

19th Sunday after Pentecost (Yr. B)

“When Bad Things Happen to Good People” - Job 1:1, 2:1-10

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Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book some years ago called “When Bad Things Happen to Good People”. He wrote it after the death of his son Aaron who was diagnosed at age 3 with a rare disease from which they were told he would die in his early teens, which did happen. Writing the book for Rabbi Kushner was his way of trying to make some sense of the unfairness of life. Not a single day passes on this earth without someone, somewhere asking one of those tough, hard to answer questions like: “Why DO bad things happen to good people?”, and “If God is all loving and all powerful, why do suffering and evil still exist – why doesn’t God just obliterate all that misery? And for many of us one of the most challenging questions: “How do we remain faithful in the face of the reality that suffering and evil are very much part of the world, present in our lives on a daily basis?”

The OT readings for today and the next 2 weeks tell the story of Job. As we follow the story’s development today and in the coming weeks, we will be invited and encouraged to wrestle a bit with those weighty, perplexing questions which can lead even the most faithful person to experience a faith crisis. While we will see that Job does not ask “Why?” he has suffered calamity, it is the most natural and instinctive response to ask “Why?” when pain and suffering befalls us or someone we love. Usually, people are not really looking for a direct answer to that question, at least not initially. It often comes in a period of adversity, when someone is in a state of intense disbelief, disorientation or despair. What we most want at that point, is to know that someone will be with us and stay with us, to help us keep our heads above the waves of chaos, confusion, disbelief and pain. We hope for someone to help steady us and let us know that life has not become completely unmoored from all that is secure.

Today we enter into Part I of this story, where we are introduced to Job. We could call this first part “The Grand Reversal”. Next week we will hear the second part focused on “The Power of Protest”. 10/18 will be the third and final portion – “Hearing God out of the Whirlwind”. As we immerse ourselves in this story of Job and his undeserved suffering, hopefully we will find the faith and courage to engage with God in a deeper way, and to engage with others who are suffering and facing adversity in a more sensitively compassionate way. We begin now, on a journey of faith seeking understanding.

Old Testament scholar Karla Suomala in her commentary introduces the story of Job like this:

“The book of Job tells a very un-American story. Our national myths favor rags-to-riches, underdog-to-victor, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps storylines. But Job does not fall into any of these categories. In fact, his is a billionaire-to-beggar, top dog- to-underdog kind of story. What happens to Job is our worst nightmare. He is a good person who does all the right things and ends up losing everything – his family, friends, home, possessions, and even his health. It takes just 35 verses to catapult Job from his perfect life to an ash heap, covered in oozing sores. His wife has told him to give up on God and die. He sits, completely alone.

All of this drama has been set in motion by God and the Accuser (“*ha Satan*” in Hebrew) making a bet on whether Job will remain faithful through this great reversal of his fortune, which now includes the loss of his health. God wins this bet – Job doesn’t turn away or curse God. But the story isn’t as straightforward as that. What follows are 39 chapters of poetry in which Job curses not God but the day he was born, attempts to take God to task, demands a hearing with God, and suffers through the speeches of his so-called friends who try to convince him that he’s done something wrong. Eventually God weighs in – but with dozens of questions, rather than answers. Finally, there is no happy ending, at least one that would appeal to most of us. In chapter 42 the original

story concludes with Job still in dust and ashes but with a new understanding of God. The ancients didn't like that ending much either, so later interpreters created a more palatable ending where Job is restored to his former status and position, with even more wealth, and a brand new family." [*Working Preacher*, 2012].

This is a good place to pause for a moment and consider a few important things about this story. First off, it is a story, a parable. It is part of the wisdom literature of Israel, and has no basis in historical fact. It does present the listener with some pretty tough theological questions begging to be answered. The storyteller wants to make some sense of calamity and undeserved suffering. What DO you do when the rules, the comfortable and orderly system of "reward for good behavior and punishment for bad behavior" doesn't work any longer, when those rules don't fit with your lived experience? How do we respond when bad things happen to good people? Whether it comes as a result of crime, disease, war or natural disaster – as human beings we long for the security which comes from finding reasonable explanations and causes for why things happen as they do. It helps us to feel in control. If suffering has to be part of life, we want it at least to have some meaning. As we will see later on in the dialogue between Job and his friends, even well-meaning people can be quick to rush in with advice, "answers", flimsy and faulty explanations to explain why bad things happen. But life is more complex than our scientific and rationalistic approaches can explain. There are things beyond our knowing.

