

ONE

The Forming God

I believe in God. I believe that the love and power of God, as revealed by Scripture, tradition, and religious experience, are best described as relational, ambiguous, and resilient. God is radically relational with the world. I understand relationality between God and the world as a process of interaction characterized by asymmetrical mutuality. God and the world are bound together in a web of mutuality that gives identity to each. God, the first person of the Trinity, constantly forms the world in its struggle for existence, meaning, and power. The world, in its responses to God, creates value that both enhances and diminishes the love and power of God. While this interchange is not symmetrical—that is, God’s power and love are the foundation for the love and power of the world—God and humans depend on one another for responses that create identity and value.

Who is God and what are God’s intentions for the world? This is the question of the first person of the Trinity. If we understand God as responsible for the direction of

Who is God and what are God’s intentions for the world?

the empirical reality of everyday life in partnership with God’s creatures who are free, what can we say about the character of God based on Scripture, theology, and contemporary religious experience?

SCRIPTURE

Within Scripture, God is sometimes called Father,¹ by which the texts often mean Creator, the one who made the world. In both creation stories that appear in Genesis, God created the world into water, land,

plants, animals, persons, and social systems, and God said that it was good.² As an ancient text, the creation story of Genesis 1 is more compatible with modern scientific explanations because it suggests an evolutionary and progressive creation of structures from the simple to the more complex. Light and darkness are followed by water, then seas, rocks, simple living organisms, plants, fish, animals, and finally humans. In Genesis 1, God is like an engineer who organizes the world according to principles of science. Genesis 2 offers a more relational and poetic account of creation. God shapes human beings from clay, breathes life into them, and then creates animals and other persons as companions. In this story, God is like a midwife or artist who lovingly creates a world based on interpersonal relationships. In both stories, there is an asymmetrical mutuality between God and the world—God creates a world that operates by certain principles as an expression of God's basic identity; God is a God who creates; the world is the world because of its covenant with God. Divine and human destinies are tied together. God is angry and disappointed when the world does not fulfill its purpose; human beings are angry and disappointed when God is absent and withholds the love and power necessary for humans to thrive.

The book of Psalms can be read as a record of conversations between God and humans about their relationship. They are filled with love, admiration, praise, gratefulness, affection, and honor as well as hurt, guilt, shame, rage, and destructive thoughts—the full range of human thoughts and emotions. The psalms are often organized into categories such as praise, lament, and petition, although all three functions can be found in many psalms. For example, Psalm 100 is often taught to children because it contains strong praise images without any negative human feelings: “Enter his gates with thanksgiving, . . . for the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” Walter Brueggemann calls these “psalms of orientation”³—praise for the goodness of God during times when particular human communities are stable and secure. Many Christian parents want their children to love God unreservedly and give God praise for the goodness of our lives together. It is a premise of Christian education that the church should establish a positive image of God early in life so that children and new Christians have a foundation to return to when they face challenges in life.

Psalms of lament express the pain of the human community in times of tragedy and oppression. Sometimes lament takes the form of rage at enemies and calls for God's revenge on them. One of the harshest is Psalm 137:8: "Doomed Babylon, be cursed! Good for those who deal you evil for evil! Good for those who destroy you, who smash your children at the walls."⁴ At other times the lament takes the form of individual depression and a feeling that God is absent, such as Psalm 39:4-13: "LORD, let me know my end, . . . let me know how fleeting my life is. . . . Surely everyone goes about like a shadow. Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; . . . Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more." In some laments, hope seems to be absent for the believer, except that lament is directed to God and therefore is a part of an ongoing conversation with God. But other laments have powerful images of hope in the midst of human suffering; for example, Psalm 30:11-12: "You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever." Lament psalms are resources that can provide comfort during times of loss and oppression because they give theological language to human feelings that need to be expressed. Implicitly, these psalms say that humans can bring everything to God in prayer without worry that we will be punished and rejected. Even the worst evil in human life is not outside the human relationship with God.

