

A person is walking away from the camera in a field of tall grass. The person is wearing a dark jacket and light-colored pants. The background is a bright, hazy sky. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

Theology for Troubled Believers: *A Lenten Journey*

2. Suffering

Sunday, March 27, 2011
10 to 10:50 am, in the Parlor
Presenter: David Monyak

St. John in the Wilderness

■ **March 13 and March 20: The Nature of God.**

- *Topics:* Introduction to Theology. The Holy One of Israel. The Maker of Heaven and Earth. The Limits of Science. What is Meant by “God”

■ **March 27: Suffering**

- *Topics:* Nature as a Witness and Innocent Suffering. Innocent Suffering and Life Beyond Death. Suffering from Nature and Extreme Human Cruelty.

■ **April 3: The Divine Sacrifices.**

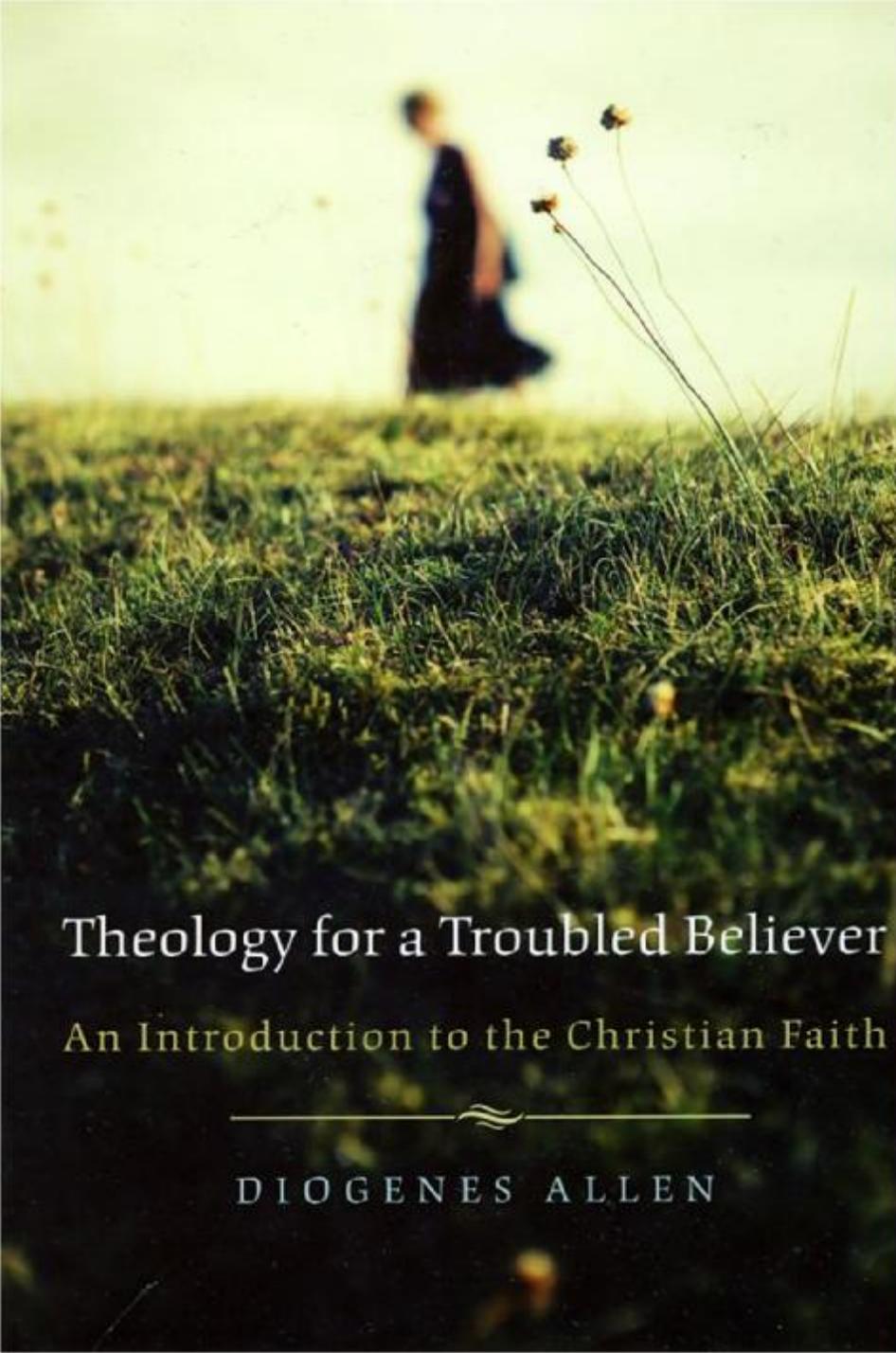
- *Topics:* The Sacrifice in Creation. Incarnation as Sacrifice. The Temptations in the Wilderness. The Sacrifice of the Cross.

