



Preface

Tom: The day was perfect. Everything at church was going well; we were enjoying a rare absence of challenges. Rarer still, when I got home, all was at peace in my house full of kids. Rarest of all, for a February day in Baltimore, the sun was shining and the temperature had reached 65 degrees. So, the only thing on my mind was getting out in the fresh air as soon as possible and going for a run.

Once home, I quickly changed clothes. Then I grabbed my phone and put in my earbuds so I could listen to music. I have two playlists—one sacred, which contains current Christian music; the other secular, with rock and classic rock from Van Halen, Led Zeppelin, and U2. I don't remember which list I chose, but I know I turned the volume all the way up. I was excited for the run.

At the front door, my two-year-old daughter Lydia waved and blew me a kiss. Lydia's a charmer, and she gets me every time. I slowed down just long enough to pat her on the head and then took off across the front yard and down the street.

The run was everything I wanted it to be. Some days you run, and it's all work. Other times you run,

and it's pure joy. This run was pure joy, and I was feeling good about life. Until I got back home.

My wife, Mia, was standing at the door with a look of what I can only describe as utter horror. "What's wrong?" I asked. "Lydia," she barely managed to say. "What's happened?" "I don't know. We're not sure. A couple was driving down Old Harford Road and Lydia was in the middle of the street. They stopped and rescued her, learned from neighbors where she lives, and brought her back."

Old Harford is about fifty yards from my house. It is a very busy thoroughfare, especially at that time of day, when drivers seem more than usually willing to ignore the speed limit.

Mia continued through her tears, "Apparently Lydia wanted to run with you and followed you down the street, but when she got to the intersection, she became confused and disoriented." Neither of us said what we couldn't stop thinking: Lydia could have been killed. We had nearly lost our precious daughter.

I was shaken by what had happened. It took some soul searching to try to fill in the details and put the story together. Eventually I began to realize that my irresponsibility and self-absorption had nearly led to my daughter's death. I was so focused on getting outside and going for a run that I just took off, completely unmindful of her. Music blasting in my ears ensured I did not hear

her calls to join me. I guess I thought she would stay at the house. I suppose I assumed the other kids were watching her. But truth be told, I wasn't really thinking about anything but myself.

I experienced a mix of two conflicting emotions: enormous gratitude that God had spared my daughter and crushing guilt at the thought of a terrible tragedy. Later that night came a third emotion—confusion. God had spared my child. There was no doubt in my mind that he had protected her, but then I couldn't help but think of Tom and Pam.

Tom and Pam are two of the most generous people we know. They are generous in every sense of the word—with their time, their money, their spirit. They are generous listeners and wonderful hosts. They are especially generous in their service to the Church. Tom and Pam had lost their beloved son Christopher, in a car accident in his junior year in high school, at the hands of a drunk driver. We couldn't help but think that if God could have spared them the tragedy of losing their son, why didn't he?

At the time, we were working on a message series in our parish ("message series" are our weekend homilies organized around a single theme over the course of several weeks). And while we were grateful that God had protected Lydia, we realized we couldn't make sense of why God hadn't spared Christopher. Why did Tom and Pam have to suffer an unthinkable loss? It seemed completely random,

and our faith isn't in a random God. The scriptures describe a God of order. And yet God's choices and decisions don't always make sense to us.

If you are a Christian, you may be very quick to defend God when terrible things happen to good people. You may feel the need to speak up for God in a secular culture that dismisses him easily. Or perhaps, as a believer, you gloss over this kind of criticism of God. It is easier not to think about such things. It is more convenient sometimes just to accept circumstances as you find them and events as they unfold. You want to move on with life "in faith": going to work, paying the bills, taking care of the kids, or whatever else fills your time. If so, this is a book for you because it will challenge you in terms of what you think you believe about God and how you respond when life doesn't make much sense.

If you are not a Christian or have stopped believing in Christianity, we are so glad you picked up this book—or accepted it from a friend—and actually cracked it open. Maybe you walked away from faith *precisely because* God didn't make sense to you; he seemed to be absent when *life* wasn't making much sense. You were told that you just had to have faith. And since you *didn't* have faith, you thought the only honest thing to do was to walk away. This is a book for you because it will speak exactly to those experiences.

Or maybe you are angry with God. It's true, you're mad at him. You were told or at least have heard that if you honored God, followed the commandments, and stayed out of trouble, you would be blessed with a good life. Nothing bad

would ever happen to you or your loved ones. You kept the rules. You did everything the Church asked you to do; you did stay out of trouble, and then something bad happened anyway. God didn't hold up his end of the bargain, and you are angry with him for that. You feel cheated. This is a book for you too, because we know how you feel.

Perhaps you have never been introduced to God and what Christianity says about him. This is your first real chance to hear anything about God, and someone gave you this book as an introduction. This is definitely a book for you because it is a great place to start.