In the psalms of new orientation, there is an implied or explicit faith that God has saved us from suffering and oppression and restored the good life. Consider Psalm 66:16: "Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me. I cried aloud to him, and he was extolled with my tongue. . . . But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer." The witness about "what God has done for me" has had powerful impact on the contemporary churches that practice testimonials. In many communities of faith, the people celebrate the God who has remained faithful in the "valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23). Praise of God that comes after tragedy and loss is often the most powerful expression of hope. Though I was lost, now I am found. The psalms are conversations with God that assume a real relationship, a partnership in which each has responsibilities and humans can call on God for redemption and rescue in the midst of oppression and affliction.

The narrative of the Scriptures is commentary on the asymmetrical relationship between God and humans. Immediately after the creation, the first humans engaged in deception and conspiracy against God to violate the limits of the created order. In a sense it doesn't matter what the limits were; what matters is that humans succumbed to the temptation

What do the prayers called the psalms tell us about the character of God?

to exceed them. Both animals and humans have power that can bring life and death, and humans have freedom to choose life or death. The biblical narrative describes the human struggle to choose life rather

than death. The story points to life on the razor's edge between life and death, between beauty and boredom, between love and destructiveness. King David was chosen by God and the people because of his virtue and courage in the face of great danger, yet he chose evil when he took Bathsheba and killed Uriah and initiated generations of violence in his own family.⁵ In the encounter with the evil he had done, David was repentant and redeemed although his repentance did not avoid the consequences of his sin for his family and his subjects. His recovery from sin and evil endeared him to the community that later gave him credit for authoring the psalms, the community's greatest prayerbook.

The story of the rise, fall, and redemption of David is a statement of a core theme of the Scriptures. The same formula is repeated in the story of the birth of Israel, its fall into disobedience, its corruption and injustice to the poor, its punishment in exile, and its restoration as a faithful nation. In this story, God and particular human communities live in mutual covenant with one another; their destinies are tied together. God and the human community are not affected in exactly the same way; for example, there is no indication that God will die, while humans are constantly faced with death. But there is a way that the quality of the divine-human relationship is significant for God as well as humans. God hopes that the human community will enrich the beauty of the world and is disappointed and experiences pain when humans decide to destroy beauty rather than sustain and create it. We cannot know how much any particular project like the history of the Jewish people means in the total life of God because we don't have access to the full reality of the transcendent God. But the Scriptures witness that God invests significant energy and concern in the stories of the Jewish people.

The Bible is the formative book for Christian faith and action. Many Christians believe the New Testament has a special authority and are not reticent to believe that its theology has universal significance. Most Christians believe that Jesus was more than just another prophet of the Word of God, that Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, and that Jesus' life is the decisive revelation of God to humans. Some theo-

The sequence of "creation, fall, and redemption" is one way to understand the narrative of the Scriptures. How does this apply to your life?

ries of Christian evangelization of the world are based on the confidence that Christians have the final truth that is necessary for the salvation of the world. This can make interreligious dialogue highly problematic. Other Christians believe that while the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Scriptures are authoritative for Christian identity, the authority of revelation for Christians does not limit God to only one religion. Rather, they believe that God is an active force in all religions, revealing God's nature in multiple ways. Therefore, interreligious dialogue is crucial for a fuller understanding of the nature of God. Being christocentric can be exclusive (there are no other revelations outside of Christ) or inclusive (Christ has shaped our identity, and we are enriched by conversations with other religions).

According to most biblical interpretations, Jesus did not go through the formulaic developmental stages as originally virtuous, then fallen, then redeemed. A rough parallel is Jesus' election at his baptism, his crucifixion and descent into hell, and his resurrection on the third day. In these events, Jesus goes through the stages of human spiritual life, but without sin and without the full impact that such an experience would have for humans. There is little inclination within popular Christian thought for believers to see Jesus as fully human in spite of the ancient creeds.⁶ Yet, seeing Jesus as fully human and fully divine is a central doctrine of all contemporary Christian churches.

PROCESS THEOLOGY

Within process theology, God is relational because of God's ontological function within the world. According to process thinker Alfred North

Whitehead, one of the basic principles of reality is Creativity, which is his name for the process by which experiences (actual entities, in technical language) come into momentary existence through syntheses of past relationships and pass their influence and values on to the future. This process of coming into existence and passing on is the most elemental reality of the world, according to Whitehead. A rough parallel is the fact that all humans are born, live, and die; Whitehead, however, suggests that this process of birth, life, and death occurs in each moment of our experience. Therefore, human beings are always in process, always changing. We are born, live, and die in a continuous series of moments that constitute identity and conservation of values.