■ **April 10: The New Life in God.**

- *Topics:* The Resurrection of Jesus and Eternal Life. Jesus as Lord and Jesus as Servant. Revelation and Faith.

■ **April 17: Responding to God.**

- *Topics:* The Holy Spirit, the Church, and the Sacraments. Sin, Evil, and Hope for the Future.



Theology for a Troubled Believer

An Introduction to the Christian Faith

—  —
DIOGENES ALLEN

Reference

- **Theology for a Troubled Believer. An Introduction to the Christian Faith.** Diogenes Allen, 2010.
Chapters 6, 7, and 8

"Theology for a Troubled Believer is one of the richest expressions of theology in years. Allen invites the nonspecialist into the worlds of philosophy, literature, and Scripture in ways rarely made so accessible and compelling at the same time. A very wise work."

—**W. Mark Richardson**, Professor of Systematic Theology,
The General Theological Seminary, New York

"In this powerful book, Allen brings a lifetime of philosophical and theological reflection to the task of explaining how contemporary Christians can fully embrace their faith without compromising their reason and ably addresses the concerns of committed Christians as they strive to make sense of their faith in a complicated and frequently hostile world."

—**William Greenway**, Associate Professor of Philosophical Theology,
Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

■ **Theology for a Troubled Believer. An Introduction to the Christian Faith.**

Diogenes Allen, 2010

Lord Jesus Christ, King of kings, you have power over life and death. You know even things that are uncertain and obscure, and our very thoughts and feelings are not hidden from you. Cleanse me from my secret faults, and I have done wrong and you saw it. You know how weak I am, both in soul and in body. Give me strength, O Lord, in my frailty, and sustain me in my sufferings. Grant me a prudent judgment, dear Lord, and let me always be mindful of your blessings. Let me retain until the end your grace that has protected me till now.

Saint Ephrem of Edessa, c. 306-373

Teacher, Poet, Orator, and Defender of the Faith

Feast Day June 10

This week:
Suffering

A photograph of a person walking away from the camera in a field of tall grass. The person is wearing a dark, sleeveless dress and is slightly out of focus. In the foreground, several dandelion stalks with their heads are visible. The background is a bright, hazy sky. The word "SUFFERING" is written in large, bold, purple capital letters across the center of the image.

SUFFERING

A blurred photograph of a person walking in a field of tall grass and dandelions. The person is in the center, slightly to the left, wearing a dark dress. The background is a bright, hazy sky. The foreground is filled with green grass and several dandelion heads on tall stems. The word "Overview" is overlaid in the center in a bold, purple, sans-serif font.

