

Oh God, Are You Sleeping!?

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,

on Sunday, April 25, 2021, by Maggie Guekguezian.

Scripture: [Psalm 44:17 - 26](#)

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If I was to preach on the Armenian Genocide every year from now until my death, the reflections and insights I would offer and the stories I would tell would be different than any that I had ever spoken before each time. And though I would likely go well below the surface from many points of entry, I would only be offering the insights of one person onto a grief that is felt in millions of hearts. The Armenian Genocide is the open wound in the soul of all Armenian people, it is a collective, intergenerational trauma that is felt differently in the bodies, minds, and souls of any Armenian person. This is true whether they are in the Diaspora or in *Hayastan*, whether they are descendants of Genocide survivors or not, it is a grief that is as deep as our DNA and our endocrine systems. The stories of the Armenian people in the wake of our attempted eradication are still unfolding now and will be as long as the wounds of the Genocide are held open with systematic denial. This morning I have one story to offer you, couched in a broad-strokes rendition of dense and harrowing history, and one set of meditations upon it.

You have seen my name plenty of times, pay attention for a moment to my last name: Guekguezian. If you know any Armenians, you've seen those last three letters '-ian' (or '-yan.')

This suffix is a clear giveaway to my heritage as it concludes most Armenian family names. However, I haven't ever told this congregation the story behind "Guekguez-" which means "blue eyes." While no Guekguezian in the Western hemisphere has blue eyes, the name most likely

dates back 1000 to the Crusades, probably from an instance of a Western Armenian and European getting together, having children, and causing a new family name to appear among some of the common folk in the Kingdom of Armenia in Cilicia.

What remains unsaid is that —if the political vision of Sultan Abdul Hamid and the Committee of Union and Progress of the Young Turk revolutionary government that succeeded him was realized to its fullest extent—I would not be speaking to you today, nor any member of my family exist, nor would any Armenian who had not previously emigrated from the Armenian Highlands or the region of Cilicia.

For the Guekguezians in particular this holds especially true as we lived for generations in the city of Adana. In the year 1909, a local militia of Turkish ethno-nationalists marched on the city's Armenian quarter, buildings were razed and an estimated 30,000 Armenians were killed in the massacre. I don't know how my great grandparents or their parents or their grandparents escaped or survived the Adana massacre, nor do I know how they survived the deportations and death marches into the deserts of northern Syria, nor do I know which of my ancestors were the ones who made it through and settled in Lebanon. This is all I know: the Armenian Genocide was not something that my great grandparents' generations readily talked about to my parents' generation—it was a real horror and trauma of their lives—and my great grandparents had all passed away by the time I was born, when my grandfathers were alive I didn't know how to ask about the stories of their parents' survival through those atrocities, and I do not know how to ask these questions of my grandmothers. This is all of that story I can tell.

Know this: The Armenian Genocide happened. It didn't happen overnight, rather decades of bigotry and localized acts of mass violence erupted into state policy and systematic destruction on April 24th, 1915. The Armenian people living in the Ottoman Empire were the

most numerous of the victims of this genocide, however every predominantly Christian ethnoreligious minority was targeted including Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Pontic Greeks. The Armenian Genocide happened, but *not* because of some evil unique to Turkish people or the Islamic faith —to believe so is not only foolish but profoundly destructive in its own right. The Armenian Genocide happened because of ideology and policy that should be horrifically familiar in the Anglo-European world even as it emerged from a different context and with a different name: this ideology is called Panturkification. It is an extreme form of Turkish nationalism that arose in the twilight years of the Ottoman Empire, this ideology envisions a state singularly Turkic in its ethnic composition and spoken language that would stretch from the Dardanelles to Central Asia. This ideology is alive today and is the principal force that underpins state violence against the Kurds in and around Turkey, and is still enacted against Armenians as is horrifically apparent in Azerbaijan’s war upon Artsakh, Turkey’s support for it, and the murder of civilians, destruction of historical sites, and the rhetoric of finishing the work begun in 1915 spoken by Turkey’s President, Erdogan, and Azerbaijan’s President, Aliyev. What I hope comes through loudly and clearly in this summary of history and ideology is the arresting similarity between the ideology of Panturkification and White Supremacy. Hold that similarity and any discomfort that it may cause in your heart, as it is essential for answering the question, “God, are you sleeping?”

In preparation for this sermon, for community worship at Pacific School of Religion, for prior work, and for the sake of my own need to know what I can of the story of my people’s survival of their attempted extermination, I have read several accounts of the history of the Armenian Genocide and its causes and consequences. The most meaningful and haunting of all of these are the primary sources, especially the letters by Armenians living through the Genocide. Several questions run throughout these letters, essentially asking, “Why is this

happening? Why does God forsake us? *Is* God forsaking us? Could we have expressed our faith in such a way that would have stopped this? Is there any point in having faith in God?" Such questions are likely familiar to anyone who has endured personal troubles or collective trauma in their community. These are ancient questions which are at least as old as the writing of Psalm 44, when the Psalmist cries out to God:

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?

Awake! Do not cast us off forever!

Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?

For we sink down to the dust and our bodies cling to the ground.

Rise up! Come to our help! Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.

These are ancient questions, often asked and often answered. Truthfully, I did not think I would offer one of my own, and if I did I would most likely say “perhaps God *was* sleeping at those times; I just don’t know” accompanied by a shrug of my shoulders. Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? Why does justice go undone for so long? Why does God sleep when the world needs Them awake? My meditations on these questions were fretful and full of heartbreak and looked like they would stay that way until this past Friday evening.