One of Whitehead's central questions was, What is the principle that determines whether creativity results in increased value or continuous chaos? His answer: God is the being who influences the creation toward greater value. God is the one who sustains the values of goodness through the process that is always changing. Through an initial aim, God initiates each moment of experience and presents the graded possibilities that are available for synthesis in that moment. In this way, God helps to preserve the possibility of greater value (goodness) and to resist evil. Whether the maximum creation of value will occur depends not just on God, but also upon the courage of the decision of the person within particular moments.⁷

Given the possible choices of value that God provides, each person has to decide how much risk to take. With every decision, there are pressures toward continuity and pressures toward novelty. We have the hard task of trying to prevent the goodness of the past from being destroyed and trampled by the human desire for excitement while supporting the necessary novelty to construct a new future. Chaos and loss of value is a continuous threat. The risk of chaos is the destruction of the stream of occasions that make up the society of which it is part, which humans experience as the threat of death. In this sense, every human being is naturally conservative, desiring to survive and preserve the values that have sustained us so far.

However, the past also includes contradictions that threaten the dream of a new future. Our ancestors faced the challenges of their lives as best they could, but they were not able to do everything. Some of their dreams are yet to be realized. New levels of harmony and qualitative change come only through risk and extended periods of relative

chaos, what Christians sometimes call the process of death and resurrection. In the moment of decision, the person cannot know the future. God empowers persons to become and gives us the data we need for our decisions. God lures us toward increased value, but we are free to act with courage or not. Lack of courage is a constant temptation that leads to sin and evil. Sometimes we are terrified of what we are called to do, and we choose to be passive at crucial moments. We avoid risk by doing nothing, tragically allowing the moment of transformation to pass. Sometimes we try to control the future by controlling others. However, abuse of power for control violates the relationality of the created order and leads to heartbreak and loneliness. Only through courageous risk and vulnerability can human beings preserve the best of the past and bring novelty that will fulfill the dreams of humanity for a peaceful and prosperous world.

Does God change? If not, can humans have real relationships with God? If so, can we count on God to be always loving?

Given this view of God and human nature, process theology understands God and humans as partners in creating value in the processive flow of life. God and humans are not peers because God acts to preserve goodness within

creation and the full knowledge of good and evil, and humans do not. But humans make choices that help determine whether the past is preserved and future dreams come to reality. In the ideal world, God and the world, especially humans, work together for good and the world becomes a more beautiful place for all creatures.

HUMAN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

For survivors of sexual and domestic violence, God as Father and Creator is an ambiguous character. One of the favorite narratives of the prevention of domestic violence movement is 2 Samuel 13, the rape of Tamar by her brother, Amnon. While God is not an active character in this story as it is recorded, survivors find comfort that the story of a victim of sexual violence and her courageous witness has been preserved in the Hebrew Bible. Tamar is the hero of the story. At the beginning, she has no way of knowing that her brother, Amnon, and his cousin, Jonadab,

have engaged in a conspiracy to entrap her into sexual abuse. They even manipulate her father, King David, into helping by ordering Tamar to visit Amnon on his sickbed. This conspiracy creates a situation where Tamar is alone with Amnon in his bedroom with no protection from violence. When she learns of his intent, she forcefully argues her case: “No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile! As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel. Now therefore, I beg you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you” (2 Sam. 13:12-13). Amnon is not persuaded and he overpowers her and rapes her.

The aftermath of rape reveals the usual male responses of violence against women. Amnon is enraged with her and wants her to disappear; David is worried about the fate of his oldest son, Amnon, and refuses to protect or comfort Tamar; Absalom uses the rape of his sister as an occasion to get revenge and eliminate a rival for his own ambitions to the throne. All three men show cowardice in facing the tragedy that has unfolded in their family.⁸

When survivors read this story, they quickly recognize the human plot—the male conspiracy, the vulnerable but courageous victim, the cowardly father, and the vengeful male relative. Many survivors report that their own experience is a close parallel; for many, there were years of abuse, collusion, silence, and rationalization that heaped trauma upon trauma. The story is empowering for some because they can clearly see Tamar’s resistance to evil even though it was not an effective deterrent to victimization. But then they ask theological questions: Where was God during the rape of Tamar? What is God’s responsibility for creating a hostile social context in which women are sexualized and made vulnerable by male attitudes and behaviors? Why didn’t God intervene in this situation to protect Tamar when God saw her righteousness? Where was God during the aftermath when Tamar disappeared as a disgraced princess? Even though God is not a character in the story, God is a member of the covenant that made Tamar vulnerable to rape. The silence of God in this story often matches the survivors’ experience in which she prayed for help and the abuse continued.

