

Author's Note

I AM FINISHING THIS BOOK in early Eastertide 2020 and sending it out to an uncertain world. A pandemic has spread around the globe, death tolls are mounting, and we in the United States have largely been under stay-at-home orders. I have chosen not to specifically address the pandemic in these pages. When I wrote this manuscript, Covid-19 did not exist. By the time this book is released, any reader will likely have far more insight into the reality of Covid-19 and its effects on the world than I could give here. What is needed now is the slow work of wisdom, and I am too near the outset of this tragedy to offer that in any detail.

But though I do not know what lies ahead, I know that whatever awaits us in this particular catastrophe, it will not be the last. We will face other natural disasters and global calamities. And there will be devastating yet more commonplace suffering that each reader will bring to these pages: personal stories of pain, vulnerability, anxiety, and loss that will continue long after the current crisis ends.

So I send this book out with a prayer that it will bear light and truth, and do the work it's been given to do.

Part One

Praying in the Dark

*Darkness—night—these are always
symbols for the God-forsakenness of the
world . . . and for the lostness of men and
women. In the darkness we see nothing,
and no longer know where we are.*

JURGEN MOLTSMANN, *IN THE END—THE BEGINNING*

*Comprehension of good and evil is
given . . . in night fears when we are
small, in dread of the beast's fangs
and in the terror of dark rooms.*

CZESLAW MILOSZ, *ONE MORE DAY*

Prologue

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, covered in blood in an emergency room, I was praying.

We had lived in Pittsburgh for less than a month. Amid frigid nights and snow that had turned to gray slush, I was miscarrying.

Earlier that night, we had joined new acquaintances at their house for dinner. Their daughter went to school with ours. I was two days into the miscarriage, but my doctor had told me to go about the week as planned, so we went. As my husband, Jonathan, made the kind of awkward small talk you rehearse with near strangers, I began to have contractions. I felt like I couldn't quite breathe. I asked to go to an urgent care clinic. I was trying to be breezy and undramatic—not the emergency room, but urgent care, the place where people go for stitches, no big deal.

Jonathan began to explain to our hosts that we had to end the evening early because, though we hadn't mentioned it over dinner pleasantries, I was in the middle of a miscarriage, and while I was supposed to be bleeding slowly for a week, now I was bleeding quickly and in pain. I stood apologizing to our dinner hosts—because as a woman from the South, there is no awkward social situation in which I won't compulsively apologize. Then, suddenly, I began gushing blood. Gushing. I looked like a gunshot victim.

Our hosts threw two towels to my husband, which he wrapped around me as I stumbled into the car, shouting, "Where is the hospital?" We left our children upstairs playing, without saying goodbye, with people whose last name we couldn't quite remember.

It was dark out now. We wound through blurred city lights and hip college students walking to bars. On the way to the hospital I felt faint. Blood quickly soaked both towels as Jonathan offered panicked prayers: "Help her! Breathe. Oh God." He ran all the red lights. He thought I was going to die on the way.

But we made it to the hospital. I was going to be okay, but I needed surgery.

The room filled with nurses, all commenting that this was way more blood than they usually saw, which should have been discomfoting, except they seemed calm about it, even a bit fascinated, like I was a particularly well-done project at a school science fair. They put in a line for a blood transfusion, and told me to lie still. Then, I yelled to Jonathan, lost amidst the nurses, "Compline! I want to pray Compline."

It isn't normal—even for me—to loudly demand liturgical prayers in a crowded room in the midst of crisis. But in that moment, I needed it, as much as I needed the IV.

Relieved to have a direct command, Jonathan pulled up the Book of Common Prayer on his phone and warned the nurses, "We are both priests, and we're going to pray now." And then he launched in: "The Lord grant us a peaceful night and a perfect end."

Over the metronome beat of my heart monitor, we prayed the entire nighttime prayer service. I repeated the words by heart as waves of blood flowed from me with each contraction.

"Keep us as the apple of your eye."

"Hide us under the shadow of your wing."

"Lord have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy."

"Defend us, Lord, from the perils and dangers of this night."

We finished: "The almighty and merciful Lord, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless us and keep us. Amen."

"That's beautiful," one of the nurses said. "I've never heard that before."



Why did I suddenly and desperately want to pray Compline underneath the fluorescent lights of a hospital room?

Because I wanted to pray but couldn't drum up words.

It isn't that "Help! Make the bleeding stop!" wasn't holy or sophisticated enough. I was in a paper-thin hospital gown soaked with blood. This was not the time for formality. I wanted healing—but I needed more than just healing. I needed this moment of crisis to find its place in something greater: the prayers of the church, yes, but more, the vast mystery of God, the surety of God's power, the reassurance of God's goodness.

I had to decide again, in that moment, when I didn't know how things would turn out, with my baby dead and my body broken, whether these things I preached about God loving me and being for me were true. Yet I was bone-weary. I was heart-broken. I could not conjure up spontaneous and ardent faith.

My decision about whether to trust God wasn't merely an exercise of cognition. I wasn't trying to pass some Sunday School pop quiz. I was trying to enter into truth that was large enough to hold my own frailty, vulnerability, and weak faith—a truth as deniable as it is definite. But how, worn out with tears and blood, in a place without words and without certainty, could I reach for that truth?

