

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project
The Ways of God in the Midst of Glaring Evil,
Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue
Baptist Church

[13 January 1957]
Montgomery, Ala.

In the brief CBS filmclip from which this transcript is drawn, King appeared exhausted by recent events and paused often while addressing his congregation. After several weeks of escalating violence King asks, "where is God while churches and homes of ministers are being plunged across the abyss of torturous barbarity?"¹ He later remembered feeling "discouraged" that weekend: "Revolted by the bombings, for some strange reason I began to feel a personal sense of guilt for everything that was happening."² That evening, King gave a speech at Nashville's First Baptist Church; a fake bomb was found on the sidewalk in front of the building.³

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1. King delivered a similar version of this sermon one year earlier at Dexter (King, "How Believe in a Good God in the Midst of Glaring Evil," 15 January 1956).
 2. King, *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), p. 177.
 3. Robert Churchwell, "Bus Boycott Leader Speaks Here; 'Dummy Bomb' Found," *Nashville Banner*, 14 January 1957.

13 Jan
1957

This morning I want to talk with you from a subject which rose out of our situation here in Montgomery. And it is my hope that this message will [*recording interrupted*] [. . .] first book in our Holy Scripture, the last chapter in the book of Genesis, that is the fiftieth chapter, the nineteenth and twentieth verses: "And Joseph said unto them, 'Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.'" There is a desperate question on the lips of our community. It is a poignant and pressing question. It is none other than the question: What is God doing now? It seems to be a fact of life that when crisis situations develop, men turn away from the inadequate explanations of the finite, to the adequate and eternal explanations of the infinite. The theist always wants to know what God is thinking and what he's doing. And so somehow this morning we wonder: Where is God while hundreds and thousands of his children suffer merely because they are desirous of having freedom and human dignity? Where is God while churches and homes of ministers are being plunged across the abyss of torturous barbarity? Where is God while men stand before the world with no respect for law and order, with respect for neither God nor man? In our moments of despair, some of us find ourselves crying out with the earnest belief of Carlyle, "It seems that God sits in His heaven and does nothing."⁴ Others find themselves crying out with the great second Isaiah, "Verily, thou art a God that hideth thyself, O God of Israel."⁵ And then others begin to wonder whether or not life itself is ultimately irrational; whether or not life is something of a jigsaw puzzle with the decisive pieces missing; and whether life is nothing more than, as Schopenhauer the philosopher would say, "but an endless pain with a painful end."⁶

These are the things that men begin to wonder in moments of despair when they are forced to stand amid the deep and confused waters of trouble. Where is God while evil races? And we begin to wonder and ask: Is God no more than a sort of cold majestic absolute, totally detached from the affairs of men? Is God no more than the Aristotelean "unmoved mover" who merely contemplates upon himself? Or is God a loving father concerned about his children and what happens to them? You see, this is, at bottom, the whole problem of evil, this is the question which we are raising this morning. It is a whole question of how God operates as a good God in the midst of glaring evil. This is a basic question, this is a question that is forever on the lips of the disinherited of every generation. It is a question that rings and echoes across the hills from the oppressed. Where is God in the midst of falling bombs?

Now in order to fully understand the ways of God in the midst of glaring evil, it is necessary to understand something basic about God's will. You see this morning we are talking about God's will and man's bombs. And so in order to understand man's bombs, it is necessary to understand God's will. When we talk about the will of God and the ways of God, what do we mean? In order to understand God you've got to understand that there is something of a dualism within his will. There are two aspects to God's will. On the one hand, God has an ultimate, ab-

4. King paraphrases Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1836), book 2, chapter 7, paragraph 4: "Is there no God, then; but at best an absentee God, sitting idle?"

5. Isaiah 45:15.

6. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was a German philosopher.

solite causal will. And this point God neither thinks, nor causes, nor cooperates with evil, for God has an absolute ultimate causal will which only causes good. But then there is another aspect to God's will and that is God's permissive will. Since God through his absolute ultimate causal will decided to give man freedom, he had to make it possible for evil to exist if men did not properly use their freedom. And so because of the frailties and inadequacies and sinfulness of human nature, God has to have alongside his ultimate, absolute will, a permissive will. And so God never causes evil. But sometimes he permits evil to exist in order to carry out his creative and redemptive work. That is beautifully told in that story back in Genesis which stands before us. Here was Joseph [*recording interrupted*] [. . .]

14 Jan

1957