Overview

Overview

Suffering

- Natural Witnesses to God Available to All:
 - The External Witness of Nature
 - An “Inner” Witness
 - God’s Power, Wisdom, and Goodness Displayed in Creation
- The Problem of Innocent Suffering
 - Job’s Assertion of Innocent Suffering in Creation
 - Jesus on Innocent Suffering and God’s Idea of Justice

Overview

Suffering

- Justice and Belief in the Life To Come
 - The Difficulty of Truly Loving Justice
 - Justice, Our Need for Mercy, and Belief in the Life To Come
- “Almighty” versus “Omnipotent”
- The Free Will Defense to Suffering Caused by Others

Overview

Suffering

- “Natural” Evil and Suffering
 - Lessons in Humility from a Stoic
 - The Experience of God’s love in the Midst of Suffering.
- Extreme Human Cruelty
 - Concept of a “Total Event”
 - Our Calling to Act Redemptively

A photograph of a person walking away from the camera in a field of tall grass. The person is wearing a dark, sleeveless dress and is slightly out of focus. The sky is bright and hazy. The text "Natural Witnesses to God" is overlaid in a bold, purple font. The word "Natural" is on the top line, "Witnesses to" is on the second line, and "God" is on the third line.

**Natural
Witnesses to
God**

“Natural” Witnesses to God

The Witness To God of Creation

**The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
And night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
Their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the
earth,
and their words to the end of the world.**

- Psalm 19:1-4

“Natural” Witnesses to God

The Witness To God of Creation

- Paul writes in Romans:
 - Romans 1:20: **Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. ...**

“Natural” Witnesses to God

The Witness To God of Creation

- Nature’s order and existence are not self-explanatory.
- Nature’s order and existence thus raise an ultimate question.
- A choice must be made between:
 - taking the universe as just a brute fact that has no explanation, or
 - seriously examining the possibility that the natural world is dependent on God.

“Natural” Witnesses to God

The “Inner Witness” To God

- There is also an “inner witness” available to all people.
- In Genesis 3, after Adam and the woman disobeyed God, they hide themselves when they hear God walking in the garden.
- God calls, **“Adam, where are you?”**
- It is not that God does not know where Adam is. Rather, Adam and Eve no longer know where they are. *They have lost their orientation toward God* (= the fundamental meaning of sin, or original sin)

“Natural” Witnesses to God

The “Inner Witness” To God

- “Where am I?” = What is the ultimate reality in which I stand? What is my purpose here?
- Each of us encounters and ponders this question in one form or another at various times in our lives.
- In pondering this question, we are “hearing” and responding to God’s call.

“Natural” Witnesses to God

God’s Power, Wisdom, Goodness

- God’s Creation eloquently witnesses to God’s **power, wisdom and goodness.**

“Natural” Witnesses to God

God’s Power

- **Psalm 33:**

Let all the earth fear the Lord;

**let all the inhabitants of the world stand
in awe of him.**

For he spoke, and it came to be;

he commanded, and it stood firm ...

“Natural” Witnesses to God

God's Power

- Isaiah encourages the people of Israel to take heart by reminding them that Yahweh was the creator of the universe:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God (40:1) ...

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span? (40:12a) ...

Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are counted as dust on the scales. (40:15a).

“Natural” Witnesses to God

God's Wisdom

- God's wisdom is stressed in the creation story of Genesis 1, in which the world is ordered in a sequence of six days, with the frequent refrain, **“And God saw that it was good”** (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), concluding in verse 31 **“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”**

“Natural” Witnesses to God

God’s Wisdom

- God reminds Job of God’s responsibility for all creatures and the great beauty and order of the cosmos:
 - **“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? . . . Who determined its measurements? . . . Have you commanded the morning since your days began? . . . Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep?”** (Job 38:4, 5, 12, 16).

“Natural” Witnesses to God

God's Goodness

- The goodness of God that nature reveals is the making of a habitable universe, a place for us and all other creatures.
 - This is reflected in the cosmology in Genesis when God separates and holds back the waters.

“Natural” Witnesses to God

God's Goodness

- Psalm 104 praises God's goodness in providing for us and all other creatures a world in which our basic needs can be met:
 - **You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal. You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart ...**
 - **These [and many more named in the psalm] all look to you ... when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.**

A blurred photograph of a person walking in a field of tall grass and dandelions. The person is in the background, slightly out of focus, wearing a dark sleeveless top. The foreground is filled with green grass and several dandelion stalks with their heads. The overall lighting is bright and warm, suggesting a sunny day. The text "Innocent Suffering" is overlaid in a large, bold, purple font in the center of the image.