That night, I held to the reality of God's goodness and love by taking up the practices of the church. Specifically by taking up prayer, the liturgy of the hours.

For most of church history, Christians understood prayer not primarily as a means of self-expression or an individual conversation with the divine, but as an inherited way of approaching

God, a way to wade into the ongoing stream of the church's communion with him.¹ In that moment in the hospital, I was not trying to "express my faith," to announce my wavering devotion to a room full of busy nurses. Nor was I trying to call down (in the words of Richard Dawkins) my "sky fairy" to come save me.² Through prayer I dared to believe that God was in the midst of my chaos and pain, whatever was to come. I was reaching for a reality that was larger and more enduring than what I felt in the moment.

Every prayer I have ever prayed, from the most faithful to the least, has been in part a confession uttered in the Gospel of Mark: "I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). That was my prayer as I repeated the well-worn words of Compline that night. And as countless nights before, the church, in the midst of my weakness, responded with her ancient voice: "Here are some words. Pray them. They are strong enough to hold you. These will help your unbelief."

Faith, I've come to believe, is more craft than feeling. And prayer is our chief practice in the craft.

This is not to say that a relationship with God is something we accomplish by effort, or that there's a hierarchy of Christian achievement where an elite group excels at faith like some excel at sewing or basketball. Grace is the first and last word of the Christian life, and all of us are desperately in need of mercy and are deeply loved.

Faith comes as a gift. And any artisan will tell you that there is something miraculous about their craft. Madeline L'Engle said that any good work of art is more and better than the artist. Shakespeare, she said, "wrote better than he could write; Bach composed more deeply, more truly than he knew; Rembrandt's brush put more of the human spirit on canvas than Rembrandt could comprehend."³ A gardener cannot make daffodils grow, nor can a baker force the alchemic glory of yeast and sugar. And yet we are given means of grace that we can practice, whether

we feel like it or not, and these carry us. Craftsmen—writers, brewers, dancers, potters—show up and work, and they participate in a mystery. They take up a craft, again and again, on bad days and good, waiting for a flash of mercy, a gift of grace.

In our deepest moments of anxiety and darkness, we enter into this craft of prayer, at times trembling and feeble. Most often, we take up prayer not out of triumphant victory or unimpeachable trust but because prayer shapes us; it works back on us to change who we are and what we believe. Patterns of prayer draw us out of ourselves, out of our own time-bound moment, into the long story of Christ's work in and through his people over time.⁴

As I prayed that night, I wanted to believe the things I proclaimed: that God knew and loved me, that this terrible moment, too, would be redeemed. I believed it and I didn't. Reaching for this old prayer service was an act of hope that it would put me under the knife, work in me like surgery, set things right in my own heart. I may as well have said, "Compline. STAT."

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Finding Compline

Nightfall

IT WAS A DARK YEAR IN EVERY SENSE. It began with the move from my sunny hometown, Austin, Texas, to Pittsburgh in early January. One week later, my dad, back in Texas, died in the middle of the night. Always towering and certain as a mountain on the horizon, he was suddenly gone.

A month later, I miscarried and hemorrhaged, and we prayed Compline in the ER.

Grief had compounded. I was homesick. The pain of losing my dad was seismic, still rattling like aftershocks. It was a bleak season—we named it, as a grim joke, the “Pitts-of-despair-burgh.”

The next month we found out we were pregnant again. It felt like a miracle. But early on I began bleeding, and the pregnancy became complicated. I was put on “medically restricted activity.” I couldn’t stand for long periods, walk more than a couple blocks, or lift anything above ten pounds, which meant I couldn’t lift my then four-year-old. As I spent hours sitting in bed each day, my mind grew dimmer and darker. The bleeding continued near-constantly for two months, with weekly trips to the hospital when it picked up so much that we worried I was miscarrying or in danger of another hemorrhage. In the end, in late July, early in my second trimester, we lost another baby, a son.

During that long year, as autumn brought darkening days and frost settled in, I was a priest who couldn't pray.

I didn't know how to approach God anymore. There were too many things to say, too many questions without answers. My depth of pain overshadowed my ability with words. And, more painfully, I couldn't pray because I wasn't sure how to trust God.

Martin Luther wrote about seasons of devastation of faith, when any naive confidence in the goodness of God withers. It's then that we meet what Luther calls "the left hand of God."¹ God becomes foreign to us, perplexing, perhaps even terrifying.

Adrift in the current of my own doubt and grief, I was flailing. If you ask my husband about 2017, he says simply, "What kept us alive was Compline."



An Anglicization of *completorium*, or "completion," Compline is the last prayer office of the day. It's a prayer service designed for nighttime.²

Imagine a world without electric light, a world lit dimly by torch or candle, a world full of shadows lurking with unseen terrors, a world in which no one could be summoned when a thief broke in and no ambulance could be called, a world where wild animals hid in the darkness, where demons and ghosts and other creatures of the night were living possibilities for everyone. This is the context in which the Christian practice of nighttime prayers arose, and it shapes the emotional tenor of these prayers.

