

I have a neighbor who lives down the street from me, and while she is a wonderful person she has one really annoying flaw. She is all too... well, normal. What I mean is that she wants life to make sense. She's had numerous health problems throughout her life, all of them seem to be genetic. In other words, she suffers for things that aren't her fault. The worst of her health problems has been serious heart arrhythmia. Recently it's gotten worse and she has some major decisions to make about treatment. None of the options before her are all that great.

So, here she is, in her early forties, wanting to be healthy, active and unlimited. She's done nothing to deserve it, yet she knows that at its very best life in the future will be full of shadows and unknowns. She'll never know the robustness of full health. She also knows that decades of medications and treatments are prematurely wearing out her body.

While she isn't exactly depressed by it all she asks some very reasonable questions: Why? What is the purpose of all this? What did she do wrong?

And like many people with these questions, she does her best to come up with answers. People of faith often come up with things like: God must have a plan. Or, God must be trying to teach me something. My neighbor wrote in an email, "God has his reasons, praying for understanding."

As a pastor you might think I would appreciate her acceptance of what is, and her trust in the ultimate goodness of God. I do, but her email gets into messy issues very fast. It's easy to council a person undergoing unfair hardships with words like, "Keep the faith. God has a plan." Or, "God is trying to teach you something through this." Or, "God will make it alright in the end." But that would not be faithful. Yes, that sort of thing works with some people, but ultimately it's not the truth. Besides, my neighbor is no fool. Like many people, she's wrestled with all too many unfair things in life to really be content with simplistic answers.

Theologian Carol Newsom enters these treacherous waters in her commentary on Job. She writes, "It is difficult to live in a world that often seems to make no sense at all, and the desire for certainty is an understandable response to a disturbingly confusing world... One often encounters a kind of pseudo-rationalistic theology in fundamentalist churches, although it can appear in other religious traditions as well. Propositions are lined up and conclusions drawn to 'prove' the various claims that the preacher or evangelist wishes to make... One can memorize the arguments and so have a ready answer for every doubting thought, whether it comes from others or from one's own heart." She goes on to say that the alluring simplicity and certainty offered by this kind of faith does not stand up to the complexities of real life. People often end up in moral dilemmas with no right answers, or they end up questioning the goodness of God. (New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 4, Pg. 578-9)

Scour the Bible carefully and you'll find that many things people think are biblical are not. Nowhere does it say that God has a purpose for all things. Nowhere does it say that if you are faithful God will protect you from bad things. Perhaps the worst of all is, "God will never give you more than your faith can handle." You wouldn't believe how many people think they

can open their Bibles and find that somewhere. It's not there! It is a misquote of 1 Corinthians 10:13 which reads, "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

That complex verse deserves a sermon unto itself, but the root meaning is this: Where there is temptation, hardship, or confusion God promises to be with you in the midst of it.

That brings us to the reason for today's holiday, The Presentation of Our Lord. On one level it is a silly church holiday. Why set aside a day to celebrate Joseph and Mary bringing Jesus to the temple when he was 8 days old? Who really cares? But on another level it reminds us of something very important. The gospel writer Luke puts this scene, and the scene in the temple when Jesus is 12 years old, in to accomplish several things. One of them is to round out our picture of Jesus' life as a child. Jesus doesn't just go from being born to showing up as an adult and being baptized by John. He had a full childhood. He knew what it was like to skin his knee, to

play with friends, to conflict with his parents, and so on and so on.

Our second reading from Hebrews sums it up well in verse 17, "Therefore [Christ] had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect,..." Why? The verse continues, "...so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God."

It was, it is, and it always will be God's desire to walk with us through everything in life. Jesus lived a full life and experienced everything life had to offer - all the way to death itself. Jesus knew what it was like to be mocked, to be in conflict, and to experience unfair suffering.

We make a mistake when we think Jesus' position as Son of God meant that he somehow had a privileged way through life, or that somehow his way was paved more clearly than our own, or even that things made more sense to him. We forget the times Jesus admits that he does not know everything and does not have perfect knowledge. We easily forget the many times Jesus left the crowds and his disciples so he could go off, rejuvenate,

reflect, and pray. And you know well his final words from the cross in Mark's gospel, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Some people seek to minimize the full impact of this statement saying it is the beginning of Psalm 22; that Jesus began reciting the psalm but died before he finished it. But let us not take the easy way out, and let our hearts recognize that Jesus knew what it felt like to feel forsaken by God his Father.

An odd thought, isn't it? ...God knowing what it feels like to be forsaken by God. It's an intellectual impossibility, yet the reality of our God's love for us.

I wish everything in life made sense. I wish I could see a clear purpose to all things, but I can't. Life would sure be easier if I could. What I can do is proclaim that in God's own wisdom God has not given anyone the clarity to understand all things. In fact, desperate as we are to make sense of our lives, God doesn't seem all that interested in having it make sense.

Instead God is willing to walk with us in the confusion. God is willing to ask the same questions we ask, to feel the same things we feel, to know what unfairness is, and to know what confusion and uncertainty are.

God chooses to know you with complete and total intimacy, rather than to be distant from you and solve all your problems for you. Life and human relationships are immensely complex. God would rather enter into the complexities of life with us than diminish the deeply wonderful complexity that being a human made in God's image really is.

And isn't that it? God made you in his image. That means you also are complex and powerful and beautiful. God will never do anything to reduce or simplify your wholeness. Hard as it is to accept, God knows it is better for us to live in our confusion than to ever diminish us in any way.

Personally I want God to solve the problems and fears of my neighbor down the street. I want her to be restored and perfect and healthy. I wish God would solve the problems and confusions that all of us face. Foolishly I think it would be great if it

would happen. But God never will; ironically it is because God loves us.

Inasmuch as you can, be bold when you are scared, are suffering, or feel confused. God knows those feelings too, and God isn't afraid of them. The power of God's grace and the freedom that comes through forgiveness are with you always. God's love is certain, forever. Amen