Innocent Suffering

Innocent Suffering

Suffering as Deserved Punishment

- The ancient Jews believed that all the adversity they suffered as a people and individually was a punishment for sin.
 - They often praised God for his mercy in not punishing them as much as they deserved.
- Common complaint today: “What did I ever do to deserve this?”
- In classical Hinduism, the doctrine of reincarnation allows a belief in perfect justice on earth:
 - There is no innocent suffering.
 - Everyone’s place in life is a result of their deeds in a previous life.
 - All those who are poor, in lesser castes, or born as animals or less, deserve their fate.

Innocent Suffering

Job and Innocent Suffering

- The book of Job attempts to break the Jewish tradition of its day. It insists that sometimes people suffer innocently.
- Job's orthodox friends continually appeal to Job to confess his wrongdoing – which they are certain is the cause of his loss and suffering – and to rely on God's forgiveness.
- Job, with vehemence, anger, frustration, and firmness resists them. He insists that he is innocent.

Innocent Suffering

Job and Innocent Suffering

- Job is finally able to transcend his own suffering and recognize that the Creator is worthy of his worship (= to ascribe worth) despite Job's own condition and his inability to account for his suffering.
- Job also becomes convinced that God is just and will ultimately vindicate him from all charges of sin:
 - **“I know that my Redeemer [or Vindicator] lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another”** (Job 19:25).

Innocent Suffering

Jesus and Innocent Suffering

- Jesus also firmly repudiates the view that all suffering is a just punishment.
- In the **Parable of The Man Born Blind** (John 9:2-3), the disciples ask, “**Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?**”
- Jesus answers, “**Neither this man nor his parents sinned**”
 - His blindness had nothing to do with punishment.

Innocent Suffering

Jesus and Innocent Suffering

- In Luke 13:4, Jesus refers to the death of 18 people on whom the tower of Siloam fell and bluntly asks **“Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you.”**

Innocent Suffering

Jesus and Innocent Suffering

- In the **Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus** (Luke 16:19-31), Jesus firmly repudiates the view that all suffering is a just punishment and that prosperity is a mark of righteousness.
 - The fact that the rich man enjoys all the goods and comforts of this life does *not* mean he is righteous.
 - The fact that Lazarus knows nothing but abject poverty does *not* mean that Lazarus is unrighteous.

Innocent Suffering

Jesus on God's Justice

- Jesus furthermore challenges common views about justice in the **Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard** (Matthew 20:1-16)
- The Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus says, is like a landowner who hires laborers for his vineyard throughout the day.
- At the end of the day, the landowner gives all of his laborers a full days wage.

Innocent Suffering

Jesus on God's Justice

- Our first reaction to this parable tends to be sympathy with the people who work all day.
 - Either they should receive more, or those who have worked less should be paid less.
- Simon Weil: the reason they are paid the same is because the landowner does not have any small change.
 - *That is:* God gives Godself to everyone who hears his call and responds, for that is all that God has to give.
- God's justice is actually an act of overwhelming generosity, giving us communion with Godself.

A photograph of a person walking away from the camera in a field of tall grass. The person is wearing a dark, sleeveless top and dark pants. The background is a bright, hazy sky. In the foreground, there are several dandelion stalks with their heads. The text "Justice and Belief in the Life To Come" is overlaid in a bold, purple font.

**Justice and
Belief in the
Life To Come**

Justice and The Life To Come

Rectifying Injustice in the Life To Come

- Many great thinkers have become convinced there must be life after death because of a profound belief in and love of Justice.
- Plato (427-347 B.C.) for example believed that all injustice must surely be ultimately righted.
 - Injustice could surely not persist forever by people evading punishment for their evil through dying.
 - People who have done good could surely not go unrewarded forever (even though they are not moral in order to receive rewards).
- This conviction was the main reason Plato believed in life after death.

Justice and The Life To Come

Rectifying Injustice in the Life To Come

- A love of justice can also strengthen our own faith in the life to come, and potentially give us some relief in the face of innocent suffering.