For much of history, night was simply terrifying.

Roger Ekirch begins his fascinating history of nighttime by saying, "It would be difficult to exaggerate the suspicion and insecurity bred by darkness."³ In the eighteenth century, Edmund Burke said there was no other "idea so universally terrible in all times, and in all countries, as darkness."⁴ Shakespeare's Lucrece famously laments the "comfort-killing night, image of hell."⁵

Nighttime is also a pregnant symbol in the Christian tradition. God made the night. In wisdom, God made things such that every day we face a time of darkness. Yet in Revelation we're told that at the end of all things, "night will be no more" (Revelation 22:5; cf. Isaiah 60:19). And Jesus himself is called a light in the darkness. He is the light that darkness cannot overcome.

The sixteenth-century Saint John of the Cross coined the phrase "the dark night of the soul" to refer to a time of grief, doubt, and spiritual crisis, when God seems shadowy and distant.⁶ The reason this resonates with us is because night typifies our fears and doubts—"the hard day of the soul" or "the gray morning of the soul" would never have had the same staying power.

And in a darkness so complete that it's hard for us to now imagine, Christians rose from their beds and prayed vigils in the night. The third-century North African theologian Tertullian refers to "assemblies at night" in which families would rise from their sleep to pray together.⁷ In the East, Basil the Great instructed Christians that "at the beginning of the night we ask that our rest be without offense . . . and at this hour also Psalm [91] must be recited."⁸ Long after night vigils ceased to be a regular practice among families, monks continued to pray through the small hours, rising in the middle of the night to sing Psalms together, staving off the threat of darkness. Centuries of Christians have faced their fears of unknown dangers and confessed their own vulnerability each night, using the dependable words the church gave them to pray.

Of course, not all of us feel afraid at night. I have friends who relish nighttime—its stark beauty, its contemplative quiet, its space to think and pray.⁹ Anne Brontë begins her poem "Night" declaring, "I love the silent hour of night."¹⁰

There is much to love about the night. Nightingale song and candlelight, the sparkling city or the crackling of a fire as stars slowly creep across the sky, the sun descending into the horizon

silhouetting a reddened sky. Yet each of us begins to feel vulnerable if the darkness is too deep or lasts too long. It is in large part due to the presence of light that we can walk around without fear at night. With the flick of a switch, we can see as well as if we were in daylight. But go out into the woods or far from civilization, and we still feel the almost primordial sense of danger and helplessness that nighttime brings.

In deep darkness, even the strongest among us are small and defenseless.

Despite modernity's buzzing light bulbs and twenty-four-hour drive-throughs, we nonetheless face our vulnerability in a unique way as darkness falls. There's a reason horror movies are usually set at night. We still speak of the "witching hour." And poet John Rives, the curator of The Museum of Four in the Morning, a website that archives literary and pop culture references to 4 a.m., calls it the "worst possible hour of the day."¹¹ These wee hours, he says, are a popular shorthand infused with meaning across genres, cultures, and centuries.

Night is not just hours on the clock. How many of us lie awake at night, unable to fall back asleep, worrying over the day ahead, thinking of all that could go wrong, counting our sorrows?

Our very bodies confront darkness each night. So each night we practice facing our truest state: we are exposed, we cannot control our lives, we will die.

In the daylight, I'm distracted. At moments, even productive.

At night I feel alone, even in a house full of sleeping bodies. I feel small and mortal.

The darkness of nighttime amplifies grief and anxiety. I'm reminded with the setting of the sun that our days are numbered, and full of big and little losses.

We are all so very, very vulnerable.

We can speak of vulnerability as something we choose. We decide whether to "let ourselves" be vulnerable through sharing or withholding our truest selves—our stories, opinions, or

feelings. In this sense, vulnerability means emotional exposure or honesty. But this isn't the kind of vulnerability I mean. Instead, I mean the unchosen vulnerability that we all carry, whether we admit it or not. The term *vulnerable* comes from a Latin word meaning "to wound."¹² We are wound-able. We can be hurt and destroyed, in body, mind, and soul. All of us, every last man, woman, and child, bear this kind of vulnerability till our dying day.

And every twenty-four hours, nighttime gives us a chance to practice embracing our own vulnerability.¹³

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I don't remember when I began praying Compline. It didn't begin dramatically. I'd heard Compline sung many times in darkened sanctuaries where I'd sneak in late and sit in silence, listening to prayers sung in perfect harmony.

In a home with two priests, copies of the Book of Common Prayer are everywhere, lying around like spare coasters. So one night, lost in the annals of forgotten nights, I picked it up and prayed Compline.

And then I kept doing it. I began praying Compline more often, barely registering it as any kind of new practice. It was just something I did, not every day, but a few nights a week, because I liked it. I found it beautiful and comforting.

A pattern of monastic prayer was largely set by Benedict and his monks in the sixth century. They prayed eight times a day: Matins (before dawn), Lauds (at sunrise), then Prime, Terce, Sext, None, and Vespers throughout the day (each about three hours apart). Finally, at bedtime, Compline.¹⁴

The Anglican Book of Common Prayer condensed these eight canonical hours into two prayer "offices," morning and

evening prayer. But some Anglicans (as well as lay Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and others) continued to have fixed night prayers. Eventually, in Anglican prayer books these two prayer offices were expanded to four, adding vespers and a Compline service.¹⁵

Like most prayer offices, Compline includes a confession, a reading from the Psalms and other Scriptures, written and responsive prayers, and a time for silence or extemporaneous prayer.