I was discussing this psalm and my sermon with one of my colleagues at Pacific School of Religion over a cup of coffee —as we often do when I’m preparing a sermon. They shared something with me that changed my perspective on the questions of God’s nature that I was continually struggling with. It was a *midrash* on the 44th psalm, in which the *midrashim* wrestles with the question of why God seems indifferent to the suffering of Their beloved people. The *midrashim* concludes that God not only can but *does* feel grief, yet we don’t realize it because They weep in private. It is not for the sake of God’s pride that They must weep in

*mistarim*¹. No, God must weep in places secreted by angels because the force of Their grief is so tremendous that the tears of God would threaten to tear the world asunder. The *midrashim* cites Isaiah 63:9², contending from his reading that God bears all of our pain. He then cites Jeremiah 13:17³, in which the prophet's soul—standing in for God—must weep in concealment as the anguish in God's heart is three times as potent as the anguish in the hearts of any being in Creation⁴. The conclusion of the *midrash* reminded me of a favorite quote of mine about grief and the 24-hour news cycle, “the human amygdala was not made to deal with all of this heartbreak all of the time.” Now imagine how God experiences the heartbreak of the universe—of all creation, all at once—in Their mind—in the image of which our nervous systems were created. I don't think that God can bear it nor can God bare those feelings in a way that would leave the world untouched.

Imagine that the stories of God's wrath that we find in the scriptures are, rather, stories of God's grief. When I approach them as such, I conclude that: God is not inert at our suffering, God is not silent at the atrocities of human being against human being, God cares deeply when we harm the planet and our fellow things and beings that live on it. I now believe that God's grief is so powerful, so palpable, and so deep that Creation cannot take it. God grieves at watching human beings do harm to each other, and Their tears flood regions of the Earth so vast that multiple peoples in Ancient Mesopotamia felt like the entire world was submerged. God sees

¹ That is “concealment” in Hebrew.

² in all their distress.

It was no messenger^[a] or angel

but his presence that saved them;^[b]

in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;

he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. (Isaiah 63:9, NRSV)

³ But if you will not listen,

my soul will weep in secret for your pride;

my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears,

because the LORD's flock has been taken captive. (Jeremiah 13:17; NRSV)

⁴ The actual statement of the *midrashim* is that God feels the grief in the heart of any Jew at three times the magnitude; though I changed the wording in my sermon, this should not go unsaid.

humans calling strangers “alien” and “outcast”, watches them offer threats of violence rather than welcome, and Their heartbreak levels cities and leaves permanent scars on the land. And I believe that if God was to witness all of the horrors that humans inflict upon each other and the planet right now, all the forms of exploitation and oppression happening on a systemic level, and all of the open wounds from violent histories left untended by justice that the force of God’s grief would tear the world asunder—not metaphorically, but literally. I’m not saying this out of a sense that God—who bears our pain and walks alongside us—wants us to suffer, but because of heartbreak.

We know why God’s heart breaks, but why does it stay broken? My discernment with this text and the history of my people leads me toward an answer. I believe that God’s heart remains broken because of denial. Not because of any denial on God’s part but human denial and the justifications that people make for our unjustifiable actions. Recall the similarities between Panturkification and White Supremacy. Among their commonalities is systematic denial of grievous harm. Such systematic denial is the force that holds shut the door to the place of God’s concealment so that the Divine cannot emerge, cannot let us know that They bear our pain with us, cannot offer to work justice through our hands. Yes, when human beings deny the atrocities that are on our hands, we keep God and God’s justice concealed. This is the truth, we have to invite God in.

When you speak the truth and give voice to what is systematically denied, I assure you that you are: Striking at the heart of human hatred and arrogance. Piercing the barrier that systems of human evil put up to deny their culpability. Resisting the force that keeps collective wounds open and generational trauma alive. And all of this denial and ongoing harm is a human story; it is not simply an Armenian one or a Jewish one or an ancient one or a present one, it is a

story that is always happening and will persist as long as humans deny the evil that we commit. I believe that denial is a sin and that it separates us from God, and whatever separates us from God keeps justice and restitution from happening, keeping healing—or even scarring—and reconciliation from taking place.

The sin of the Armenian Genocide is not simply a story of Turk versus Armenian, of Muslim versus Christian, or anything like that. It is not even unique, as this story is achingly similar to many across the world. I stress that deportation was a tactic of genocide used against my people because it calls attention to what the United States does on its southern border: displacing migrants, breaking families apart, settling them away in concentration camps in the Sonoran Desert far from the consciousness and hearts of people around this continent-sized country. The open wound of the Armenian Genocide is present in the fact that so many books of US history, especially textbooks, do not call what happened during colonization genocide. Yesterday the government of the United States finally said that word to describe what happened to the Armenian people in 1915—and implicitly before and after and to this day. Yet this work is not finished, it is only beginning and it requires us to take a number of steps that we must urge our leaders to take as well.

We must speak the truth that the actions that are on the hands of the United States as a polity throughout its history are actions of genocide against the indigenous peoples of this continent. This is not for the sake of making non-indigenous Americans feel bad but to begin the act of repair for historical atrocities and ongoing violence and exploitation. Yesterday's act of recognition must be followed by solidarity with all peoples whose collective trauma remains an open wound. I urge you to do this as political participants, as children of God, and in your own lives. Denial of the truth hurts. Open your hearts. Pierce the veil that conceals God from us and

keeps Their grief from existing as a companion to ours. It will not be comfortable, it may not be easy, but it is necessary. Go forth and do this for each other, for the sake of my ancestors, for the sake of ancestors of people you do not know, and for the descendants of all people and all being in Creation. Go forth in truth and in love, my beloved ones. Amen.