Justice and The Life To Come

The Challenge of Loving Justice

- However, loving justice is not easy.
 - Jesus taught us: “**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled**” (Matthew 5:6)
- A simple test to determine if we truly love justice:
 - To love justice is to desire with our whole heart (to “**hunger and thirst**”) that the consequences of the wrongs *we* have done fall fully and wholly on *ourselves*, and *not* on anyone else.
- Loving justice thus puts us into a horrible situation: We both want and do not really want justice.

Justice and The Life To Come

Acceptance of God's Mercy

- This dilemma pushes us to:
 - Accept our personal failure before the standard of justice.
 - Gratefully accept and receive God's mercy.
- If we:
 - try to hunger and thirst for justice (= for righteousness), and
 - accept the blessedness of God's mercy,
- then the claim of life after death can give us some relief in the face of innocent suffering.

A photograph of a person standing in a field of tall grass, holding a dandelion seed head. The person is out of focus, and the background is a bright, hazy sky. The text 'Almighty versus Omnipotent God' is overlaid in a bold, purple font.

**Almighty
versus
Omnipotent
God**

Almighty Versus Omnipotent

We Believe in an Almighty God

- Christians do not believe God is **Omnipotent**.
- Christians believe God is **Almighty**:
 - The Apostles' Creed: "I believe in God the Father, **Almighty**, maker of heaven and earth,"
 - The Nicene Creed: "We believe in one God, the Father, the **Almighty**, maker of heaven and earth, and of all that is, seen and unseen."
- **Almighty**: to have authority over all things.
- **Omnipotent**: to be able to do all things.

Almighty Versus Omnipotent

We Believe in an Almighty God

- “**Omnipotence**” which means “can do all things,” is a philosophically indefensible concept, and leads to all sorts of needless contradictions and absurdities:
 - Can God can contradict his own will?
 - Can God change the past?
 - Can God make a circle with four sides?
- God has authority over everything (= **Almighty**), but God cannot do everything.

A photograph of a person walking through a field of tall grass and dandelions. The person is out of focus, wearing a dark shirt. The background is a bright, hazy sky. The text "The Free Will Defense" is overlaid in a large, bold, purple font.

The Free Will Defense

The Free Will Defense

The Evil Done By Others

- One understandable cause of evil and suffering is the gift of “free will” God has given to human beings.
- In allowing human beings to have the freedom to choose to do evil, God must also allow the possibility of human suffering, including innocent suffering, because of evil human actions.
 - God cannot do everything. God cannot give everyone free will and at the same time guarantee no one shall will to do evil.
- The alternative of making people without freedom to choose would be to create robots, not human beings.

A photograph of a person walking through a field of tall grass and dandelions. The person is in the background, slightly out of focus, wearing a dark dress. The foreground is filled with green grass and several dandelion heads on thin stems. The overall lighting is bright and warm, suggesting a sunny day. The text 'The Problem of Natural Evil' is overlaid in a large, bold, purple font across the center of the image.

The Problem of Natural Evil

Natural Evil

Natural Evil and a Good Creator?

- The free-will defense does not help with the fact that a great deal of human suffering comes from the operations of the natural world, from diseases and natural catastrophes, from **“natural evil.”**
- Is **“natural evil”** compatible with the goodness of God in creating a habitable universe?
 - Wouldn't a good God have created a more felicitous order in the natural world, so that there was no, or at least not so much suffering from natural evil?

Natural Evil

Lessons from the Stoics

- In wrestling with such questions, Allen suggests we may find the teachings of Stoic philosophers helpful (he quotes extensively from the Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus, 55 to 135 A.D.)
- The goodness of the cosmos is not that everything goes according to our will, with each of our desires catered for.
- Appreciation of the goodness of the cosmos requires a comprehensive view of the entire order of the universe.
- In that order we are but one item among many in a vast interconnected whole.

Natural Evil

Lessons from the Stoics

- In this interconnected universe, we are material beings, formed of the clay of the earth, vulnerable to injury, illness, decay, and death.
- To realize this is to realize our status, our place – to realize what we are. It is to come to terms with a hard fact.
 - It is to melt our egotistic illusion that we are of ourselves immensely significant in the grand scheme of the material universe.

