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First Presbyterian Church
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Job 23:1-9, 16-17
Job 38: 1-7

“Calling and Healing”

Back in August when I was doing my sermon series on rescuing the Bible from fundamentalism, we covered the topic of why bad things happen to good people. I had originally planned on using the book of Job to tackle that subject. But at the last minute I pivoted away from it, because I decided the question as to why bad things happen to good people isn't the central question of the Book of Job because the book of Job doesn't answer that question. In fact, for most of the book there is just endless speculation and chatter by Job's friends about why he's enduring such unexplainable suffering. Job's friends pontificate on a subject for which they've received no theological training, show little humility, and display no knowledge. They are like our Facebook friends who expound on a subject they know little about but believe they do. *You know we all have those Facebook friends!* Job's friends are like that; they take shots in the dark about what's going on and why, and assume and assert more than they should.

The truth is, the book of Job never answers the age-old question as to why bad things happen to good people. In the piece you heard Carrie read, Job pleads with God to show up and answer his question about why he's suffering. But God not only leaves Job's questions unanswered, God doesn't even acknowledge that Job has suffered.

This is why I have come to the conclusion that the real question of Job is not why do bad things happen to good people, but why have faith when they do? I mean, what is the point in believing in God if we're just going to suffer needlessly?

Believing in God, and believing that God protects people who need protection, (I think) go hand-in-hand. Anyone nurtured in the Bible hopefully believes in a God of justice, not of indifference. In Exodus, God

says, "I have heard the cry of my people, I know their sufferings, and I've come down to deliver them." The prophet Amos portrays God as roaring in anger at war crimes, social abuses, and the lawlessness of nations. The psalmist calls God a "lover of justice." Taking the Bible seriously means taking God seriously about establishing and preserving justice.

But then along comes Job who makes us wonder what the whole point is.

Russell Baker, in his book Growing Up, tells about learning of his father's death. It was the beginning of his wondering what the whole point is. He writes this about his experience:

"Your father's dead," my cousin Kenneth said.

It was like an accusation that my father had done something criminal and I came to my father's defense.

"He is not," I said.

But of course they didn't know the situation. I started to explain. He was sick. In the hospital. My mother was bringing him home right now. . .

"He's dead," Kenneth said.

His assurance slid like an icicle into my heart.

"He is not either!" I shouted.

"He is too," Ruth Lee said. "They want you to come home right away."

I started running up the road screaming, "He is not!" It was a weak argument. They had the evidence as I hurried home crying, "He is not. . .he is not. . .he is not. . ." I was almost certain before I got there that he was.

And I was right. When I came running home, my mother was still not back from the hospital, but the women had descended on our house, as they did in such times, and were already busy with the housecleaning and cooking that were Morrisonville's ritual response to death. With a thousand tasks to do, they had no time to handle a howling 5 year-old. I was sent to Bessie Scott's house. Poor Bessie Scott. All afternoon she listened patiently as a saint while I sat in her kitchen and cried myself out. For the first time I thought seriously about God. Between sobs I told Bessie that if God could do things like this to people, then God was hateful and I had no more use for Him.

Bessie told me about the peace of Heaven and the joy of being among the angels and the happiness of my father who was already there. This argument failed to quiet my rage. "God loves us just like His own children," Bessie said. "If God loves me why did he make my father die?"

*Bessie said I would understand someday, but she was only partly right. That afternoon, though I couldn't have phrased it this way then, I decided that God was a lot less interested in people than anybody in Morrisonville was willing to admit. That day I decided that God was not entirely to be trusted. After that I never cried again with any real conviction, nor expected much of anyone's God except indifference. (Russell Baker, *Growing Up*, pp.61-62)*

Baker stopped asking questions and grew indifferent because he believed in an indifferent God. But Job kept at it, kept questioning, kept longing for there to be answers, for there to be a reason beyond God's apparent indifference. Kept expecting some rationale for his afflictions, kept expecting God to prove his friends right or wrong. For 37 chapters out of a 42 chapter book, Job is relentless and holds firm to the belief that God is not indifferent, that indeed God cares enough to answer his questions about why he's suffering.

And finally, in chapter 38, God shows up.

God answered Job from the eye of a violent storm. God said:

"Why do you confuse the issue? Why do you talk without knowing what you're talking about? Pull yourself together, Job! Up on your feet! Stand tall! I have some questions for you, and I want some straight answers. Where were you when I created the earth? Tell me, since you know so much! Who decided on its size? Certainly you'll know that! Who came up with the blueprints and measurements?

