

## Participating in God's Redemptive Response to Our Suffering World: *Stories of Care* | BY ANNE COLLIER-FREED

The establishment of Adventist institutions of learning, healing, and relief and development, testifies to important ways Adventists respond to the world's suffering. Yet at times, Adventists have been perceived by outsiders as apocalyptic sectarians primarily concerned with personal, divine deliverance from the sufferings of this world to the neglect of prophetic engagement of systems that proliferate suffering in the world. In light of this perception, could further exploration of an integrative theology of suffering and its embodiment assist us in our witness to the hope we seek to announce through word and deed? To such an end, I hope in this article to introduce a few contemporary, seasoned theologians whose work profoundly engages this topic, biblically, personally, and historically. In addition, I will interweave stories of suffering, vulnerability, learning, and spiritual growth in contexts of care for the suffering, which have shaped my ministry and understanding of God's redemptive work through the Spirit.

Many Adventist believers who walk closely with Christ consistently care for those suffering in their midst and in their wider communities, whether through formal church ministries, informal relationships, or professional care-giving ministries. For example, in my local congregation one family in particular has consistently identified those suffering alone at the end of their lives and invited others to reach out to these individuals with practical help, emotional support, and love. I have also heard individuals at church testify to their trust in God's promises to redeem their own suffering and loss in ways that uplift the faith of others. In what ways do such actions flow from a biblical faith, thereby standing as a prophetic witness to the wider world?

In his book *Suffering and Hope: The Biblical Vision and the Human Predicament*, the Dutch Presbyterian theologian J.

Christiaan Beker, who had been enslaved by the Nazis as a young man, reflects on the challenge of contemporary Western Christians to live in the tension between hope and despair as they share their faith.<sup>1</sup> He argues that not only remembering the horrors of the Holocaust, but also our ever-increasing exposure through technology to the immensity of suffering around the world, presses upon Christians the need to grapple again with the biblical vision of God's triumph over suffering and death. And yet, Beker says, we all too often fall prey to enticements within both our religious and secular cultures to escape into "technologies" and strategies that insulate us from, or lead us to deny, the magnitude of suffering in the world. I believe many Adventists easily find such insulation, ironically, in our medical communities. Though surrounded by suffering people daily, the required professionalism of our service protects us from entering more fully into their suffering. Beker's call reminds those of us who understandably keep ourselves sheltered from the world's suffering to look again at the complex layers of biblical responses to such realities.<sup>2</sup> Even as Beker challenges his readers to distinguish between the emphases and social contexts of these scriptural texts, he insists they should ultimately cohere with the death and resurrection of Jesus as it testifies to the place of suffering and hope in the Christian life.<sup>3</sup>

First, Beker outlines the Deuteronomic view of suffering, which primarily presents a "scheme of sowing and reaping." Here, both the pleasures of reward and pains of punishment are part and parcel of God, good, and moral order. The Old Testament prophets are more subtle, says Beker. While still affirming the choice to participate or not in God's moral order, they often uphold a greater tension between God's judgment and mercy. Beker suggests this allows for a reckoning with perceived injustice where

the proportion of suffering seems greater than the judgment inflicted. Beker notes that Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah all “proclaim a final restoration of Israel,” expected after its suffering and exile, which will manifest the priority of “God’s mercy over his judgment.” Beker notes that, especially in Ezekiel, this is described as God’s unilateral action prompted by faithfulness to his covenant and for “the sake of [His] holy name” (Ezek. 36:22).<sup>4</sup>

The sense of disproportion of punishment to crime continued to be addressed by apocalyptic writers, whose responses sought to preserve moral order while affirming the faithfulness of God to his people. While books such as Job and Ecclesiastes address the unjust linkage of justice and suffering, their messages fall short of “apocalyptic authors like Daniel [who] cling to the faithfulness of the God of creation and covenant, and refuse to surrender their hope in the justice of God and in God’s ultimate triumph over the powers of evil.” Through their visions of God’s imminent intervention, apocalyptic authors keep suffering and hope linked together, while resisting any move to let suffering become “purely tragic and meaningless.”<sup>5</sup>

While such an analysis might sound like an unreserved affirmation of apocalyptic-oriented communities, Beker cautions contemporary readers to look at the whole of the apocalyptic thrust of various biblical authors from both Old and New Testaments. Such an approach, he argues, will help us to avoid extremes that disconnect our suffering from our hope. This will help us avoid a Platonic or Gnostic “disavowal of creation” that makes “the world... a valley of tears which prepares us for our true home in heaven,” where we enter “real life.”<sup>6</sup> We can also avoid making God a sadist who gives us suffering for our own good. And we can avoid the excesses of monastics and mystics, who at times elevated suffering to a kind of nobility that sets one apart or intensifies religious experience.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than suffering conferring a mark of nobility, Paul points to the *necessity* of suffering