We do not pretend to have all the answers about God. No one does. If we did, then God would not be God. That said, we do hope to make a little more sense of him in the pages that follow. When questions and confusion, frustration and anger arise about where God is and what he's doing, we have nothing to fear. We don't have to run from those thoughts and emotions. We can lean into them. God is big enough to handle all that.

We're just two guys working in a parish in north Baltimore, a parish like many other parishes, with people like any other people. What follows are some of our stories and their stories and what we've learned about how God works in our lives and remains ever faithful to us. These stories speak to us, and we think they will speak to you too.

We invite you to read on as we try to make sense of what God is up to when life doesn't make sense and God seems to be missing.



Introduction

IT MAKES SENSE THAT GOD DOESN'T MAKE SENSE

For as the heavens are higher than the earth
so are my ways higher than your ways,
my thoughts higher than your thoughts.

—Isaiah 55:9

A god small enough to be understood is not
big enough to be worshipped.

—Evelyn Underhill

Father Michael: Connor was probably the most delightful, positive student we ever had in our high school youth ministry program. While many students drop out after Confirmation, Connor not

only remained a part of the program but he also became a student leader. And because of his gifts of personality, his peers flocked to our Sunday evening program. He was also a gifted artist and brought his skill to bear in some very interesting and original worship presentations here at church. Not incidentally, he was easily one of the best sacristans we've ever had, eventually rising to head sacristan, a position he held even after he began attending college locally.

In his sophomore year of college, we were experiencing some staff transitions, and I found myself shorthanded. Connor stepped up to the challenge and became a most helpful part-time assistant when not attending class. One Friday, about three weeks before Christmas, obviously a busy time of year, I had several commitments that took me rather far afield and late into the evening. Anticipating that this would be taxing, Connor volunteered to accompany me. After the last engagement, it was incredibly helpful that he could take the wheel for the drive home, during which, and much to my surprise, he really opened up about many things that were on his heart: his love for his family, his struggles with his faith despite his commitment to our parish, and his uncertainty about the future.

I would not soon forget the conversation, because just days later, Connor died, almost instantly, of an aneurysm.

Let's be honest. God often doesn't make sense. If you are not a religious person, this may be precisely why you don't go to church, believe the Bible, or even accept the reality of God. There are too many commandments that seem inconsistent; too much Church history that is indefensible; way too much going on in the world to reconcile with an all-loving God. Even if you are a follower of Jesus, it can be difficult to understand.

If you find yourself struggling at times with the question of God, *congratulations!* You are in good company. The heroes of the Bible frequently experienced situations in which they misunderstood or completely failed to understand God.

- Abraham couldn't comprehend why God gave him a son and then asked him to give up his son. *It didn't make any sense.*
- Moses, with his speech impediment and extreme shyness, was the least likely person ever to serve as God's chosen to lead Israel out of the slavery of Egypt. *It didn't make any sense.*
- David, a mere boy, was blindsided when God anointed him king. *It didn't make any sense.*
- The apostles, the closest friends and followers of Jesus, were constantly confused by his teaching and preaching. *It didn't make any sense.*

While God not making sense is nothing new, we offer you three important principles to keep in mind as you read this book.

FIRST PRINCIPLE: IT MAKES SENSE THAT GOD DOESN'T ALWAYS MAKE SENSE.

To put it bluntly, if those of us who believe in the God of the Bible have it right, then God is *smarter* and *older* than we are and *thinks* in ways far beyond our capacity.

God is smarter than we are.

The universe is unfathomably vast in its design but also incredibly intricate in its detail. The skill (for lack of a better word) needed to create the universe is unimaginable. As scientists study its exquisite, astonishing composition and complexity, the genius of creation is more and more revealed. And despite advances in these studies, scientists still do not even know what holds matter together.

Everything that *is* argues for an intelligent force behind creation. We call this force God. And while his wisdom, knowledge, and understanding are complete and comprehensive, ours is not.

Father Michael: A few years ago we decided we needed to build a new church, as we had outgrown our existing sanctuary. I approached this project with excitement and enthusiasm, but little understanding of its complexity. The design phase was of great interest to me, and I followed it closely. But when it came to the engineering, electrical, mechanical, and all the other trades, I was lost. I eventually stopped going to the meetings, sending representatives instead, because I couldn't even follow the conversation. I knew what

I wanted the building to look like, but that's about all I knew.

If this sort of experience is so consistently and completely true in our interactions and conversations with one another, how could we expect it to be otherwise when it comes to our experience of God?

God is older than we are, knowing all times and cultures.

To say that God is older than us implies that God had a beginning, which he did not, of course, but language limits us. God is infinite. God stands outside of time, having created it. On the other hand, we are limited and defined (in part) by time. However long our life, we live according to a limited span, seeing love and loss and everyday experiences through this tiny window. God, on the other hand, sees all of human history at once.

