

The second Sunday after Epiphany

John 1:5 “The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it.”

“God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.”

You probably know this line? But maybe not where it is from. It is the first line of a hymn written by an eighteenth-century Englishman, William Cowper, who struggled with mental illness much of his life. Even so, he wrote: “God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.” Ways beyond his understanding. Ways that none of us can understand.

The prophet Isaiah wrote: “Truly thou art a God who hidest thyself” (Isa. 45:15 KJV; see 45:1-15, especially verse 7). When life takes a tragic turn, where is God? In dark times – whatever they may be, this word from Isaiah strikes home. Why does the Lord permit this tragedy, this illness, this disability, this horror?

The prophet Habakkuk asks: “Oh Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear? Why are you silent when the wicked man swallows up the one more righteous than he?” (Hab. 1:2, 13)

When evil swallows up the good, where is the Almighty? Is he really Almighty? Perhaps we got the wrong idea about God long ago in confirmation. We got the idea that God is all powerful, and therefore when bad things happen, it must mean either that God isn’t all powerful, or that God is a fool who is no help in the face of evil.

What do we make of the apparent absence of the Almighty One? First, he is inaccessible in his almightiness. As in the hymn, “Immortal, Invisible”:

Immortal, invisible God only wise  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes  
Most gracious, most glorious, the ancient of days,  
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

The idea of God hidden in blinding light is a very biblical one. When Moses came down from speaking with God on Mount Sinai, his face reflected God’s light so brightly that he had to wear a veil over it so as not to blind the people (Exodus 34:29-35). When Moses asked God to show him his glory (*shekinah*), God placed him in a cleft in a rock and covered him with his hand to protect him from seeing the glory directly (Ex 33:21-23). The hymn, “Rock of Ages,” connects this imagery from Exodus to the cross to show how the Lord covers us: “Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hid myself in thee; Let the water and the blood, From thy riven side which flowed, Be of sin the double cure: Cleanse me from its guilt and pow’r.” The Lord covers us in the alien righteousness of Christ.

The idea of God hidden in blinding light sends the message: Do not tamper with the Almighty! He does not want to be known as he is “in heaven,” in his blinding “almightiness.” As Isaiah 55:8-9 goes on to say:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
Neither are your ways my ways, say the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,

And my thoughts than your thoughts.”

The Lord is hidden in inaccessible light – light that we can’t directly look at. His holiness is something beyond our understanding. We are mere mortals. We can’t see God from a human point of view at all. We can’t see him with our eyes; you cannot look around the world and see him. We can’t see him with our mind’s eye, that is our brains and imaginations. Even the smartest, brightest scientists, or smartest, brightest theologians among us, can’t see God. No one can see through the universe to God beyond.

The Lord hides himself. He is almighty, all-knowing, Lord of all. He has done, is doing, and will do things that we cannot begin to understand. “Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself.”

He hides his almighty power in blinding light as if to say: “Don’t look for me here.” Look elsewhere. The blinding light of his almightiness drives us to the place where his will *is revealed*.

God’s will is revealed in his down to earth action, in the cross and resurrection. The cross and resurrection is the promise that the Lord is still Lord, in spite of sin, death, and devil. In spite of the evil that threatens to undo us and this world.

The Almighty One hides himself in blinding light to drive us away in fear to a place where he, as *revealed* God, wants to be known. In the cross and resurrection.

Therefore, in the face of tragedy and sorrow, we can boldly confess: “I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” In other words, we say: Let God be God. We can let God run the universe. The Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, is in charge, in control, in spite of how things might look.

Of course, this is not a solution to the problem of evil. It doesn’t explain where evil came from, or how it started, or how evil is related to God’s almighty power. We don’t have answers to the problem of evil. It remains a deep mystery. But God’s way of working in our world, that is, God hidden and revealed, gives us a way to talk about the problem of evil, a way to handle it.

We can look evil in the eye and still say: “I believe in God the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.” Apart from Jesus Christ, God remains hidden. We have, ultimately, no means for penetrating that hiddenness. We cannot see God. We cannot say: Here is God; there is God. We really don’t even have a basis for making an absolute separation between evil and good. Many things we think are good turn out to be evil in the end and *vice versa*. But this impenetrable hiddenness drives us to the place where the hiddenness is broken through: the cross. Because of the cross we can say: “I believe in a good God, creator of a good earth.” There God has come down to earth and revealed his will for us.

The thing to do when you become worried about God’s almightiness is to go to the cross, to his Word and sacraments, there to discover what his almightiness has accomplished and will accomplish. God alone can solve the problem of evil and his almightiness. And he has done so on the cross.

The hymn, When Peace, like a River, expresses this well:

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,  
Let this blest assurance control,  
That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate  
And hath shed his own blood for my soul.

He lives—oh, the bliss of this glorious thought;  
My sin, not in part, but the whole,  
Is nailed to his cross, and I bear it no more.  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

(As Luther writes: “Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from the Word and sacraments is of the devil. For even to Moses God wished to appear first through the burning bush and the spoken word” (*Smalcald III/VIII/10-11*; Tappert 313, Kolb/Wengert 323).