

34Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. 36You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. 37You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— 38how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

39"We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, 40but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. 41He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. 43All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Okay, now hear a bit of this speech from Peter again, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism . . ." Everything in that statement sounds to be on the up and up, right? Peter is making it clear to an audience that God's salvation through Christ is for all—not just the Jewish people. That's what he's talking about when he says that God does not show favoritism—that God did not choose the Jews over and above all the rest of the peoples of the world. Salvation is for all. Period. It's nothing out of the ordinary, pretty run of the mill, for God so loved the world stuff. But now, now hear what a Biblical scholar has to say about this passage. "Peter's brief . . . review of the Messiah's career also argues for the fairness of God . . ."<sup>1</sup>

What? What? The fairness of God! Hotdog! This is the passage I've been looking for all my life. For you see, I grew up in a household that was split on the issue of fairness. My mom has always tried to keep things fair—"Even Steven" as she says. There were times, even into my college years, when she would call me around Christmas time and say, "I need a gift idea for you of something that costs about twelve dollars." I knew why she was asking. It wasn't as if she'd come upon twelve bucks in the bottom of her purse and decided she wanted to spend it on her only daughter. No, that wasn't it at all. The issue was that she'd just purchased a gift for my brother that put him \$12 ahead on the total gift cost tally and now she had some making up to do. My mother is nothing if not fair. And then there's my dad—destined for failure in his attempts to convince my brother and me that all things need not be fair, that indeed, life is not fair. He tried, he sure did. He'd occasionally go to conferences and bring one of us a gift and not the other. He explained that when he brought us gifts it was because he'd seen something that he thought one of us would really like—not because he felt obligated to bring us something every time he went away. And so sometimes when he returned his suitcase was empty, sometimes it had one gift, sometimes two. It all depended on if he found something he thought one of us really wanted or needed.

And so it is that for the last three decades, basically since the time I was able to form coherent thoughts, I have been confused about the issue of fairness. My head tells me what my dad, former teachers, and so many others have told me over the years—indeed what I have told others—that life is not fair. However, my heart, my heart tells me that I always want a present from Daddy when he comes home. My heart still hungers for fairness, even when my head is telling my heart that it's bound to starve.

A group of us from the church just had a conversation about fairness at a meeting this past week. We were discussing the parable of the prodigal son in which the youngest son goes out and squanders his inheritance on jazz and liquor and then, broke and starving, comes home with his tail between his legs, asking his father to take him back. The father embraces the wayward son and not only takes him back, but throws him a party and serves lobster

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<sup>1</sup> Robert W. Wall, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. X, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2002.

and prime rib. The older brother, who did back-breaking labor out in the hot Middle Eastern sun for the hundreds of days that his brother was away hears the strains of music and laughter coming from the house. You can imagine his dismay when he discovers the cause of the celebration—his selfish, greedy, philandering brother has come home and his dad is throwing a party to celebrate. Talk about unfair! And to add insult to injury, the older brother has been eating Hamburger Helper and Fish Sticks while his brother has been gone and now that the screw-up is back, they're having Surf and Turf. Unfair indeed. But as one of that meeting's participants said, "You know, "fair" is just another four-letter word that starts with "F".

Obviously, the prevailing opinion is, that although we would like life to be fair, it isn't and so we might as well just get over ourselves. And this is the mindset I was in as well, until I opened this commentary and read of God's fairness. I knew that God was just and righteous but fair? If God is fair, wouldn't life be fair? But what is fair about a God who allows a happily married couple to remain childless even after they spent all of their life savings on the infertility treatments while a 14 year old girl gets knocked up after a football game and yet another child is raised in poverty with very little hope of a decent future? What is fair about a God who allows a perfectly healthy 62 year old man who is teaching life-changing classes at NMC and loving life to drop dead from a brain aneurism while a 98 year old resident of a nursing facility yearns for the end to come and her suffering to cease and yet she lives on, day after day after day? What is fair about a God who allows a single tsunami to devastate an entire nation—drowning thousands of its citizens—while citizens in another nation die from starvation as draught literally cracks their land a part. It is hard, it is really hard to look at the world—to look at our nation—to look at our community—indeed to look at our own lives and declare that God is fair. Violence, war, starvation, grief, genocide—it is hard for me to understand these things as being the product of the work of a fair God—let alone a loving God.