There are many other biblical stories of violence against women that are tragic because the victims are never given voice and never heard from again. Examples include Jephthah’s daughter (Judges 11), Queen Vashti (Esther 1), and Lot’s daughters (Genesis 19). There are also a few

stories of justice. For example, in Daniel 13,⁹ Susanna is attacked by two corrupt judges in her garden. When she resists and screams, they accuse her of adultery, give witness against her, and she is sentenced to die. In the nick of time, Daniel suspects that the judges are giving false witness. He entraps them in contradictions and vindicates Susanna; the judges are sentenced to death for their false witness. It is one of the few biblical stories of sexual violence where justice is done for the victim.¹⁰

Survivors ask several important questions to traditional Christian theology about God. Why did God create a world in which some persons are victims of violence at the hands of others? Why is God sometimes silent when the victims of violence cry out in prayer for safety and healing? How does God participate in the healing process that must occur for survivors of violence to construct a full humanity? These are painful questions that drive some survivors away from Christian faith

Survivors of violence give witness to the absence of God. Is this a problem of human limitation? Is this a problem for a doctrine of God?

and away from Christian community. Other survivors blame the evil actions on human beings who abuse others and find comfort in their faith. For some, God provides support and comfort during times of abuse. God brings resources in the form of courage and empathic partners that lead to healing. Out

of these hard questions comes a new witness about the nature of God.

From this brief review of Scripture, tradition, and the religious witness of survivors, I come to the following affirmations about God, the first person of the Trinity: God's character is relational, ambiguous, and resilient.

GOD'S RELATIONAL CHARACTER

Study of Scripture, theology, and contemporary witness is arriving at a consensus that God is relational by nature. When God made humans "in God's image," God embedded us in our relationships with one another, the natural world and the earth, and with Godself. That is, we know who we are through our relationships. We are born to parents, raised in families, nurtured in communities, and find work in communities and

institutions with other people. Our life is made up of relationships. Likewise, many current doctrines of the Trinity emphasize the relationality of the three persons in one Godhead. The Trinity symbolizes a way that unity and diversity, individuality and community exist in a harmony of contrasts that does not diminish the uniqueness of any person.¹¹

The nature of God's relationality is controversial, however. Even though every modern theology teaches that God is love and God loves the world, the meaning of this love is contested. If the nature of God's transcendence includes the idea that God is unchanging and unchangeable, then how can there be mutual love between God and humans? If God does not need human love, and if God is not affected by human love, not even the fervent prayers of those who seek God, then what does it mean to say God is love?

In the twenty-first century, we in Western culture have inherited an individualistic perspective based on ancient and modern philosophy and theology. Within the metaphysics of Western philosophy a basic distinction is made between being and nonbeing. Being is the ground of all that exists and never changes; an existing being is a mixture of being and nonbeing that comes into existence, lives for a time, and dies; that is, an existing being goes from nonbeing to being and returns to nonbeing. Therefore, existence is a lesser form than being. Within this theology God is defined as being itself or the ground of being. God's love sustains existence in a benevolent way, but God is not affected by existent beings because God is pure being and does not partake of nonbeing.

What does it mean for a human being to be in a covenant of love with being itself or the ground of being?¹² Modern theology based in European existentialism asserts that God loves the world but is unable to explain the meaning of this love in ways that humans can understand. God must be unchanging, all-powerful, all-loving, and omniscient, the characteristics of being within existential philosophy. Because of the contradictory logic of this combination of characteristics theologians have spent much energy defending God against the questions about the existence of evil and the meaning of love (questions of theodicy and the efficacy of prayer).¹³

Process theology, in contrast to European existential philosophy, puts change or process at the center of reality. According to Whitehead, change does not mean the loss of being. In fact, existence is the purpose of God's creativity. Put another way, God is an existent being,

which is possible because Creativity, the ultimate principle of reality, is change itself. Therefore, God can exist and participate in change without ceasing to be God. God and human beings are not equal and the same. That is, human experience exists only momentarily, and what we know as persons are actually enduring societies of many experiences over time. In contrast, God is a changing being who does not exist momentarily, but eternally, and whose function is to offer an initial aim to every human being in its flow of experience. God and actual entities are qualitatively different from one another because their functions in the world are quite different. But God is real and interacts with humans in intimate ways.