Tom: Michael and I were invited to Vienna to speak at a conference for Church leaders. We carved out a day before our speaking engagements to tour the city. As we visited the baroque Schönbrunn Palace, the magnificent Hofburg complex, and medieval St. Stephen's Cathedral, I found myself inspired by the history of it all. Pretty much everything I knew about Austria I learned from *The Sound of Music*, which of course depicts a moment in time just before the Second World War. I knew little of the Hapsburg dynasty, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or the Holy Roman Empire that

preceded it. I reflected that my sense of time is so often, in so many ways, limited.

Any view of the span of time can be instructive and even inspiring, but consider having a *complete* view, as one who stands outside of time. That is God's perspective, and God's alone.

God thinks differently than we do.

At one point in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus rebukes his friend Peter, telling him, "You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do" (Mt 16:23). Peter's problem is our problem. We think as human beings think. And you might wonder, *Well, how else am I supposed to think?* However, God doesn't actually want us to think only from a human perspective but to somehow try to see life from his perspective.

St. Paul called this the "renewal" of our minds (Rom 12:2). Paul's letter to the Romans reminds us that there is false thinking in every age. Each generation holds and forms errors in thinking. Therefore, we must beware of conforming our thinking to the common wisdom of our age and instead learn to think as God thinks.

So, how do we do that? Well, that leads us to a second principle we invite you to keep in mind.

SECOND PRINCIPLE: WE CAN GROW TO KNOW GOD'S THOUGHTS AND WAYS.

A group of blind men heard that a strange animal, called an elephant, had been brought to their village, but none of them was aware of its shape or form. Out of curiosity they

said, “We must inspect and know it by touch, of which we are capable.” So, they sought out the animal and, upon finding it, reached out to touch it. The first man’s hand landed on the elephant’s trunk and he said, “It is like a snake!” For another, whose hand reached its ear, the creature seemed like a kind of fan. A third, whose hand touched its leg, was sure this new creature was shaped like a tree trunk. The last of the group felt the tusk and imagined the elephant like a spear.

Many people might argue that this parable accurately describes the historical development of the great religions of the world. Different religions can understand different aspects of God, but no one knows the whole truth; we are all just guessing. So why even try to make sense of it?

You may feel the same way about God. You are not motivated to learn more because there are so many different viewpoints. If everyone is just guessing, then why study faith or religion at all unless you are simply doing it as an academic exercise? But Christianity responds to this parable by asking a question: *What if the elephant could talk?* What if the elephant began to describe each aspect of his body to help make sense of what the blind men were touching? The elephant could explain how his trunk and his tusks function, why he has thick legs and large ears, and so on.

Christianity argues that this is exactly what has happened when it comes to God. Christianity is not merely a religion dreamed up by human beings. Christianity is a *revelation*, the story of God revealing himself to friends and followers.

In the chapters that follow, we'll take a deeper look at some of this story, but here are the basics. God the Father revealed himself first and foremost to a particular people—the Jewish people—in a specific time and place. He revealed himself to a man, Abraham, who became a father and formed a family who grew into a tribe and eventually into a great nation. Then, over many centuries, God instructed this people about himself. Through the Law and the prophets, he taught them who he is, what he values, and how he wanted them to act. In the fullness of time, God revealed himself by sending his Son into the world. Jesus came to the earth to set us straight about God by being love in action. And then Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to continue to instruct us so that we can grow in our understanding and knowledge of God.

Even so, we have only a *partial* understanding about God. First and last, coming to know God is not simply a matter for the head but also for the heart. Christians believe that God is not just a concept but a divine, eternal communion of three persons. We grow to know God's thoughts and ways through a personal relationship with the Blessed Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit.

THIRD PRINCIPLE: WE CAN'T CONFUSE GOD NOT MAKING SENSE WITH LIFE NOT MAKING SENSE.

Catholics pray the Our Father at every Mass. In that prayer Jesus taught us to say to God, *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. Why do we have to pray for God's will to be

done? Because a lot of the time it isn't. God's will *isn't* always done on earth as it is always done in heaven. Heaven is perfect, and God's will reigns there.

Meanwhile, back here on planet Earth, many things that happen are *not* God's will. Of course you've heard well-meaning Christians explain sad and even tragic events with the trite phrase *It's God's will*. And you may have thought, *If that's God's will, then I want nothing to do with God*. We don't blame you. We agree with you. We wouldn't want to follow that God either.

But here's the truth we hold. God doesn't want injustice or poverty, violence or terrorism, disease or pandemics, hunger or homelessness. God doesn't *want* any of these things, but he *allows* them. Why?

Some theologians explain it this way: There is God's *preferred will* and his *permissive will*. God's preferred will is what he wants to happen, how he desires people to act. And yet God has given human beings freedom to act in a way that is contrary to what he wants. He gives us free will because only by using free will can we truly grow and actually learn to love.

Tom: If you are a parent, you understand this well. You have a preferred will for your kids. You want them to act with kindness toward their siblings, take responsibility for their hygiene, do their schoolwork, and finish their chores. But often what I want is *not* what happens in my household, and I know that always demanding compliance is not a good long-term strategy for successful parenting.