
Did Heaven Make a Mistake?

Lamentations 3:20-24

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, August 13, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Frank A. Thomas

“...and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, ‘The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.’” (Lamentations 3:20-24 NIV)

Witnessing all of the injustice, hate, violence, and cruelty; the hurt and the pain caused in this world by human beings upon other human beings. Witnessing the levels of rape, misogyny, molestations, abuse of women, discrimination against the LGBTQ community, the economic and political exploitation of the poor, the xenophobia, racism and prejudice against minorities and immigrants, the inequality between the rich and the poor, the devastation of the environment, what Pope Francis calls, “our common home,” and most of it, perpetrated in the name of God and high-minded democratic ideals. Witnessing the drug trafficking, human trafficking, the continual shooting of unarmed black young men and women, the mass incarceration of black people, racial profiling, along with the justifications, denials, and defense of state sponsored terrorism. Witnessing the assassination of police officers, and hear blind and tribal defense of our gun-crazed and glorification of violence culture. I have come to the conclusion that though from Genesis 1:26, we claim to be above and have dominion over the animals, the fact is that we really are animals; animals trying to be moral or, what one writer calls, “moral animals.”¹ We are trying to be moral, but when you scratch us or we perceive that we, or our interests, are threatened, we go straight to our instincts as animals. We are really animals trying to be moral. I wonder if human beings deserve to be created. With Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, I ask the question: “Do human deserve the gift of life?” Did heaven make a mistake?²

In Sasso’s book, *Midrash: Reading the Bible with Question Marks*, she records several stories of Rabbi’s debating this very difficult question:

Rabbi Simon said: When the Holy One, the blessed one, came to create the Adam, the ministering angels formed themselves into groups and parties, some of them saying, “Let the human be created,” while others urged, “Let the human not be created.” . . . the Angel of Love said, “Let humans be created, because they will dispense acts of love”; Angel of Truth said, “Let humans not be created, because they will speak falsehood.” The Angel of Righteousness said, “Let humans be created because they will perform righteous deeds.” the Angel of Peace said, “Let human beings not be created because they are full of strife.” What did the Lord do? The Lord took Truth and cast it to

¹ Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

² Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *Midrash: Reading the Bible with Question Marks*, (Brewster, Mass: Paraclete Press, 2013), “Should Humans Have Been Created?”, pps.52-65.

the ground. Said the ministering angels before the Holy One: 'Sovereign of the Universe! Why do you despise your seal? Let truth arise from the earth!'"³

The Rabbis are doing a riff on the "we" in let "us" create in Genesis 1:26. The Rabbis in this story suggest that "let us" means that God consulted the angels about the creation of humanity. Rabbi Simon sees angels arguing with themselves. The Angel of Love favors creation because humans will act lovingly. The Angel of Truth objects because humans will tell lies. The Angel of Righteousness gives the nod of assent because they will perform good deeds. The Angel of Peace claims that human beings are full of strife. The vote is tied two angels to two angels and God has to break the tie. God decides by throwing the Angel of Truth out of heaven and casting Truth to the ground. It is not that the Angel of Truth is incorrect in assessing the human character; it is that God wants to create despite the fact that humans will lie and contend with each other. The angels take no comfort in God's action and the angel chorus says, "Let Truth spring up from the earth and return to its proper place in the heavens!" But God pays no attention because if Truth assumed its proper place, human beings could not exist.

This story through the rabbis tells us something about their profound disappointment in human beings and human behavior and almost despair that we will ever change. It takes overwhelming disappointment to question whether or not God should have created us in the first place. That is where I am right now. I am profoundly disappointed, profoundly hurt, and profoundly angry. I had hoped that with the election of Barack Obama as the president of the United States that we could move beyond centuries of racism and exploitation and have a post-racial America, and yet his election has brought forth some of the most vicious and unabashed racism that has been seen in decades; and at least, in my estimation, things have gotten worse.

And if I could be really honest, I would tell you that I wrestle with despair. Despair that things will ever get better; despair that our best hopes and dreams for freedom, liberation, equality, reconciliation, and access to the land and to the resources for all will come to naught. The ability of a small minority of the human population that are globally wealthy to maneuver, manipulate, and always come out on top no matter what happens discourages me deeply.