For most of my life, I didn't know there were different kinds of prayer. Prayer meant one thing only: talking to God with words I came up with. Prayer was wordy, unscripted, self-expressive, spontaneous, and original. And I still pray this way, every day. "Free form" prayer is a good and indispensable way to pray.

But I've come to believe that in order to sustain faith over a lifetime, we need to learn different ways of praying. Prayer is a vast territory, with room for silence and shouting, for creativity and repetition, for original and received prayers, for imagination and reason.

I brought a friend to my Anglican church and she objected to how our liturgy contained (in her words) "other people's prayers." She felt that prayer should be an original expression of one's own thoughts, feelings, and needs. But over a lifetime the ardor of our belief will wax and wane. This is a normal part of the Christian life. Inherited prayers and practices of the church tether us to belief, far more securely than our own vacillating perspective or self-expression.

Prayer forms us. And different ways of prayer aid us just as different types of paint, canvas, color, and light aid a painter.

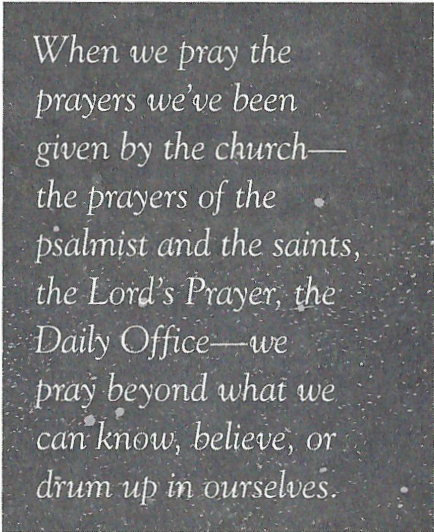
When I was a priest who could not pray, the prayer offices of the church were the ancient tool God used to teach me to pray again. Stanley Hauerwas explains his love for praying "other people's prayers": "Evangelicalism," he says, "is constantly under

the burden of re-inventing the wheel and you just get tired.” He calls himself an advocate for practicing prayer offices because,

We don’t have to make it up. We know we’re going to say these prayers. We know we’re going to join in reading of the psalm. We’re going to have these Scripture readings. . . . There’s much to be said for Christianity as repetition and I think evangelicalism doesn’t have enough repetition in a way that will form Christians to survive in a world that constantly tempts us to always think we have to do something new.¹⁶

When we pray the prayers we’ve been given by the church—the prayers of the psalmist and the saints, the Lord’s Prayer, the Daily Office—we pray beyond what we can know, believe, or drum up in ourselves. “Other people’s prayers” disciplined me; they taught me how to believe again. The sweep of church history exclaims *lex orandi, lex credendi*, that the law of prayer is the law of belief.¹⁷ We come to God with our little belief, however fleeting and feeble, and in prayer we are taught to walk more deeply into truth.

When my strength waned and my words ran dry, I needed to fall into a way of belief that carried me. I needed other people’s prayers.



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When my own dark night of the soul came in 2017, nighttime was terrifying. The stillness of night heightened my own sense of loneliness and weakness. Unlit hours brought a vacant space where there was nothing before me but my own fears

and whispering doubts. I'd stare at the hard, undeniable facts that anyone I loved could die that night, and that everyone I love will die someday—facts we most often ignore so we can make it through the day intact.

So I'd fill the long hours of darkness with glowing screens, consuming mass amounts of articles and social media, binge-watching Netflix, and guzzling think pieces till I collapsed into a fitful sleep. When I tried to stop, I'd sit instead in the bare night, overwhelmed and afraid. Eventually I'd begin to cry and, feeling miserable, return to screens and distraction—because it was better than sadness. It felt easier, anyway. Less heavy.

The mechanics of my nightly internet consumption were the same as those of the addict: faced with grief and fear, I turned to something to numb myself. When I compulsively opened up my computer, I'd go for hours without thinking about death or my dad or miscarriages or homesickness or my confusion about God's presence in the midst of suffering.

I began seeing a counselor. When I told her about my sadness and anxiety at night, she challenged me to turn off digital devices and embrace what she called “comfort activities” each night—a long bath, a book, a glass of wine, prayer, silence, journaling maybe. No screens. I fell off the wagon probably a hundred times in as many days.

But slowly I started to return to Compline.

*I needed a comfort that
looked unflinchingly
at loss and death.*

I needed words to contain my sadness and fear. I needed comfort, but I needed the sort of comfort that doesn't pretend that things are shiny or safe or right in the world. I needed a comfort that looked unflinchingly at loss and death. And Compline is rung round with death.

