

The Scourge of Human Trafficking
Job 24:1-12

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
February 10, 2019

Lola, a 16-year-old girl, was in a crowded taxi headed toward a Cambodian border town known for illicit business in drugs, gambling, and sex. Elise, my friend and former colleague, was also in the taxi, on assignment for Hagar, the social service agency for which she worked in Pnom Penh. To Elise, Lola seemed nervous and worried, so Elise was glad when Lola asked if they could get something to eat together. Elise learned that Lola was running away from home, with only \$20, to avoid being sold by her father to another man in forced marriage. Elise explained to Lola that Hagar operated a shelter for women and children in need, and with the young girl's consent, Elise bought Lola a return ticket to Pnom Penh.

Every January is designated by Christian religious organizations for "Human Trafficking Awareness". "Human trafficking", or "trafficking in persons", can be traced back 400 years, but is, in our time, the third largest criminal industry in the world, after trafficking in arms and trafficking in drugs. At any given moment, 30 million people are trapped in modern day slavery. Half of them are children. Some are in involuntary labor, some are in forced prostitution, some are in debt bondage. In 1993, I visited a church sponsored safe house in Japan, where women from various Asian countries had found refuge from the sexual servitude they had unwittingly entered. In the United States, more than 100,000 women and children are subjected to commercial sexual exploitation every year. Recently authorities in Montgomery County made arrests in connection with such activity. Countries on every continent are used as sources of victims, or for victims to be transited, or as ultimate destinations.

"Hagar" is but one of a multitude of organizations fighting this scourge. There is "Not for Sale", based in California, run by another of my former colleagues, with its "Underground Church Network". There are "Free the Slaves"... the "Polaris Project"...the "International

Justice Ministry”...”Doctors at War Against Trafficking Worldwide”...the “Coalition Against Trafficking in Women”...”Child Safe”...”International Labor Organization”...the “Office to Combat Trafficking in Persons” of the US State Department...the “United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime”...the “National Council of Churches of the USA”, which inspired the United Church of Christ to resolve in 2008 to encourage local congregations to engage in prayer, reflection, education, and actions that will help bring an end to modern-day slavery. In our home, prayer concludes at the dinner table with the plea: “God bless all the children of the world.”

In *Moral Dilemmas*, a book on Christian ethics, Phil Wogaman—former Senior Minister of Foundry United Methodist Church—reminds us that “the intrinsic value of every human being is deeply grounded in Christian faith...the belief that we are created ‘in the image of God’...the profound sense that we are all valued by God...” (REPEAT)

If we so believe, then how do we understand and relate to a Creator God who abides such violation, such suffering, such inhumanity? Where is God?

This is indeed a moral dilemma!! And it can be framed by the experience of Job:

Why are times not kept by the Almighty, and why do those who know him never see his days? The wicked remove landmarks...They thrust the needy off the road; the poor of the earth all hide themselves...They lie all night naked, without clothing, and have no covering in the cold...There are those who snatch the orphan child from the breast, and take as a pledge the infant of the poor...From the city the dying groan, and the throat of the wounded cries for help; yet God pays no attention to their prayer.”

In the face of man’s inhumanity to man—man’s inhumanity to innocent women and children—Where is God?

In our tradition, the story of Job, recorded in prose and poetry, may hint at answers.

Let’s lay aside for now the fact that the prose that begins and ends the book, and the poetry that comprises the majority of the book, are the collective product of multiple authors with multiple goals. Let’s focus on the primary purpose of this literature: Namely, it does not intend

to explain the mystery of suffering. It aims at probing the depths of faith in spite of suffering!

Job—a righteous man, a faithful man, a man defiant in his insistence that life demands the fruits of justice—Job in the end, acknowledges a stand-off with God, a spiritual communion with God, just as do other prophets and psalmists in the surrounding literature of the Old Testament. As Job says to God: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you.”

In the face of man’s inhumanity to man—man’s inhumanity to innocent women and children—where is God? Where is the Protector of Creation, of each precious life in Creation? After all, deeply grounded in the Christian faith, is belief in the intrinsic value of each and every human being!

When your heart is broken, the heart of God is broken. When your mind is tormented with grief or guilt, the mind of God is tormented. When our bodies are limp with despair or depression, the body of God feels that pain with us. When a victim of human trafficking is “seized”, “snatched”, “naked”, “hungry”, “groaning”, “wounded”, there also is God: seized, snatched, naked, hungry, groaning, wounded. Where is God? There also is God: violated...exploited...suffering the unmentionable.

The Book of Job does not intend to explain the mystery of suffering, or to justify the ways of God with human beings. It aims at probing the depths of faith in spite of suffering.

This is not to excuse you and me from doing nothing about the scourge of human trafficking, which is happening in Dubai and in the District of Columbia, and too many places in between. If God is there, so must be every compassionate Christian: in earnest prayer, in searching reflection, in more extensive education, in active advocacy for the innocent. “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you.”

What of Elise and Lola? Elise went on to law school at the University of Michigan, a person of faith in a life of service. She kept in touch with Lola, who became employed at Hagar in Pnom Penh, helping potential victims of human trafficking. Lola also enrolled in business

school. Elise later stated with conviction to me: “If there was one reason for me to go to Cambodia, it was to meet Lola that day in a taxi heading to the border.”

“And God bless all the children of the world...and all the women...and all the men.”