Maybe I have been all my life to far on the side of the Angels of Love and Righteousness that we will act lovingly and do righteous deeds, in the belief that we could do justice and love mercy. But I am right now in serious dialogue with the Angel of Truth. How can anyone ignore the truth: wickedness, deceit, war, violence, did I say racism, global white privilege, trivializing of climate change, global warming, and issues of the de-valuing of the created order. Do you know that we are really stupid enough to drop nuclear warheads on ourselves? Someone asked Albert Einstein what weapons will the third world war be fought with. He said that he did not know, but he could tell you what the fourth world war would be fought with – he said, "Rocks."⁴

So God bring Truth back to heaven and close shop on this human experiment; heaven made a mistake by the creation of human beings. You remember that we have been at this point before. God you got so frustrated with human beings that you sent a flood to virtually wipe everything out

³ Ibid., 53-54.

⁴ Albert Einstein, in an interview with Alfred Werner, *Liberal Judaism* 16 (April-May 1949), Einstein Archive 30-1104, as sourced in *The New Quotable Einstein* by Alice Calaprice (2005), p. 173.

and start all over in Genesis 9. God you said in Genesis 9:11 that you would never flood the earth again, so we assume it will be by fire next time. Bring the fire and let's be done with it. Just admit that Heaven made a mistake. Burn baby burn! God let the fire come. Heaven made a mistake. God curse human beings and let us die. The human experiment did not work. And then out of nowhere, out of the depths of my disappointment, hurt, anger, and despair, this comes screaming to mind:

...and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for God's compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:20-24 NIV)

It is owing to God and God alone that things are not worse. Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. New every morning Great is thy faithfulness. Everything would burn everything down except for one thing, the Lord's hesed – faithfulness.

I know that many are probably not familiar with the term hesed, so let me explain. (C)hesed can be translated as loving-kindness, steadfast love, grace, mercy, and goodness. It means faithfulness to a relationship; to act in a loyal, loving way to a person. The word is used 240 times in the OT, especially the Psalms. It is one of the most important terms in Hebrew theology and ethics. It means the strength of God, the steadfastness of God, and the love of God all taken together. God's love has to be full of strength and steadfastness to sustain the human enterprise.

Hesed means covenant-love, involving mutual and reciprocal rights and obligations between the parties of a relationship, such as Yahweh and Israel. This covenant love is not based in obligation, but in generosity. In terms of God and Israel, the weaker party seeks the protection and blessing of the patron and protector, but may not deserve it. The stronger party remains committed to the covenant promise. Chesed goes beyond the rule of law; it is being in the relationship full of mercy, grace, steadfastness, and loving-kindness. God's loving kindness is offered to the Israelites who need redemption from sin, enemies and trouble.

In Hebrew culture, someone does, shows, or keeps, hesed. Hesed can operate in human relationship, but I do have the time to focus on that. I want to talk about God: God does hesed. God does kindness. God does mercy. God does faithfulness. God does hesed in concrete acts of redemption in fulfilment of God's promise. God is hesed. God's hesed is so hesed that ultimately it is even beyond the covenant; it will not ultimately be abandoned, even when the human partner is unfaithful and must be disciplined. Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed. The steadfast love the Lord never ceases. God mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. New every morning. Great is thy faithfulness. Everything would collapse except for one thing – the Lord's hesed – the Lord's loving-kindness – faithfulness.

This word hesed is used in Psalm 89:3 (NIV) "For I have said: The world is built on hesed (lovingkindness, mercy), in the very heavens you establish your faithfulness." The throne of God is established on hesed. Let me give you an image from Sandy Sasso and the Rabbis. Have you ever been to eating on a table and one of the legs is wobbling? Maybe it was in a fine restaurant, or maybe at home. You know that feeling? You have to put something like cardboard or a rock underneath the leg so that it will stop wobbling. Psalm 89:3: "For I have said: The world is built on hesed, in the very heavens you establish your faithfulness." The Rabbis says that God's throne in

heaven was wobbling and all of heaven wobbling as well because one leg was too short until the Holy One, the blessed One, propped it up. And with what did God prop up God's throne? Heseḏ (mercy). Hence it is said that the world is built on "mercy." Psalm 89:3: "For I have said: The world is built on heseḏ, in the very heavens you establish your faithfulness."

