

Well, the semester has started at APU, and I'm back to lecturing, which means I'm used to talking for an hour at a time. We don't have quite that much time today, so I'll start with the most important stuff first.

Five things I didn't know before we bought our house:

- 1) Automatic sprinklers have to be repaired at least once a week.
- 2) Things always break the day before a vacation.
- 3) Having a yard means always knowing where you'll be on a Saturday morning
- 4) The amount of crap you have will always expand to fill the storage space you have available.
- 5) The big iron fence in the front yard isn't to keep out strangers, it's to keep out bears

When people visit, they will sometimes say things like, "You have a lovely home". My answer has been pretty much the same, since day 1 - "Thank you, we've been very blessed."

Now I didn't really mean to, but after a while I realized I was saying that phrase, and I was being a little smug about it. I was saying "We are blessed" but what I was thinking was,

"We worked hard, and saved a lot of money, we resisted the temptation to take a risky loan and buy an overpriced house, and because we are such good and virtuous and wonderful people, God has blessed us with this house, which we totally deserve."

We are good people! Well, Gretchen is good people, and I'm not THAT bad. We are good people, and we deserve to have good things come our way. When we bought our house, it felt like confirmation to us that God loved us, and was rewarding us with blessings.

God is good, and He is good to us, the reason we know that is because He blesses us, right?

Some of you know the phrase "God is good, all the time, and all the time, God is good"

McEachern (Cal and Debbie)

- Ben, born @ 26 weeks (3 months early)
- Organs not developed
- Spent his first year in the hospital, both parents were there with him night and day
- He lived two years, in pain, with a feeding tube the entire time, and then little Ben died.

If we say, "God is good" because he blesses us, then what about the McEacherns? They are good, good people, generous, patient, kind. They love God, they've spent their lives serving him ... so why wasn't God good to them?

We know, I think, that it doesn't work like that. We have been alive in this world long enough to see that good things happen to bad people, bad things happen to good people, but sometimes, bad people suffer and good people are blessed.

So.

If all of that is true, then what does it mean to say, "God is Good"?

It's one of the central pillars of our faith, that God is good, that he is all good, and that he is good all of the time. But if we are honest, we might have to confess that we are NOT very good at understanding what that means.

Let's start with this, shall we? Let's confess our ignorance together. Let's confess that whatever we might mean by "God is Good", it doesn't mean that God rewards good people with good things, that he punishes bad people with bad things, at least not in any simple way that we can see or understand.

The goodness of God is something altogether more complicated.

We can look back in the history of our faith and see a line of people who have wondered about this, who have pondered the goodness of God, and wondered what it might mean.

² How long, O LORD, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?
Or cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you do not save?

³ Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrong?
Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.

⁴ Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.

I think about the prophet Habakkuk, who stood on the edge of Jerusalem as the Babylonians were about to invade, and he shakes his fist at God. He says, "You know God, you're not very good at your job! There are these evil, evil people here, but you allow to roam free, not only that, but they are rich and healthy, and seem to live forever! On the other hand, you pour out suffering on those of us who are trying to be good, and you allow us to be take advantage of by the evil! God, you have a lot to answer for! God, you're not very good to us!"

[Sophia playing with a toy that Josiah wants, Josiah cries, "You know, technically Sophia, that's his toy." "Well, technically, I took it."]

Habakkuk essentially looks up at God and says, "You don't even bother to enforce basic fairness! Look, even Gretchen would be a better god than you!"

Do you ever feel like Habakkuk? Do you ever stare up at the night sky and shake your fist, ever wonder why God doesn't step in and reward us for being faithful, or why he allows dark and painful things to happen to us? Have you ever found yourself asking if God is, really, good?

What do you do with all of this power, God, if you don't use it to protect the innocent, What do you do with all of this power that you allows it to rain down wealth and power on those who are violent and cruel? Is this still your world, God, that you allow such things to happen?

When we start to question God's goodness, there are two things that we should stop, and acknowledge.

1. Our lives are short, and our perspective is limited.

How often have you been in a situation where you jumped to a conclusion based on limited information, and later found out that your assumptions were completely wrong?