in light of God’s battle with the powers of evil. This battle has been won through the cross of Christ, but awaits the final cleansing of the world from sin, death, and suffering. Christ’s resurrection becomes the “first fruits” of God’s victory, and provides for our assurance of the world’s final transformation. Yet in the meantime, Paul also brings to light the *redemptive possibilities* of the suffering of those incorporated into Christ’s body. (Paul also distinguishes a kind of suffering that is not redemptive, a kind of suffering that must be seen as a “mysterious ‘dark residue’ of evil and death in God’s created order.”)<sup>8</sup> Here, Beker highlights Romans 8:17–30, pointing to its announcement of the Spirit leading the church in “solidarity with the world and its suffering,” so that (unlike the focus of the message of Revelation) “the windows of the church are open to the world and its suffering.” In this way, the church is called to exist and suffer *for* the world, rather than merely sheltering against it.<sup>9</sup> It is called to stand not only in solidarity, as God redeems the whole of creation, but also to stand *prophetically* against injustice and idolatry. Beker argues that both Paul’s writings and the apocalyptic message of 1 Peter link the church’s suffering *for* the world with the “enfleshment of its hope in God’s coming triumph over evil and suffering.”<sup>10</sup>

What might redemptive suffering *for the world* look like, as reflected in the humble ways we serve the world and each other in the church, in contexts of care for those suffering inside and outside the church? The reflections of Frances Young, a retired British Methodist scholar of Bible and patristics, are instructive here. Though Young had a successful academic career, her personal suffering was found in caring for more than forty years for her profoundly disabled son. With little ability to move or communicate, this son accompanied Young as she taught, researched, traveled, participated in associations, and parented her other nondisabled children. Her disabled son’s suffering also lodged in her heart as she wrestled to understand how the God she served would

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allow such a son to be born. Young explores her internal struggle and wrestling with biblical texts in her book *Brokenness and Blessing: Towards a Biblical Spirituality*.<sup>11</sup> Engaging stories like Jacob's struggle with a divine Stranger along the road to meet Esau, or the Children of Israel's story of journeying through the desert, Young discovers her own deepest identity in finding herself in the Presence of a transcendent and loving God.

After years of struggling with God allowing her son's profound disability, Young finds herself, like Job and Moses, confronted with God's incomprehensible being "from himself." In this light, Jacob's struggle begins to frame for her the importance of her own *wounding* in knowing God, which allows her finally to let God be God. This leads her to challenge (prophetically) our contemporary culture's idolatrous vision of human fulfillment. She contends that, for the Christian, the journey to human fulfillment takes us through the desert, through a sense of exile and estrangement, even intense suffering at times. It involves not so much a struggle with our conceptions of God, but with ourselves, until "the created nature is defeated and we are fit to receive God's blessing."<sup>12</sup>

As a chaplain I have seen, in a variety of ways, God's use of suffering to prompt such a realization, as well as a growing receptivity to God's love, to resting in God's God-ness. As a young chaplain trainee in the late eighties, I encountered a stranger whose spiritual orientation was quite foreign to mine, though her struggle to let God be God, I would find later, was quite similar to mine. Responding to an evening call, I found a late-middle-aged Pentecostal woman attempting to support her husband as he was transitioning to actively dying of bone cancer. When I arrived, I could see the overwhelming horror on her face as she struggled to watch her husband's physical and emotional pain. In talking privately with her, I saw, despite my youth, that she also struggled with her trust in God. As a Pentecostal, this woman had come from a tradition in which she was

affirmed to have the gift of faith healing. She shared stories with me of numerous times when she had been able to miraculously heal relatives and friends throughout her life. Yet at this moment, she was not able to help her suffering husband. My own capacities to help her through this struggle were limited, yet I sensed, even as I offered my presence and attuned listening, that God's Spirit was present in her struggle. At the same time the mystery of God's ways in bringing each of us through psychological suffering and loss would be left for God's unfolding over time, both for me and for the patient's wife, who I sought to support.

In my recent experiences of ministry with the dying in a hospice context, I have seen patients witnessing through their suffering to the redemptive love of Jesus. One patient, who I will call "Edith," powerfully "lived into the story of Jesus" at the end of her life. Edith came from a loving Mormon family, yet she had survived two difficult marriages while raising her four children, mostly away from her immediate family living in Utah. When I first encountered Edith in her midnineties, I found her unusually open to spiritual conversations with me, a non-Mormon chaplain. At times lucid and at other times confused, Edith shared stories of her life, fears, and suffering from her confinement and isolation in her care center. Though it was located close to one daughter and many relatives who loved her, Edith did not see them daily and missed those close friends who had already died. She also suffered from mild dementia and limited mobility, along with unresolved hurts and frightful delusions.

Yet, Edith had a rich history with her Heavenly Father. Through our conversations and prayers together for two and a half years, Edith shared how prayer sustained her through losses past and present. As a relatively young woman, she had undergone major open heart surgery, along with a separation from her children for months on end in her hospitalization and recovery. During this period, she was not able to use her talents or abilities to serve others.

Yet Edith learned to love scripture, particularly the Psalms. I noticed how she responded to these texts more fully than other Mormon patients I had come to know in my hospice work. She also loved to have me pray for her.