How was its foundation poured, and who set the cornerstone, while the morning stars sang in chorus and all the angels shouted praise? And who took charge of the ocean when it gushed forth like a baby from the womb? That was me! I wrapped it in soft clouds, and tucked it in safely at night. Then I made a playpen for it, a strong playpen so it couldn't run loose, and I said, "Stay here, this is your place. Your wild tantrums are confined to this place.

Who do you think gave weather-wisdom to the ibis, and storm-savvy to the rooster? Does anyone know enough to number all the clouds or tip over the rain barrels of heaven when the earth is cracked and dry, the ground baked hard as brick?

Can you teach the lioness to stalk her prey and satisfy the appetite of her cubs as they crouch in their den, waiting hungrily in their cave? And who sets out food for the ravens when their young cry to God, fluttering about because they have no food?"

(Job 38: 1-7, 34-41, "The Message")

That's how God responds to Job's questions; with demanding questions of God's own. At first read, this seems cruel of God. For thirty-seven chapters, we have waited for this moment. For thirty-seven chapters, we've watched Job lose nearly everything he cherishes in this world. We've witnessed his sorrow, his bewilderment, his anger, his despair. We've sat with him in the ashes and contemplated the injustices that scar our own lives. We've listened to the unhelpful blather of Job's friends, and recognized in their pious speeches some of the harmful things we ourselves believe about suffering. We've longed, like Job, for clarity. For answers. For vindication. For far too long, we've pleaded with God just as Job has, daring God to break God's silence and show up.

And after all that, God shows up and God's barrage comes rolling down like floodwaters.

I don't know about you, but I don't think God's words from the whirlwind would make me feel any closer to God. But God takes Job seriously enough to show up. And you gotta give credit to God for that. In our disappointment that we haven't gotten the answers we desperately want, we tend to forget that when God has so many things to do with God's time which may be far more important than a conversation with little old Job, God shows up. That in the grandeur of the cosmos, Job matters enough to God for God to show up and argue with him.

And this says something about God. Something very important. It tells us that not only does God care enough about us to show up, but that God

takes us seriously enough to allow us to question, doubt, and challenge God. And that we matter enough in the cosmic scheme of things to be confronted with hard truths and not just easy answers.

Now, do we want to hear a more comforting response to Job's questions than what God provides? Of course we do! But let's pretend that God did come and answer all of Job's questions about why he's suffering, and confirmed that yes, Job, you're suffering because you did do something wrong. Yes, you did something bad and now you're suffering the consequences of it. You did something so horrible that your children are dead and your life is in ruins. What if God did show up and give Job the answers he so desperately wanted and his friends so fervently believed?

Is this the God you want to believe in?

Look, I know it's easy to believe in an if-then universe, where if we do this then we'll be rewarded and if we do that then we'll face consequences, but is the ease worth the God we get in return? The all-controlling, all-knowing God?

I think I prefer a God who is more vulnerable than that; who doesn't punish my children because of the sins I've committed. I think I prefer a God who weeps when the innocent suffer. I think I prefer to sit with my unanswered questions, rather than get easy answers (if this is the God I get in return), and trust that God has answers even when I don't understand them.

Maybe what the book of Job is trying to do is to turn us toward a new image of God, where God is vulnerable and does understand our suffering. If we go back and re-read God's outburst from the whirlwind as if God is vulnerable, we see a completely different picture of God. An indifferent God would never wrap the earth in clouds or tuck it safely in bed at night. Uncaring parents don't do that, do they? An uncaring God would never bring rain to soak a dry and cracked earth. An uncaring God would never build a playpen for the ocean. After all, playpens were made to contain a child so he or she can't harm themselves. Why would an uncaring God care if a child is hurt?

Friends, God's questions from the whirlwind may not be what we want or expect, but they're what we need. Because God affirms that when bad things happen to good people like us, not only did we not bring this upon ourselves, but also that God is present throughout it all in ways we cannot understand.

Why have faith when bad things happen? Indeed, how can we not have faith when bad things happen? When the world is spinning out of control, perhaps our only comfort, *our only comfort*, is to hold fast to a faith that assures us that issues we face often aren't the result of what we've done or not done, but throughout it all God has a grasp on this world that is beyond our ability to comprehend – and God holds it, orders it, protects it, and cherishes it. And us.

Amen.

Sources:

Christian Century Magazine, "Living By the Word", Commentary on Job 38, September 21, 2021

Journey with Jesus, "The Unknowable", commentary on Job 38, October 10, 2021