical questions: To whom will you compare me? Who is my equal? When we're posed such questions, we know the liturgically correct response, and yet the questions in our souls persist.

The truth is we compare God to ourselves. We measure divine actions against our own. We think we know what we would do, what we would enact or change if we were omni-everything.

Like Aladdin with a lamp we think we would make wonderful wishes. People would have all the riches they wanted. There would be an end to all strife and disease, and death would be banished from the earth. Do we not all wonder from time to time, from funeral to funeral, from war to war, why God does not fire up that omnipotence and straighten things out?

Such doubts haunt us constantly. We grieve the death of a 32-year-old mother from ovarian cancer and discover we have no explanations that make sense. We are convinced that if we had the power to control this situation we would produce a cure and a family able to live happily ever after. But we don't have the power. We know who does, and in our grief we ask the ancient question, "Where is God?"

In another sermon, Isaiah reminded the people that their ways were not God's ways, neither were their thoughts divine thoughts. It's hard for us to believe that our measures of what is just, what is merciful and what is best are not in sync with the mind of God. They seem good to us. But we are not omni, Isaiah says. We have some perspective, but not the omni-perspective of God, who knows the movement of all history toward all futures, who knows our place among those billions of galaxies.

For all we know, our struggles with cancer are part of an evolutionary process within God's billion-year scheme to create a posthuman being. We speak matter-of-factly about the evolutionary process behind us, noting that creatures climbed from the sea onto land, that gills became lungs. But what did these creatures go through one by one over all those years as the Creator continued creating? Can we believe that God is still creating man and woman into something, we know not what?

When the calculations comparing our smallness with God's greatness are finished, we can react to our position in the universe in several ways. We can slink away in despair and denial or we can crawl back into God's big saving hands. Isaiah proclaimed, and the birth, death and

resurrection of Jesus confirmed, that this God who knows all, creates all, controls all and plans all also loves all. God has no inconsequential creatures or untended corners of the universe. God tells us how precious we are in God's sight.

The proclamation is always a shock because it's not the way we operate. We who counsel each other to let the little things go, we who can only manage a limited number of details are amazed by God yet again. God has the whole world well in hand. I for one am happy to live inside a wrinkle of God's palm, content to be a part of an ongoing creation process, amazed to be so loved and, most days, unafraid of what it all means.

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