



## DETAILS



### ***Prayer in the Night*** *For Those Who Work or Watch or Weep*

January 26, 2021 | \$22, 220 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-4679-5

## New from the Author of the Award-Winning *Liturgy of the Ordinary*

Framed around the nighttime prayer of compline, Tish Harrison Warren, author of *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, explores themes of human vulnerability, suffering, and God's seeming absence. When she navigated a time of doubt and loss, the prayer was grounding for her. She writes: "It was this practice that gave me words for my anxiety and grief and allowed me to reencounter doctrines of the church—the church's claims about reality—not as rational, tidy little antidotes for pain but as a light in darkness, as good news."

Where do we find comfort when we lie awake worrying or weeping in the night? This book offers a prayerful and frank approach to the difficulties in our ordinary lives at work, at home, and in a world filled with uncertainty.

- From the author of *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, the 2018 *Christianity Today* Book of the Year
- Offers respite for times of sleeplessness and anxiety
- Explores some of the deeper questions about God's goodness that emerge when we are in pain

**TISH HARRISON WARREN** is a priest in the Anglican Church in North America. She has worked in ministry settings for over a decade as a campus minister with InterVarsity Graduate and Faculty Ministries, as an associate rector, with addicts and those in poverty through various churches and non-profit organizations, and, most recently, as the Writer in Residence at Church of the Ascension in Pittsburgh, PA. She is the author of *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life*, which one the 2018 *Christianity Today* Book of the Year Award. Her articles and essays have appeared in the *New York Times*, Religion News Service, *Christianity Today*, *Comment Magazine*, *The Point Magazine*, and elsewhere. She is a founding member of The Pelican Project and a Senior Fellow with the Trinity Forum.

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“This little book is holy glow in your hands: read it, savor it, and most of all join Tish Harrison Warren in prayer in the quiet of the night. Those who pray well are honest, vulnerable, frustrated, hopeful, learning, and most of all they are listeners—all on display in *Prayer in the Night*. But don't let the beauty of this book captivate you; let its subject capture you into becoming a person of prayer.”

—Scot McKnight, professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary

## Where, O God, Are You?

Amid thousands of forgotten sermons in my life, there is one sentence in one sermon that I will never forget.

One gray Sunday morning when I was in college, a few months after a three-year old boy in our congregation had drowned, our church was still staggered in grief. And I sat listening to my pastor, Hunter, preach about trusting God. “You cannot trust God to keep bad things from happening to you,” he said. I was dumbstruck.

What Hunter said is self-evident. Bad things happen all the time, which of course I knew then as I do now. But, for me, this idea was also devastating. In some wordless place inside of me, I had hoped that God would keep bad things from happening to me, that it was somehow his job to do so, that he owed me that much. And the plain truth of what Hunter said stood before me, so clear, so terrible.

God does, of course, keep many bad things from happening to us. The sun is still suspended in the sky. The worst kinds of evil may yet be held at bay. And we do not and cannot know all the near misses in our days, all the many unnoticed ways that we were spared some misery—the accidents we weren't in, the injury we just avoided, the destructive relationships we never began, the disease our white blood cells silently snuffed from our body unbeknownst to us.

But Hunter's point was that God does not keep all bad things from happening to us. He cannot be trusted to do that because God never made that promise. And doing so is, apparently, not his job. Our creator lets us be, painfully and tragically, vulnerable.

But if God cannot be trusted to keep bad things from happening to us, how can he be trusted at all? This was the question that I could not shake, the question that haunted the empty silence of the night.

In 2017, after months of talk about grief and loss, about my parents and my marriage, about body trauma and depression, about nighttime and “comfort activities,” my counselor (the amazing one) looked at me and asked, “Where is God in all of this?”

Could I believe that God cares about me when he won't stop bad things from happening to us? Could I trust God when I'm terrified that he will let me or those I love hurt? When I look across the immense collective sadness of the world, can I know God as remotely kind or loving? Is anyone looking out for us? Is anyone guarding the door? Is anyone keeping watch?

The theological struggle I was facing has a long history and a name: theodicy.

Theodicy names the abstract “problem of pain”—the logical dilemma of how God can be good and all-powerful and yet horrible things regularly happen in the world. And it also names the gritty and personal “crisis of faith” that comes from an encounter with suffering.



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This wasn't the first time that I'd wrestled with questions of theodicy. But our difficult year and perhaps simply growing older, made past, unresolved questions return with a vengeance and howl through the long, dark night.

Theodicy is not merely a philosophical conundrum. It is the engine of our darkest doubts. It can sometimes wither belief altogether. A recent survey showed that the most commonly stated reason for unbelief among Millennials and Gen Z-ers was that they "have a hard time believing that a good God would allow so much evil or suffering in the world." This seems to be an increasingly common struggle. More young people voice frustration and confusion about theodicy than in the last several generations. Many of those who walk into vague agnosticism or atheism do so not out of any reasoned proof (since of course there is not irrefutable proof for or against God's existence) but out of a deep sense that, if there is a God, he (or she or it) cannot be trusted—this is unbelief as protest. In the Samuel Beckett play *Endgame*, his character Hamm rejects the existence of God with the quip: "The bastard! He doesn't exist!"

If there is no God, the "problem of pain" vanishes. In his book *Unapologetic*, Francis Spufford points out that "in the absence of God, of course, there's still pain. But there's no problem. It's just what happens." But, he says,

Once the God of everything is there in the picture, and the physics and biology and history of the world become in some ultimate sense His responsibility, the lack of love and protection in the order of things begins to shriek out. . . . The only easy way out of the problem is to discard the expectation that causes the problem, by ditching the author Himself.

If we do so, we are, inevitably, left with other problems. If there is no God of love, the problem of pain evaporates, but so does any redemptive meaning to pain, any transcendent story we might tell in which we situate our suffering and our broader lives. More importantly, when we dispose of the problem of pain in this way, we then face the "problem of goodness." Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre wrote that when we reject God to ease the tension that pain creates, goodness goes with it. To call something good without any overarching meaning is merely to say, "Hurrah for this!" or "I like this!," which is well enough to do, but it disregards our deep intuition that true beauty, kindness, gentleness, and wonder participate in and point to a real and ultimate foundation.

If there is no one to keep watch with us, no one we can trust to look out for us in the night, then anything that happens, however good or bad, is sheer chaos, chance, and biological accident. To believe in a transcendent God means we are therefore stuck with the problem of pain. So there are libraries of books seeking to answer the question of theodicy—responses and solutions offered by the hundreds, many of them very good and wise.

Yet, despite all the ink spilled, we are not satisfied. Our questions persist.

Because, in the end, the question of theodicy is not a cosmic algebra equation where we can simply solve for x. It is almost primordial. A scream. An ache. A protest from the depths of the human heart.



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Where, Oh God, are you? Is anyone watching out for us? Does anyone see? And tell us why! Why this evil, this heartbreak, this suffering?

I have come to see theodicy as an existential knife-fight, a wrestling match, between the reality of our own quaking vulnerability and our hope for a God who can be trusted.

At the end of the day—in my case, literally, in the darkness of the night—theodicy is not something that can be answered. It is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured.

—Taken from chapter one, “Keep Watch, Dear Lord”



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