Some years ago, GQ magazine[[1]](#endnote-1) interviewed Stephen Colbert just as he was about to take on the mantle of hosting the Late Show. He talked about his life and his career with witty humor and heartfelt authenticity. Buried in and among the anecdotes of his life and his takes on television, politics and many other issues, was a simple but powerful theological statement. “You gotta learn to love the bomb.”

He first explores this in terms of his early days doing standup comedy. Every comedian, even the best there are, bombs sometimes—especially when they are getting started. There are always nights when the audience isn’t having it, the jokes aren’t landing, the material just isn’t funny. Bombing awkward and uncomfortable, probably because telling jokes to a room full of people who aren’t laughing is the exact opposite of what a comedian wants to do, tries to do. It’s utter failure. Comedy, he says, helped him learn what it means to love the bomb.

In comedy, everybody bombs; learning to love the bomb allows you to keep going, and better yet, to even enjoy that which is otherwise unenjoyable. Colbert says, “It took me a long time to really understand what that meant. It wasn't ‘Don't worry, you'll get it next time.’ It wasn't ‘Laugh it off.’ No, it means what it says. You gotta learn to love when you're failing.… The embracing of that, the discomfort of failing in front of an audience, leads you to penetrate through the fear that blinds you.”

I trust Colbert when he says this, because he speaks with a wisdom that comes from more than just a few bad shows. Colbert is the youngest of eleven kids. When he was just 10 years old, his father and the two brothers closest to him in age died in a plane crash. As anyone would be, he was completely traumatized. His life has been an exercise in learning to love the bomb. “Boy, did I have a bomb when I was 10. That was quite an explosion. And I learned to love it. That might be why you don't see me as someone angry and working out my demons onstage. It's that I love the thing that I most wish had not happened.”

Did you catch that? He learned to love the thing he most wish had not happened. Not rationalize it, not learn to be happy about it, but love it. Throughout the interview, the reporter explores how Colbert’s grief influenced his life, how is sadness and anger and gratitude and guilt eventually shaped him into the genuinely grounded and joyful person that he is. It’s not that he doesn’t have his demons, but they don’t control him, because he learned to love the bomb. He has made peace with the fact that what he has suffered is what makes him who he is.

This is what runs through my mind today hearing Isaiah write about Cyrus, the king of Persia. He is a foreigner who worships foreign gods, and yet Isaiah names him “God’s anointed.” “Anointed,” in Hebrew, is “messiah.” Why does Isaiah call this idol-worshiping foreign tyrant “messiah?” Because his conquest of the ancient Near East brought an end to the saddest and most traumatic chapter of Israelite history in ancient times: the Babylonian Exile. This is why Isaiah and the Israelites see Cyrus and his armies—this unstoppable juggernaut of conquest and occupation—as a gift from God, an answer to their prayers.

Today’s text from Isaiah is an exercise in looking for God in unexpected places, like Persia, and in unexpected people, like Cyrus. We have trained ourselves to think of God as all light and weal, but today Isaiah reminds us that God is present also in darkness and woe. Cyrus’ conquest of Babylon would have been anything but pretty. There were battles and massacres, pillaging and destruction; hardly what anyone could call “good,” unless that one were a Persian general. And yet, Isaiah, says, this is God’s doing. Isaiah invites us to look at all this suffering and death and see God at work. He wants us to look into this misery and learn to love the bomb.

It’s easy for us to see God in joy and beauty. We see God as light, and in the absence of light—in the darkness—we then discern the absence of God. But we know that darkness is not only good, it is also necessary. Night is when our bodies rest. The darkness of caves or dense forests allows for entirely different varieties of life. Even blindness sharpens the senses of hearing and touch. This is why, though we might abhor it, when we find ourselves in the throes of pain and misery and ugliness, we may be still be able to see God at work, often in ways we never imagined.

I’m not suggesting that God causes evil, but neither is God absent from it. God created this world, and God has entered into it to dwell among us, to face the evils we face, not to hide from them. Our image of God’s response to evil is the scandalous image of the cross. Jesus did not shy away from the suffering and pain of life, nor did he condemn it. Instead, he accepted it as true, embraced it, even, refusing to withhold even his very life; and in that embracing of evil and suffering, he was transformed by it—and it was transformed by him.

In Christ, the greatest act of evil against God becomes God’s greatest moment of victory over evil; Jesus’ death becomes itself a defeat of death. But, he doesn’t destroy it, he *redeems* it. The Crucified God takes death into himself, and becomes the Resurrected God, forever present in suffering and death. In Christ, we can see the face of God’s messiah, the harbinger of God’s kingdom to come, even in the face of an innocent man being executed on a cross.

What if, instead of condemning and avoiding the world’s suffering, we were to embrace it? I don’t mean to seek it out or inflict it on ourselves or others, and I don’t mean to worship it, to sacramentalize it into something were we go to be closer to God. I mean to embrace it like Stephen Colbert has: to learn to love the things we most wish had not and did not happen, to learn to love the bomb. Loving the bomb doesn’t mean being glad about it or telling ourselves that God is doing this to us a part of some grand plan, some mysterious way of making us stronger; loving it means holding that evil and suffering and entering into it looking for the creative love of God which is capable of transforming and redeeming it.

It’s hard to talk about this because it’s not something that can be explained or taught. It can only be experienced. I know because I’ve experienced it. Like Mr. Colbert, I had had one heck of a bomb when I was a child. I lost my mother at the same age Colbert lost his father and brothers. I’ve been to that pit, I know its corners and niches like the back of my hand. I’ve cried myself to sleep, I’ve railed and raged against the injustice of a universe that would callously rob a child of a parent. I have gazed into that darkness—and in it, I have seen the face of God.

In the midst of that darkness, God has walked with me, forming me to be the person I am now. I realize that without that experience, I would not be me; I would be someone else. I not only love who I am, I love who God has made me to be, and the gifts God has given me through it, gifts like my stepmother, gifts which have blessed me to be a blessing to others. And because I love these things, I also love the thing I most wish had not happened. I love the bomb.

Because I love the bomb, because I have seen God’s face in the darkness, have been shown how to embrace and hold suffering and be transformed by it, the terrors of the world no longer have as much power over me. God has given me hope which penetrates the fear that would blind me.

Children of God, I can’t tell you with any certainty where God is in all this mess. I can only tell you where I have seen the Messiah; and I’m telling you that I have seen Jesus in death, in suffering, in pain and oppression. I have seen that even though our bones are dried up, Jesus brings the promise of new life, of a better world which will rise from the ashes of this one—but only if we can face these challenges with love and with hope.

It is so easy to be without hope these days, so easy to give into anger and despair and frustration. I wonder if that is our call as Christians in this time, the time of COVID and climate change, of dis-ease and unrest; if this is our invitation to stare into the darkness and look for the face of God. What the world needs most might be more Isaiahs, more people to point out the Messiah in the places we don’t expect.

So lift up your eyes, children of God; lift up your eyes to the hills, but don’t forget turn them to the darkness, and gaze into the face of death. Do you see the face of God? When you do, be sure to let us know.

1. https://www.gq.com/story/stephen-colbert-gq-cover-story [↑](#endnote-ref-1)