(Doug picture)

We expect things to work out quickly. A year seems like an eternity to us. Our sense of scope and scale are very limited. We are like little children, crying out “unfair!” to a parent

2. God’s perspective is vast, and his timeline is eternal

God’s answer to Habakkuk is to peel back the curtain of time, and show him the future. He shows him that the Babylonians themselves are being raised up to humble the evil. When Habakkuk protests that this is excessive punishment on those who are innocent in Israel, God peels back the curtain a little further, and shows him that here is another empire coming, one that will overtake the Babylonians, and eventually that empire will eventually allow the faithful to return to Israel, humbled and obedient to God’s word.

God is good, but his goodness is concerned with how the whole thing works out, not our little part. His goodness concerns how things finally turn out, not how they appear to us in this moment.

We are still in the middle of God’s great story. We’re on a single page, and all we see are the things right around us. The good that God is working toward doesn’t happen in a day, or in a month, or a year, or a decade, or even in a generation, just one lifetime, a hundred years, a thousand ...

It spans the whole length of history, from beginning to end, and it stretches to every corner of the world. We are small

Should it be surprising to us that we don't understand God's plans? Should it be surprising that his goodness is sometimes a mystery to us?

The prophet Isaiah says it this way,

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,"
declares the LORD.

⁹ "As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Now, I have to confess to you that this is not a very satisfying answer to me, to know that God is going to work things out eventually.

I don't think I will ever understand why the McEachern's little boy was born, why he lived so briefly, and suffered so much. I will confess, I don't understand how a good God could allow his parents to go through that kind of suffering.

In situations like that, we are tempted to find simple solutions, reasons that make sense to us. People might say things like "I guess God just wanted him in heaven sooner", or "God is trying to teach you something in this," or "Do you have some sin that you need to confess?"

Can we just stop with that?

It's trite. It's almost always wrong. It's hurtful. And it makes God petty, vindictive, and small.

So, if God's goodness isn't something we can easily understand, if it's bigger and more complicated, if it stretches over generations and across the whole earth, then what can we do? How can we, right now, in this place, how can we know and believe that God is good?

1. Do good things. God's commands are good, and good for us.

When we are honest, when we are charitable and kind, selfless, and virtuous, in short when we obey the good things that God has commanded, we get to experience things that selfish and cruel people never get to experience. The gratitude of a person you've helped. The humble joy of silently giving to someone in need. The contented sleep of the honest.

St. Augustine calls these things "the good things peculiar to the good," and they are blessings that follow from obeying God's moral commands. God may not display his goodness by rewarding or punishing people in the way we would expect, but he HAS displayed his goodness in how he has ordered the moral laws. His commands are good, and they are good for us.

By doing what he commands, we will find evidence of God's goodness.

2. Reflect on the goodness of God in Jesus.

John 14: 8-9

8Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and

you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?

Protecting the innocent, welcoming the outcast, calling out the corrupt, feeding the hungry.

Jesus is the living demonstration of God's character. As Paul says in Philippians, Jesus emptied himself out and suffered the indignity of the cross, suffered on our behalf, so that we who deserved all death and all suffering would be forgiven, would be shown mercy instead of wrath.

Is God good? Is Christ good, to us and for us?

3. Go find God in the silence of nature.

Each week of this series, a new old spiritual discipline is being introduced. This week, it's the discipline of silence.

Throughout our history, people have sought God by going away from their normal environment, finding some place where God's creation is on display, and being silent before him.

[Colorado]

In the beauty and majesty of nature, God's goodness seems very near. When we spend time in silence, our present circumstances seem to grow smaller, and the presence of God seems very near. God's goodness becomes more real.

1. LA Arboretum
2. Huntington Library

3. Angeles Forest
4. Early morning at the beach
5. Irvine Park or Aliso Canyon Park
6. Angeles Forest Trails
7. Colorado!

In all three of these ways, by doing good, by remembering Jesus, by practicing silence, we find reassurance of God's goodness.

If you remember the last time I got up here to speak, I talked about faith and doubt. We said that Faith is a commitment to something as true, on the basis of good evidence, but where certainty is impossible.

We have good evidence that God is good, but sometimes the things we see around us cause us to doubt.

So what do we do?

By faith, we acknowledge that God is good.

Habakkuk 3:17-19

Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.
¹⁹ The Sovereign LORD is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to go on the heights.

(Song)