It begins “The Lord Almighty grant us a peaceful night and a perfect end.” *A perfect end of what?* I'd think—the day, the week? My life? We pray, “Into your hands, O Lord, I commend

my spirit”—the words Jesus spoke as he was dying. We pray, “Be our light in the darkness, O Lord, and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night,” because we are admitting the thing that, left on my own, I go to great lengths to avoid facing: there are perils and dangers in the night. We end Compline by praying, “That awake we may watch with Christ, and asleep we may rest in peace.” *Requiescat in pace*. RIP.

Compline speaks to God in the dark. And that’s what I had to learn to do—to pray in the darkness of anxiety and vulnerability, in doubt and disillusionment. It was Compline that gave words to my anxiety and grief and allowed me to reen-counter the doctrines of the church not as tidy little antidotes for pain, but as a light in darkness, as good news.

When we’re drowning we need a lifeline, and our lifeline in grief cannot be mere optimism that maybe our circumstances will improve because we know that may not be true. We need practices that don’t simply palliate our fears or pain, but that teach us to walk with God in the crucible of our own fragility.

During that difficult year, I didn’t know how to hold to both God and the awful reality of human vulnerability. What I found was that it was the prayers and practices of the church that allowed me to hold to—or rather to be held by—God when little else seemed sturdy, to hold to the Christian story even when I found no satisfying answers.

There is one prayer in particular, toward the end of Compline, that came to contain my longing, pain, and hope. It’s a prayer I’ve grown to love, that has come to feel somehow like part of my own body, a prayer we’ve prayed so often now as a family that my eight-year-old can rattle it off verbatim:

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the

weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake.
Amen.

This prayer is widely attributed to St. Augustine,¹⁸ but he almost certainly did not write it. It seems to suddenly appear centuries after Augustine's death. A gift, silently passed into tradition, that allowed one family at least to endure this glorious, heartbreaking mystery of faith for a little longer.

As I said this prayer each night, I saw faces. I would say "bless the dying" and imagine the final moments of my father's life, or my lost sons. I would pray that God would bless those who work and remember the busy nurses who had surrounded me in the hospital. I would say "shield the joyous" and think of my daughters sleeping safely in their room, cuddled up with their stuffed owl and flamingo. I'd say "soothe the suffering" and see my mom, newly widowed and adrift in grief on the other side of the country. I'd say "give rest to the weary" and trace the worry lines on my husband's sleeping face. And I would think of the collective sorrow of the world, which we all carry in big and small ways—the horrors that take away our breath, and the common, ordinary losses of all our lives.

Like a botanist listing different oak species along a trail, this prayer lists specific categories of human vulnerability. Instead of praying in general for the weak or needy, we pause before particular lived realities, unique instances of mortality and weakness, and invite God into each.

This book is a meditation on this beloved prayer. It's about how to continue to walk the way of faith without denying the darkness. It's about the terrible yet common suffering we each shoulder, and what trusting God might mean in the midst of it.¹⁹

Keep Watch, Dear Lord

Pain and Presence

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, I was afraid of what lurks in the dark—monsters in the closet, ghostly sounds of branches scratching the roof, bad guys just beyond the door.

Back then, I could bolt from my bed and wedge myself between my sleeping mom and dad. But now that I'm the grown up with my own five-year-old who squirms her way into our bed each night, where is my safe place? Imagined monsters in the closet seem easier to hide from than the fear of cancer or the throb of disappointment or the loss of a job or the hard conversations that I replay in my mind or my uncertainty about how to parent my kids or live life well or trust God.

The band Over the Rhine has a song that asks, "Who will guard the door when I am sleeping?"¹ Each night I ask that question. Is anyone watching out for me?

What does it mean for God to keep watch with us?



Amid thousands of forgotten sermons in my life, there is one sentence in one sermon that I'll never forget.

It was a gray Sunday morning when I was in college. A few months before, a three-year-old boy in our congregation had drowned. Our church was still staggered in grief as I sat listening to my pastor, Hunter, preach about trusting God. "You cannot trust God to keep bad things from happening to you," he said. I was dumbstruck.

What Hunter said is self-evident. Bad things happen all the time, and I knew that then as I do now. But what he said was also devastating. In some wordless place deep within, I had hoped that God would keep bad things from happening to me—that it was somehow his job to do so, that he owed me that much. The plain truth of what Hunter said stood before me, obvious and terrible.

Of course, God does keep many bad things from happening to us. We do not know all the unnoticed ways we've been spared some misery—the accidents we weren't in, the injuries we just avoided, the destructive relationships we never began, the diseases our white blood cells silently snuffed from our bodies unbeknownst to us.

But if God cannot be trusted to keep bad things from happening to us, how can he be trusted at all?

But Hunter's point was that God does not keep all bad things from happening to us. He cannot be trusted to do that because he never made that promise. Doing so is, apparently, not his job. Our Creator lets us remain vulnerable.

But if God cannot be trusted to keep bad things from happening to us, how can he be trusted at all?

This was the question that I couldn't shake, the question that haunted the empty silence of the night.

In 2017, after months of talk about grief and loss, about my parents and my marriage, about body trauma and depression, about nighttime and "comfort activities," my counselor looked at me and asked, "Where is God in all of this?"

Could I believe that God cares about me when he doesn't stop bad things from happening? Could I trust him when I'm terrified that he will let me, or those I love, hurt? When I look across the immense collective sadness of the world, can I still know God as kind or loving? Is anyone looking out for us? Is anyone keeping watch?