God is an active agent in the center of every human life, and the decision of every moment of experience is received into the life of God. God has two functions in the world: one is to promote value through influence in each moment of experience; the other is to receive and preserve each experience as a contribution to the future. God is an agent of love and power in the world, acting to create good and resist evil, saving the world and its values for the future.

Within process theology the mutual influence between God and human beings is asymmetrical. Human beings are decisively shaped by God's influence in their lives because of the crucial role of the initial aim of values. God is shaped by the influence of human beings because God receives the energy from each moment of experience into God's existence. The actual impact upon God of any particular moment of experience is quite small when one considers the billions of experiences in each moment of history. By the transcendent nature of God, process theology means that God transcends the perspective of any human being. God is immanent within each moment of experience, but God transcends each actual moment so totally that there no way that an actual entity can perceive God's perspective on things. It is true that God creates the world in each moment, and it is true that human beings influence God, however infinitesimally.

It makes sense within process theology to say that God and the world are relational and have intersubjective interactions. Human beings are made up of relationships including God, other beings, and the natural world. God's life is constantly influenced by the decisions of human beings and all creation. Thus, within process theology God loves in a way that humans can understand. What happens in my life matters

to God, because the relative value I achieve in my life, with God's help, contributes to the value and beauty of the world and God's interior life. If the goal of creation is an increase in value, then the value of my life either contributes to or subtracts from the value of the world and God.

Process theologian Bernard Loomer defines love as the ability to sustain relationships over time with all of their contrasts and contradictions and move those relationships toward harmony and beauty.¹⁴ If love is defined in this way, then to say that God is love means that God sustains a relationship with me through all the ups and downs of my life. What I make of what I have been given contributes to God; it is my gift to God and the world. God and humans have real relationships that can be called loving. God is love, and the call to humans is to love self, others, and God in the same way that God does: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:37-40).

Survivors of sexual violence who have experienced healing sometimes witness that there is a relational God in the universe. Even though they suffered evil abuse that nearly broke their spirits and ended their lives, many have also found fragile connections with compassionate others who comforted and sustained them. Linda Crockett writes about the images of a lady in white and a little boy named Peter who

What do we mean when we say "God is love?"

came to her often after sessions of abuse by her mother. She would go to her favorite tree in the nearby woods and be comforted by the lady in white. Her friend Peter would play with her and give his unconditional love. While these figures were spiritual rather than human, they saved her life and enabled her to endure until she found concrete human beings who offered her unconditional love and support. Through many years of healing work, she learned the meaning of love and power and developed a ministry with other survivors of violence. She understands God has a loving spiritual presence in ways that are compatible with the view of process theology.¹⁵ Philip's depression based on personal and social abuses led him to contemplate suicide often and contributed to his desperate attempt to seek intimacy by abusing others. Somehow he

endured and yearns for relationships that are mutual, respectful, and intimate. His life is a witness to the reality of God's presence in desperate circumstances.

GOD'S AMBIGUITY

To say that God is radically relational leads to the additional insight that God is ambiguous. At one level, this means that God's morality transcends human understanding so much that human judgments about good and evil are only partially correct in the life of God. But God's ambiguity is more than human ambiguity and inability to conceive of the full reality of God. In process theology, God's ambiguity arises from the fact that every moment is a convergence of the contradictions from the past and hopes for the future. If divine and human decisions lead to an increase in value, then it ushers in a new world with new contradictions. The direction of creativity is toward more complexity—"the many become one and are increased by one," as Whitehead wrote.¹⁶ There is no resting point that is beyond all contradictions—although there are moments of peace and serene beauty when contradictions are overcome to the best extent possible under the circumstances. But the process continues into the next moments when new challenges to harmony arise. What is beautiful in one moment can become mundane and eventually ugly in the next moments as the ignored contradictions become evident.