After a long stint on hospice, it seemed that Edith was starting her final stage of decline. Even as the hospice team noticed signs of this transition, one of Edith's children, living in another state, decided to take Edith off hospice and move in with her so she could provide up-close care. She enrolled Edith in rehabilitation in spite of the fact that the hospice nurses feared her systems were beginning to shut down. Still, Edith made efforts to eat and drink more than she had in the past, while she clearly continued to decline. After returning from a ten-day trip, I learned from a staff person, who had closely cared for Edith in her last days, the story of her passing. In the end, it was difficult, even traumatic, for all involved—for the relatives who were present, the staff members seeking to support them, not to mention for Edith herself, without the help of the hospice team. The out-of-state daughter had called for an ambulance to take her mother to the hospital, against the advice of those at her bedside. Her attempts to deal with her own sense of inadequacy and loss in the face of her mother's dying seemed to increase the suffering that naturally accompanies death.

On hearing this story, I began a process of grappling slowly with my own submerged sense of grief. I wrestled not only with losing a beloved patient, but also with a sense of the incompleteness of this loss and other losses. It was not until I found a way through reflection and prayer to interlace Edith's lived story with her family and those who cared for her, and the story of Jesus, that my grief could be transformed into a deepening conviction regarding God's abundant provision and love.

At one point, I read again Psalm 23. I saw that despite her fears and delusions, Edith truly "dwelled in the house of the Lord eternally." Despite the fact that from a hospice perspec-

tive she had undergone unnecessary suffering at the end, Edith *kept choosing* throughout her life to walk through the valley of the shadow of death hand in hand with her Heavenly Father. I recalled also the way she ate at the abundant table of the Lord, receiving God's bountiful love through prayer and by opening herself to spiritual companionship. This allowed her to generously respond to all who trespassed through her room, making each person feel like a welcomed and honored guest. I further understood that in living out her days to the very end, Edith sacrificially held out to her beloved children, who might be seen as letting her down, a profound and loving witness to the way of Jesus. I remember with a smile the phrase in which she once captured the essence of her faith: "I just love love!" As a witness to the dying of one who has gone ahead in the way of suffering *and new life* in Christ, I believe Edith longed for her children to find the true path. This path, which she had walked, would take them beyond the rules and scripts of their faith community that entail filling roles conferring a sense of social identity and approval. Whether they were seeking to live out such scripts, or reacting against them, was not the point; rather, she held out to them a picture of what turning one's path in surrender to living in one's true home in the Father's house looks like.

I realize that in citing such a story, I point to what might be considered "normal" suffering, unlike the kind of tragedies and senseless suffering that Beker, following Paul, distinguishes from redemptive suffering. Yet, I could write similar stories about friends and relatives who died tragically in their late twenties or thirties, or another friend who died of the same disease in her early fifties, from which one of her housemates in her late twenties had died little more than a decade earlier. All these women "showed the way" to life in God's house. They showed the pattern of Jesus's free and self-sacrificial love, to which I am called as a wife and mother of four young children,

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the truly giving and yet costly love of God that opens up the sharing of our deepest gifts and capacities.

According to Rowan Williams in his book *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross* (an influential book in Frances Young's spiritual journey), we can find such a pattern in Martin Luther's early theology, known as his "theology of the cross."<sup>13</sup> Williams notes Luther's insight that God himself "shatters our images," meaning our attempts to speak accurately (or ontologically) about him, "by addressing us in Jesus." Though such a suggestion might be seen as a restatement of the Classical theological tradition's "negative theology," Luther affirms here that God is known to us in history, where God himself enters into our suffering and is ultimately "made known to us in the cross, in man's death and abandonment." God can thus be sought even in that which "opposes" or "contradicts" God. This theology does not encourage escape from the world, but prompts us to find in the world's harshness "the garment of God." After finding freedom from his own demons that mired him in a false "theology of glory," Luther announced the freedom of Christians to enter deeply into places of darkness and affliction, even as God is free to act in all life circumstances, particularly in life's most desperate places. We are free to follow God there, even if it means getting our hands dirty, or even if it leads to our own suffering.<sup>14</sup>

One Sabbath, one of our church members preached about the gift of forgiveness provided by God in the face of the bitterness that comes with profound personal loss. During her sermon, she played clips from the PBS *American Experience* documentary on the Amish community that lost a group of schoolchildren at the hands of an angry shooter. Though I had slipped out to help prepare for the potluck and keep up with my children, I came back in time to hear the commentator musing in wonder at the Amish families who lost children, several of whom *chose* to attend the funeral of the

shooter. "Who attends the funeral of someone who shoots your children?" he asked. Then, the voice of one of these parents became audible. He began to speak of his freedom from having to judge this man, betraying in his tone a transparent sense of trust in God's justice and love. In this profound testimony, I caught a glimpse of what Luther must have meant by Christian freedom, the kind of freedom allowing us to go into life's most painful places, and there to find God. ■

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## References

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