The theological struggle I was facing has a long history and a name: theodicy.

Theodicy names the abstract "problem of pain"—the logical dilemma of how God can be good and all-powerful even as horrible things regularly happen in the world. And it also names the crisis of faith that often comes from an encounter with suffering.²

This wasn't the first time that I'd wrestled with theodicy. But our difficult year—and perhaps simply growing older—made unresolved questions return with a vengeance and howl through the long, dark night.

Theodicy is not merely a cold philosophical conundrum. It is the engine of our grimmest doubts. It can sometimes wither belief altogether. A recent survey showed that the most commonly stated reason for unbelief among Millennials and Gen Z-ers was that they "have a hard time believing that a good God would allow so much evil or suffering in the world."

This is an increasingly common struggle. More young people voice frustration and confusion about theodicy now than in the last several generations.³ Many of those who walk into agnosticism or atheism do so not out of any reasoned proof (since there is no irrefutable proof for or against God's existence) but out of a deep sense that, if there is a God, he (or she or it) cannot be trusted. This is unbelief as protest.⁴ In Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame*, his character Hamm rejects the existence of God with the quip, "The bastard! He doesn't exist!"⁵

If there is no God, the problem of pain vanishes. In his book *Unapologetic*, Francis Spufford points out that "in the absence

of God, of course, there's still pain. But there's no problem. It's just what happens."⁶ But, he says,

Once the God of everything is there in the picture, and the physics and biology and history of the world become in some ultimate sense His responsibility, the lack of love and protection in the order of things begins to shriek out. . . . The only easy way out of the problem is to discard the expectation that causes the problem, by ditching the author Himself.⁷

If there is no God of love, questions about theodicy evaporate, but so does any redemptive meaning our pain might have, any transcendent story in which we might situate our suffering. More importantly, when we dispose of the problem of pain in this way, we face the "problem of goodness."⁸ Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre wrote that when we reject God to ease the tension that pain creates, goodness goes with it. To call something "good" without any overarching meaning is merely to say, "Hurrah for this!" or "I like this!," which is well enough, but it disregards our deep intuition that true beauty, kindness, gentleness, and wonder participate in and point to a real and ultimate foundation.⁹

If there is no one to keep watch with us, no one we can trust to look out for us in the night, then anything that happens, however good or bad, is sheer chaos, chance, and biological accident. But belief in a transcendent God means we are stuck with the problem of pain. So there are libraries of books seeking to answer the question of theodicy—responses and solutions offered by the hundreds, many of them very good and wise.

Yet despite all the ink spilled, we are not satisfied. Our questions persist.

Because ultimately theodicy is not a cosmic algebra equation, where we can simply solve for x . It is almost primordial. A scream. An ache. A protest from the depths of the human heart.¹⁰

Where are you, oh God? Is anyone watching out for us? Does anyone see? And tell us why! Why this evil, this heartbreak, this suffering?

I have come to see theodicy as an existential knife-fight between the reality of our own quaking vulnerability and our hope for a God who can be trusted.

At the end of the day—in my case, literally in the darkness of the night—the problem of theodicy cannot be answered. As Flannery O'Connor wrote, it is not “a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured.”¹¹

We sometimes talk about mystery as if it's a code to crack—as if the full sweep of knowledge is available to us, but we just haven't sussed it out yet. But true mystery invokes things that are fundamentally beyond our grasp. Mystery is an encounter with an unsearchable reality, an acknowledgement that the world crackles with possibility because it is steeped in the shocking and unpredictable presence of God. Avery Cardinal Dulles wrote that mysteries are “not fully intelligible to the finite mind,” but that the reason for this is “not the poverty but the richness” of the mystery.¹²

One reason the problem of suffering cannot be answered tidily is that pain and brokenness are, at their roots, anti-rational. Christians understand evil and suffering to be forces of “anti-creation.”¹³ They don't fit in the realm of reason and order because they frustrate reason and disintegrate order. If there was a neat rationale for pain, it would necessarily fit somewhere in the order of the cosmos, an essential part of reality. But the early church's understanding of suffering and evil was that they were an absurd and inexplicable abnormality, a gross absence of the good and true.¹⁴

But secondly, and much more importantly, the problem of pain can't be adequately answered because we don't primarily want an *answer*. When all is said and done, we don't want God to simply explain himself, to give an account of how hurricanes

or head colds fit into his overall redemptive plan. We want action. We want to see things made right.¹⁵

At its heart, theodicy is the longing for a God who notices our suffering, who cares enough to act, and who will make all things new. It is an ache that cannot be shaken, which we all share deep in our bones and carry with us every day—and every night.

In my favorite C. S. Lewis book, *Till We Have Faces*, the protagonist Orual writes a complaint against the gods. We hear her stories of suffering: being born ugly, losing her mother as a young child, finding her truest friend and deepest love—her little sister—only to lose her. Grief after grief is spelled out in bitter detail.

Orual demands an answer. She demands that the gods vindicate themselves.