God's ambiguity means that God and humans strive for "the more," for more harmony, more beauty, more complexity, more power, more love.¹⁷ This striving is built into the process of Creativity itself. However, there is a side of Creativity as process that does not care about value, and is content as long as the process continues, even if it disintegrates into chaos. The role of God is to guide Creativity toward greater harmony and beauty, and this is accomplished through God's covenants with actual moments of experience. The joint project between God and humans can be characterized as love, as mutual covenant. And whether the process leads to the good depends on the ability of God and humans to tolerate ambiguity.

One meaning of ambiguity is that human beings are not single-minded in our daily lives. In his research, Freud noticed a tendency

within humans to split reality into rigid categories of good and evil. This process of splitting he judged to be a stage of development in between the stage of perceiving reality as undifferentiated and the stage of perceiving reality with complexity and contradictions. He referred to this latter stage as ambivalence, which he defined as the ability to accept simultaneous subjective feelings of love and hate toward a beloved figure in one's life. Thus, within psychoanalytic psychology, ambivalence or ambiguity is a more mature developmental stage than splitting one's perceptions into categories of good and evil.

Another meaning of ambiguity is that what is good in one moment can become evil in the next. Freud noticed that his patients might make a significant insight at one moment, only to become defensive and rigid again in the future. Thus, psychoanalyst Robert Langs is purported to have said, "Today's insight becomes tomorrow's defense."¹⁸ Loomer refers to the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who said the same thing in another way: "[Niebuhr's] insight that every advance in goodness brings with it the possibility of greater evil entails the caveat that there is no progressive conquest of evil. . . . [E]very creative advance may give rise to its contrary or to some condition that either negates or qualifies the advance."¹⁹

Many survivors of abuse and violence suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.²⁰ One of the main characteristics of this disorder is rigid polarization that can mean dramatic changes in personality—from obsession with memories of the abuse to complete dissociation from these memories; from depression and inability to function to times of manic behaviors that are potentially destructive; from fear of relationships to rage and a wish to abuse others; from hatred of sexuality to hypersexual activity. The process of healing inevitably requires a gradual process of reviewing one's history of abuse and working through the range of contradictory feelings and thoughts that dominate one's life. Healing also involves learning both how to trust others and be vulnerable and how to

We know that human life is ambiguous. But can God be ambiguous?

set limits when others try to abuse their power. The end result of healing is an acceptance that all these contradictions are a part of oneself and that one can become strong enough to live with internal ambi-

guity and ambivalence toward self and others. In this sense, ambiguity is a sign of significant healing and maturity for survivors.²¹

I believe that accepting ambiguity is a sign of maturity for all human beings, and by analogy I believe the same is true for God. God is one who feels the vortex of all of the ambiguities of history and the present moment and engages faithfully in helping to create greater value and multiplicity even when it creates more moral ambiguity. In this sense, acceptance of ambiguity creates the conditions for doing good.

GOD'S RESILIENCE

Human history, including the stories of the Scriptures, indicates that there is no guaranteed progress toward increased value in the world. Every time some gain in value appears, an equally sinister form of evil is possible. David defeated Goliath and became the beloved king. Then he abused his power when he murdered Uriah in order to possess Bathsheba. Israel became a great nation, but abused the poor and vulnerable just as other nations had. The disciples followed Jesus, but they refused to accept his concepts of love and power and abandoned him at his crucifixion. Jesus was raised from the dead and the Spirit was sent to the new church. But soon the churches were fighting with one another for power and control. Constantine was converted to Christianity, ending the persecution of Christians. But he coerced the baptism of all Roman subjects and killed those who refused to submit to his power. Human history is a tragic story of achievement of value followed by new forms of corruption and abuse of power. Modern science in Christian nations has ushered in amazing advances in human health and productivity side by side with the most horrendous violence in human history.

Is God resilient? This is what the psalmists wanted to know, and what survivors of abuse want to know. Does God remain faithful to the covenant with the poor and vulnerable during and after a reign of evil? Does God side with the powerful against the vulnerable, or does God hear the cries of the poor and sustain the covenant for a new day of justice and recreation? Does God have the power to absorb the tragedy of human and natural life and sustain the value of creation and history for the future?