Preaching professor Tom Long at the Candler School of Theology shares the experience of one of his former students. "She had graduated and become the pastor of her first congregation. She made it her goal to visit all the members of her small church within the first six months there. At the end of six months, she had almost done it. She had visited everybody but one family. This family had not attended church in a couple of years, and the new pastor was advised by one of the church leaders, 'Leave them alone. They aren't coming back'.

But she'd set a goal for herself, and one afternoon she drove to the family's home and knocked on the door. Only the wife was at home, and when the pastor introduced herself, the woman invited her in for a cup of coffee. They sat at the kitchen table and chatted. They chatted about this, they chatted about that, and then they talked about *IT*. Two years before, the wife had been vacuuming in the back bedroom while her infant son played in the den. She hadn't checked on him in a while, so she turned off the vacuum cleaner and went into the den. He wasn't there. She traced her son's probable path across the den, through the open patio door, across the patio to the swimming pool, where she found him.

"Our friends at church were very kind," she said. "They told us it was God's will." The young minister put her coffee cup down on the table. Should she touch this or not? She decided to touch it.

"I think your friends at church meant well, but they were wrong. It wasn't God's will. God doesn't will the death of children."

Surprisingly, the mother's jaw clenched, her face reddened, and she said in anger, "Well then, who do you blame? Are you blaming me? Are you blaming me for this? Is that what you're saying?"

"No, no – I'm not blaming you," the pastor responded, now on the defensive. "I'm not blaming you, but I'm not blaming God either. God was as grief-stricken by your son's death as you are." But the woman's face remained frozen in rage, and it was clear that this conversation was over.

Returning to the church, the young minister kicked herself. "I shouldn't have touched it," she said to herself. "I should have left well enough alone." But when she got back to her office, there was a message waiting from the wife on the answering machine. "I don't know where this is going," the trembling recorded voice said, "but my husband and I want you to come out and talk to us about this. For two years we've thought God was angry at us, but now we wonder if it's not the other way around."

“It is not gospel either to pretend that evil is not evil but only good in disguise, or to see the hand of God causing evil for some ulterior purposes”. [Thomas Long, *“What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith”*, 2014].

We will encounter people who think this way, who look for simple straightforward explanations, wanting so desperately to find a way to make sense of suffering, tragedy and evil, to contain it somehow. It bears repeating: God does not send sickness, calamity, natural disasters, or incite people to commit evil acts to test our faith. Suffering and adversity do challenge us and form us, but God does not send these things on purpose to “shape up” our souls. The reality is that there are forces in the world that are evil and actively oppose God and God’s redeeming, healing way of nonviolent love.

In the opening of the story, Job does not speak out or blame God for the bad things that happened, even though his wife tells him that is what he should do. Job’s response reminds us that while life never offers any guarantees of security, there CAN still be certainty of God’s faithfulness. Job remains committed to being faithful and trusting God, though it remains a mystery why he has suffered such loss. The good news in the midst of Job’s adversity is that though all his security is gone, God’s love remains, and that is enough.

For us too, God’s love remains, and it is enough. Every time we receive the Eucharist we are reminded of and strengthened by God’s faithfulness to us, no matter what we are facing in life, or what our world is challenged by at the moment. Jesus went to the mat for us and for the whole world, enduring pain and suffering, facing down evil and death.

The risen Christ is our ultimate source of sure and certain hope that evil, suffering and sin will one day be completely eradicated. The empty tomb gives witness that their power has already been defeated. In the fullness of time, and in the fullness of God’s

kingdom coming, there will one day be no more school shootings. No more homeless refugees. No more hatred and racist acts. No more suicide or mental illness. No more domestic violence, war, and ravaging diseases. No more rich and poor. No more groaning of the earth from abuse and misuse. Pain and suffering will be a thing of the past. That new world is even now being born, and we are in the midst of experiencing the birth pangs of new life.

In his letter to the church at Rome, the apostle Paul describes the certainty we have of God's faithfulness while God's kingdom is coming: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The love of God will hold us and sustain us through anything and everything in life, come hell or high water. And it will be enough. Amen.