In the final pages of the book, with her list of accusations still in hand, Orual meets God in a vision. She is transformed, and concludes her book with this: “I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice? Only words, words; to be led out to battle against other words.”¹⁶

In our deepest suffering, we do not simply want words to battle other words. We want things made right.

Christians have always known the reality of pain. They’ve lived through wars and plagues, without vaccines or modern medicine, when death was ever at the door, when suffering was rampant and unavoidable, when nights were horrifyingly dark. Yet, millions of the faithful have long held stubbornly to this antinomy: God is good and powerful, and terrible things regularly happen in the world.

The church has always known this paradox, but instead of resolving its tension, it has let it persist. We have left this chord humming in dissonance for thousands of years, always believing that it will only be resolved when God himself sounds the final consonant note.

My deepest question, *Where is God in all this?*, is an ache that I hope to endure until my longing meets its end. I want justice; I want resurrection; I want wholeness, wellness, and restoration. And I won't be fully satisfied until God—before whose face our questions die away—sets every last thing right.

But we're not there yet. We live in the meantime. And in this meantime, how can we endure such a mystery? How can we live as Christians in a world where children suffer, where marriages disintegrate, where injustice rages, where tyrants succeed, where we face frustration and futility, where we get sick, where we all eventually die? How do we trust a God who does not stop all this from happening? How do we dare ask him to keep watch?



As a pastor, I've come to see that in the most vulnerable and human moments of our lives, doctrine is unavoidable. When all else gives way, all of us, from atheists to monks, fall back on what we believe about the world, about ourselves, and about God.

My friend Julie (Hunter's wife) is an artist. Her watercolors hang in my kitchen. Years ago, when her son was very young, he had to have surgery. Like any parents whose child is going under the knife, my friends were anxious. Before the nurses wheeled their infant son into the operating room, Julie looked at Hunter and said, "We have to decide right now whether or not God is good, because if we wait to determine that by the results of this surgery, we will always keep God on trial."

If the question of whether God is real or not—or of whether God is kind or indifferent or a bastard—is determined solely by the balance of joy and sorrow in our own lives or in the world, we will never be able to say anything about who God is or what God is like. The evidence is frankly inconclusive. If the story of my short life and feelings determine God's character, then he is Jekyll and Hyde. This way of approaching God becomes

a never-ending game of poker. For every breathtaking splash of a whale's breach, I raise you a forest fire obliterating acre after acre. For every monarch migration, I raise you ticks spreading Lyme disease. For every mother enraptured by her child's first smile, there is another mother whose newborn struggles for his final breath. For every inspiring act of human goodness, there is another person scheming against the weak. In all our lives, from the happiest to the most tragic, the circumstantial evidence for God's goodness is divided. There is beauty and there is horror.

We cannot hold together human vulnerability and God's trustworthiness at the same time unless there is some certain sign that God loves us, that he isn't an absentee landlord or, worse, a monster. But we cannot divine such a sign from the circumstances of our lives or of the world. We have to decide what we believe about who God is and what he is like. We have to decide if anyone keeps watch with us. It is unavoidably—even irritatingly—a decision based on doctrine, the first principles we return to again and again, the story we define our lives by.

Francis Spufford writes, "We don't have an argument that solves the problem of the cruel world, but we have a story."¹⁷ This is why, no matter what we claim to believe or disbelieve, what rises to the surface in our most vulnerable moments is inevitably the story on which we build our lives.

Christianity does not give us a concise explanation for vulnerability, loss, or pain, but it gives us a story—a real story in history. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that, "There is not a single aspect of the Christian message that is not in part an answer to the question of evil [and human suffering]."¹⁸ It takes the whole story of redemptive history to shape our questions about God's presence in the darkness. There may be no tidy solution to the problem of pain, but this is not because these questions are unimportant or, in a final sense, unanswerable. If there is anything remotely approaching a Christian answer to our questions about theodicy, the story is the answer.

When Julie sat in a hospital waiting room as surgeons carved her son's tender skin, she committed herself to deciding whether God could be trusted, regardless of the result of the surgery. She had to decide if she believed these claims that Christianity makes about God's goodness. She quit the poker game, folded her cards, and decided to trust a God who did not guarantee that bad things would not happen to her or her son.

But this was not an arbitrary decision; not a leap in the dark. She was not simply ratcheting herself up to affirm the goodness of God in spite of contrary evidence. She did look to evidence, though not the evidence of her life, nor the tally of the total amount of good in the world versus the total amount of evil. Instead, she looked at the life of Jesus. It's on this story that she anchored her decision about whether she would trust God, without knowing what would happen next.

The church has always proclaimed that if we want to see what God is like, we look at Jesus—a man “acquainted with sorrow” (Isaiah 53:3), no stranger to grief, a peasant craftsman who knew suffering, big and small, and died as a criminal, mostly alone.

Mysteriously, God does not take away our vulnerability. He enters into it.

Jesus left a place where there is no light to enter into our darkness. He met with blisters and indigestion, with fractured relationships and the death of friends, with an oppressive empire, the indignity of poverty, and the terror of violence. One night he sweat blood, asking the Father to spare him from agony, weeping in the lonely darkness while his friends fell asleep. He said, “Not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42), and soon afterward he was tortured to death.