The world is like a throne with four legs; God's creation is likewise precarious, constantly tottering and wobbling between survival and extinction. Only heseḏ, mercy and divine grace sustain existence. God props us up. If it were not for the God's love, we would have already been consumed. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God's mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. New every morning. Great is thy faithfulness.

Let me get to our text in Lamentation 3:22-24. For eighteen straight months, Nebuchadnezzar laid siege on Jerusalem. It got worse and worse and the people suffered and suffered. Finally, Nebuchadnezzar won the battle and he completely demolished Jerusalem. The beloved Jerusalem went up in flames. Though it had been prophesied, the people were not ready for it. On top of the city burning, the Temple was destroyed; the Holy Temple of God was cast down. The people were taken away in slavery; there was unimaginable grief. The prophet personifies the grief of the people in his person starting in verse 1 of Lamentations 3:1:

I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of His wrath.
He has led and brought me into darkness and not light.
He has made my flesh and skin to waste away; He has broken my bones.
He has hemmed me in, surrounding me with bitterness and anguish.
He has built a wall about me and I cannot get out.
He has put heavy chains upon me. Even when I keep on crying and calling for help He shuts out my prayer.
He bent His bow and set me up as a target for His arrow. (13) He sent into my inward parts the shafts of His quiver.
He has filled me to the brim with bitterness, caused me to drink wormwood. (16) He has ground my teeth with gravel and covered me over with ashes.

Then vs. 20

...and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's (heseḏ) great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Because of the Lord's kindness, we are not consumed. It is only God that things are not worse. It is the recognition of God's mercy and thankfulness that we are not consumed that will not allow me to wreck my despair on others through violence.

Because of the Lord's great kindness we do not bust windows, set shops on fire, demonize police. Because of the Lord's steadfast love, we go to police officers' funerals. Because of the Lord's heseḏ, we are nonviolent. We will address the issues, but because of the Lord's great love we are not violent, vindictive, and hateful. God's compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is thy faithfulness. We are the Lord's heseḏ that holds the world up. When we go out to address the issues, we are the Lord's heseḏ. We stand for human dignity, decency, equality, love of creation,

justice, mercy, and forgiveness. We declare Heaven did not make a mistake. Hesed is greater than human mistakes. We slide mercy underneath the wobbling.

Do you remember the story of Michael Brown, the young man who died in a chokehold by police in Brooklyn? You remember Michael Brown saying, "I can't breathe." It ignited a movement with the slogan "I can't breathe" all over the country in protest. Do you remember that very weekend, two police officers were also assassinated in Brooklyn? Did you notice in the news coverage that the widow of Michael Brown, whose husband died in a chokehold by police, laid a wreath at the spot where those police officers were slain? The whole country was wobbling, but she propped the country up with mercy. Acts of kindness and forgiveness, prop the country up. It is our calling to provide those acts of love and kindness.

Well, lest I keep you too long, Hesed was not only in the Hebrew Bible, but hesed is in the New Testament as well. Hesed was a theological and ethical principle in the Hebrew Bible, and still is so in the New Testament, but most importantly, hesed became a person.

He (Jesus) came -- through forty and two generations

He came -- Born on the backside of cheap motel

With wood shavings in his apron and carpenter tools in his belt he walked the dusty sands of Galilee

– He came

He healed the sick

Gave sight to the blind

Made deaf folk hear

Lame folk walk

Brought dead folks back to life

But we soon discovered

The Angel of Truth was right – we would speak falsehood and contend even with Him

The Angel of Peace was right – we are full of strife and we strove even with Him

So much so

That we crucified hesed

And the world began to tetter and totter – the world was wobbling

And we tettered between survival and extinction

Hesed had been removed

It was about the fall in
God was about to end it all
God turned up the furnace
God was about to end it all
But do deep and profound is the love of God
The faithfulness of God
The mercy of God
that God raised hosed from the grave.
Because of the Lord's Love we are not consumed
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases
God's mercies never come to an end
Great is thy faithfulness
The resurrection props things back up
Heaven did not make a mistake.