In my work with survivors, many report that they felt the absence and silence of God and felt abandoned at times of vulnerability. They want to know: Is this abandonment permanent? Or does God return for

a new day of empowerment and loving relationship? In clinical terms, is there healing for one's spirit after the trauma of violence? Is there any community where I can be accepted? Does God answer my prayers anymore?

I believe the answer to this question is that God's love and power are resilient. Some survivors report that when they cry to God, their prayers are answered. There may be long periods of silence when God seems to be absent. But God's Spirit will not be squelched forever. Eventually God returns.

Within my theology, the risk of a fully relational, ambiguous God is that the conspiracy of human evil can eclipse God for a season. This is the only way I can explain the witness of some survivors who have endured decades of trauma without relief. Human freedom to choose evil combined with institutions and ideologies of evil over generations create conditions that cannot be quickly altered. The results of evil are always tragic, a permanent loss of value and life. Evil effects are long lasting; no future value can justify the losses from a reign of evil.

There is genuine evil when human lives are lost, human spirits are crushed, and the creation itself is irrevocably damaged. In these situations, the resilience of God means that God continues to act for the good and remembers those who are lost; God does not forget the heroism of those who resisted evil. For those who survive evil, God is resilient. God provides new resources for healing, hope, and empowerment. During the healing process, survivors give witness of the hidden ways that God was present in the midst of the trauma. There seems to be no limit to hope when the resilience of human beings and the resilience of God come together. I have seen miracles that could not be explained. Where does a survivor's resilience come from? It is the combination of her own resilience as a human being and the resilience of God. In a world where evil is real and lasting, there is nothing that can destroy the resilience of God and the resilience of the human spirit. This is the meaning of Romans 8:38-39: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Within process theology, God's ontological function of providing an initial aim for every occasion and unfailingly receiving the free decisions of all occasions is a sign of resilience. The existence of the world

depends on God's everlasting response within the concreteness of each moment. God's initial aim is a powerful influence toward more value for each occasion; but whether such value is actualized depends on the courage within each momentary occasion. It is possible within such a cosmology for occasions and systems of occasions to become organized in an evil direction that is destructive of harmonious community. God's influence toward value is not always sufficient to counter the momentum of such evil systems in their ascendancy. However, God continues to act with power toward concrete occasions and greater value. As evil begins the inevitable self-destructive phase of its life cycle, God is present to preserve what value can be preserved, to support the resistance and creativity of prophetic actions, and to call all persons toward greater value. This view of God confirms the religious experience of survivors of violence about God's resilience.

For example, one of my male clients was sexually abused and traumatized as a child; he coped the best he could, but when he had opportunity as a parent, he became an abuser who did the same things that had created the trauma in his own life to a child in his care. The absence of God in his life seemed to contribute to the passing of evil from one generation to another. I think of sexually trafficked women who survive decades of forced prostitution, and then later become madams enforcing sexual slavery on other children similar to what they themselves had experienced. Where is the love of God in such a story? I believe that we must allow for the felt absence of God's love in particular moments of radical evil. But we can continue to believe in the resilience of God's love. That is, God's love can be rejected in particular circumstances by human decisions, but God's love is resilient and will return again and again.

Are God's love and power everlasting? Where are God's love and power during the reigns of terror that humans create?

The Christian mythos about the resilience of God is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God did not prevent Jesus' death at the hands of violent religious and political leaders. Some traditions ritualize this moment by extinguishing all the lights in the church in worship on the evening of Good Friday. But God's Spirit was not vanquished by this tragedy. Jesus survived and returned to inspire his disciples. His presence

continues to inspire believers in the midst of the most horrendous evils of our time. God's love and power are not destroyed by human sin and evil; God's love and power are resilient.

SUMMARY

I believe in a God who is relational, ambiguous, and resilient. Through the witness of Scripture, process theology, and survivors of violence, I see a God who created the world out of love and lives in covenant with human beings no matter what happens. I see a God who influences every moment of our human experience, and is influenced by the values that humans create through our courageous actions. I see a God who is larger than the valuations of good and evil that we understand and lives with us in the ambiguity of human life. I see a God who never gives up and whose healing power is resilient and everlasting. This is God, the first person of the divine Trinity, who was revealed in Scripture and the life of Jesus Christ, and who continues to act in the lives of people today.