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God did not keep bad things from happening to God himself.

To look to Jesus is to know that our Creator has felt pain, has known trouble, and is well-acquainted with sorrow. But our hope in suffering is not merely to gaze on the biography of an ancient man frozen in the pages of the Bible. The story of the gospel is not a mere mantra or a relic of history. It is alive and ongoing. The work of Jesus continues, even now, in our everyday lives. So in hardship we do not look to Jesus solely as one who has been there before, once upon a time in a distant past. We find he is here with us, in the present tense. He participates in our suffering, even as—mysteriously—in our suffering we participate in the fullness of Christ's life.

But we cannot embrace the Christian story or Christ's ongoing presence in our lives by an act of sheer will or an exercise in cognition. Our hope in sorrow is not something we carry around as a brute fact or, worse, a pat answer. I do not come to trust the Christian story in the same way I trust that Lake Superior is the largest of the Great Lakes or that bread is made of yeast and flour. The story we live by is one that we somehow enter into—we discover our own small lives and stories in the larger story of God and his church.

We do that through the practices and prayers we receive from those who have gone before us. We take up and learn the craft of faith that allows us to know an actual, surprising, frustrating, and relentlessly merciful God. In the present tense.

Years ago, during a vacation in New Hampshire, Jonathan and I climbed Mount Washington, which is notorious for erratic weather. It can change from sunny and warm to snowing in a few hours. The wind is so strong that it once held the record for the fastest wind gust on earth. On our hike, we thought we might be blown off the mountain (we have no photos from that day in which my hair is not blown entirely across my face). And then there's the fog, which settles so deep and thick that hikers have gotten lost and died. So the good

people of New Hampshire have made cairns along the trail: massive, towering rock structures that plot the course. When the fog descends and the weather is dangerous, hikers can make it to shelter at the bottom of the mountain or at the top by walking from cairn to cairn in the white out.

In times of deep darkness, the cairns that have kept me in the way of Jesus were the prayers and practices of the church.

When I could not pray, the church said, "Here are prayers." When I could not believe, the church said, "Come to the table and be fed." When I could not worship, the church sang over me the language of faith.

Inherited ways of prayer and worship—liturgical practices—are a way that the ancient church built cairns for us, to help us endure this mystery, to keep us on this path of faith, to guide us home.

Theodicy is in no way "solved" for me. It is not in fact solvable in the here and now. In many ways I am still wandering in the fog. But I have found cairns to follow, and they have guided many others in the midst of this crazy and unpredictable weather.



I have a friend who is a textile artist. Among other things, she sews nautical flags because, besides the fact that they're gorgeous, there's an accidental poetry to them. According to Merritt Tierce, "There are forty flags in a complete set of international maritime signal flags—one for each letter of the English alphabet, one for each number, and four flags called substitutes, which perform special operations."¹⁹

Raised by themselves or in different combinations, the flags mean different things. White with a blue cross, followed by a

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flag divided into four colored triangles means *What is the wind doing?* Yellow and red triangles mean *Man overboard*. There are combinations for races and to warn about gales. Tierce writes,

I wish we could fly such flags, we humans, ships unto ourselves, to communicate our states of balm or damage, our current headings, our desires and lacks. Maybe my friend's radio has gone out, but at least he could fly his small I-am-suffering-on-this-sunny-day flag and I could raise my I-will-take-a-walk-with-you-and-listen flag. We could see each other, understand, and act, without having to say all the words.²⁰

These days, with radio and digital communication, satellites and GPS, ships still keep flags on board in case all else fails, but they rarely use them. Flags on ships are a bit like oxygen masks on planes: they're necessary when things go very badly wrong. If all you have left, drifting alone in the middle of the vast ocean, is a small square of flapping fabric calling for help, things are about as dire as they can be.

Now picture yourself in a boat, lost and afraid, adrift as the sun sets, with no way to contact anyone except for the flag you've been given for this very moment. You don't know what else to do, so you raise the flag—bright white with a red X.

And you see a ship, distant but drawing nearer. It hoists flags in response, a bright red diamond on a white field, followed by another made of two triangles, yellow and red, and then lastly a white trapezoid marked with a red circle.

This is the flag combination that my friend sewed to hang on her bedroom wall. It means *I will keep close to you during the night*.

When I was drifting in grief, not knowing what else to do, the prayers of the church, especially the prayers of Compline, became my flag to fly in the night.

The hope God offers us is this: he will keep close to us, even in darkness, in doubt, in fear and vulnerability. He does not

promise to keep bad things from happening. He does not promise that night will not come, or that it will not be terrifying, or that we will immediately be tugged to shore.

He promises that we will not be left alone. He will keep watch with us in the night.

Spufford writes that, ultimately, "we don't ask for a creator who can explain himself. We ask for a friend in time of grief, a true judge in times of perplexity, a wider hope than we can manage in time of despair." If we suffer deeply, he says, there is no explanation, no reason, no answer that can ease our heart-break. "The only comfort that can do anything—and probably the most it can do is help you endure, or if you cannot endure to fail and fold without wholly hating yourself—is the comfort of feeling yourself loved."²¹

In the end, that's what I needed to know.