Natural Evil

Lessons from the Stoics

- But when we humbly accept our status as transient pieces of matter in a vast interconnected material universe, we paradoxically transcend being merely a piece of matter.
- Any degree of humility means that we have performed an action that a piece of nonliving matter or nonhuman living matter does not perform – and thus we prove ourselves to also be spiritual beings.

Natural Evil

A More Felicitous World?

- The question of whether God could have created a more felicitous order in the natural world, so that there is less suffering from natural evil, is impossible to resolve:
- Things in the world are so connected that we do not know what consequences the alteration of any one factor might have for the rest of the universe.

Natural Evil

Experiencing God's Love Amid Suffering

- When as Christians:
 - we have accepted our humble role as material beings in a vast interconnected creation, and
 - we are suffering,
- we can also say – as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane – “Yes, Father” and experience God’s love in the midst of our suffering.

Natural Evil

Experiencing God's Love Amid Suffering

- The French philosopher and Christian mystic Simone Weil (1909-1943), suffering from severe headaches, wrote of such an experience:
 - **Christ himself came down and took possession of me.... I had never foreseen the possibility of that, of real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God.... Moreover, in this sudden possession of me by Christ, neither my senses nor my imagination had any part; I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love.**

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Extreme Human Cruelty

Extreme Human Cruelty

The Shoah, The Catastrophe

- In the *Shoah* = the Catastrophe (1939 – 1945) about six million Jews and five million others were exterminated by the Nazis and their sympathizers.
- The *Shoah* of World War II, the genocide of Armenian people in 1915-16 (plus some in 1922-23) in Turkey, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda — can all be attributed to willful human action, to extreme human cruelty.

Extreme Human Cruelty

Redeeming the World from Evil

- As Christians, we believe:
 - God seeks to redeem us from evil.
 - We are called to bring the Kingdom of God to creation, and must thus strive to participate in redeeming the world from evil.
- How can we as Christians act redemptively in the face of something like the *Shoah*, the Catastrophe?

Extreme Human Cruelty

Concept of a “Total Event”

- The Concept of a “Total Event:”**
 - The suffering inflicted on a person is not a complete event.
 - A **complete or total event** includes a person's response to the suffering, and the response of other people.
- For example:
 - A person who responds to torture with fear, self-pity, and hatred, and in no other way, makes the total event worse.
 - A creative response to the torture can bring a redemptive element into existence.
- Since the response is part of the total event, it affects the meaning and significance of the event.

** concept from: Iulia de Beausobre, “Creative Suffering”

Extreme Human Cruelty

The “Total Event” of The *Shoah*

- The *Shoah*, the Catastrophe, then, is not just an event of 1939 to 1945, an event over and done with. It includes people’s responses to that event.
- How we react to it even now affects the meaning and significance of the event.
- If our response today is one of utter indifference, then the significance and meaning of the death of the victims differs from what it would be if our response is:
 - Reconciliation with present-day Jews;
 - Recognizing in ourselves the seeds of the kind of hatred and evil that did such things.

Extreme Human Cruelty

The “Total Event” of The Shoah

- In New York Times, February 12, 1980, under the headline, “*Three Nazis Convicted of Abetting Murder of 50,000 Jews.*”:
 - We read of Ida Greenspan, sent to Auschwitz at the age of fourteen in one of the boxcars that the defendants supervised, who attended the trial.
 - She said to a reporter afterward that she thought the sentences (six to twelve years) reasonable. In addition, she is quoted as saying:
 - **The three of them lived easy lives until now, and the sentences don't really mean much. Perhaps reliving all of this was harder for a person like me than for them. If I did hate them, that would mean in a way that their inhumanity had won.**



Next Time (April 3):
April 3: The Divine
Sacrifices.

Topics: The Sacrifice in Creation. Incarnation as Sacrifice. The Temptations in the Wilderness. The Sacrifice of the Cross.