Now, this digression of thought—from Peter's statement that God does not show favoritism to the commentator's assertion that God is fair to our own knowledge of the unfairness of life—this digression of thought is an entire discipline among theologians—people who think, study, and write about God. According to Wikipedia "Theodicy is a specific brand of theology and philosophy that attempts to reconcile the existence of evil or suffering in the world with the belief in an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent God. Theodiceans are those who seek to reconcile the co-existence of evil and God; a group of theodiceans may thus be called "a theodicy". Friends, I don't know if you knew it, but you entered a theodicy when you walked into church this morning. You are part of a group of folks seeking to reconcile the co-existence of evil and God. I think it is fair—pun totally intended—I think it is fair to say that all of us, at some point in our faith journeys, seek to reconcile the of evil and God. And for our case this morning, we seek to reconcile the co-existence of the unfairness of our world and our lives with the concept of a fair God. Theodicy happens, very understandably, when our modern notions of who and what God is do not mesh with our lived experience of life. It is a truly rare person who is not, at some point, deeply troubled by the seeming incoherence between what is believed about God and what is experienced in life.

But friends, although the Bible has words of truth and wisdom for us all, I do not believe that these words of Peter can be taken at face value by our postmodern minds. The words of the Bible were written for folks who lived in worlds very different than ours. Yes, the human condition was the same, but the ways in which the human condition were thought about are very different. We live in such an individualistic, self-centered culture. We are heirs of enlightened thinking and therefore believe in the liberty of thought and expression. This provides an opportunity for each of us to create a God of our own liking. We apply to God the characteristics and qualities we are looking for in a divine entity. And, we attribute to God human characteristics and qualities. And sometimes, indeed most times I dare say, our human characteristics and qualities, indeed our human brains themselves simply cannot describe or comprehend the depth and breadth of God. Quite frankly, it's impossible. Whatever notions of fairness we might have, we can't put those on God. Whatever notions loving we might have, we can't put those on God. Whatever notions of justice we might have, we can't put those on God.

If you've ever gone on the Dell computer website and ordered a new computer—you know that it takes you step by step through all of the options and extras available for your computer so that when you're finished, you have the perfect computer for your wants and needs. God isn't a Dell computer. God is also not one of the amazing custom-ordered and hand-crafted motorcycles that our own Garrick Opie builds with such skill and talent exactly to the measurements and wishes of one of his clients. God is bigger than that, bigger than us. God is simply beyond our ability to comprehend and if Peter says that God is fair, I believe that God is fair and that divine fairness must then necessarily be something beyond my comprehension. In a nutshell, we make God too small, too manageable, too predictable, and because we do, we very understandably experience theodicy in which we struggle and yearn to reconcile God to our world, instead of reconciling ourselves to God's world.

Annie Dillard speaks to this experience of Christianity in her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. Many people find great spiritual nourishment and guidance in the writings of Annie Dillard. I am not one of these people. Most of her writing leaves me frustrated and puzzled. However, as much as I am not a fan, let me just say that this that she writes about folks in churches makes all the sense in the world to me. That is why this quote will sound familiar to some of you, I certainly have used it before. And surely I will use it again. And I'll certainly use it right now as it so aptly describes our situation this morning.

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”

We don't know the waking or the sleeping God. We catch glimpses of God, have experiences of God, and believe in God. But we do not know God. And so can God be fair when life is, both according to my Dad and according to many of our experiences of it, unfair? Yes, of course. Can God be a God of peace when places in this world are being torn apart by war and violence? Yes, of course. Can God be a God of love when people kill each other and hurt each other and tell lies about each other and ostracize each other? Yes, of course. Because, much to our chagrin, God is not created in our image. Only God knows what God is. And it is up to us to reconcile ourselves to God—not the other way around.