

The Question of Suffering
Job 1:1, 2:1 – 10; Hebrews 1:1 – 4, 2:5 – 12
Sunday, October 7, 2018

Over the course of this next month, the lectionary has us looking at the book of Job. A lot of us, if we are familiar with Job, think of this as the book that addresses the question of suffering. It starts out telling us that there was once a man named Job who was blameless and upright; he feared God and turned away from evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, thousands of sheep and camels and oxen and donkeys, and many servants. He was the greatest of all the people of the east. He was *righteous*, and he was *blessed*.

But then one day, God and Satan are having a conversation, and God says to Satan, “Have you seen my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth. He is blameless and upright and fears God and turns away from evil.” And Satan says, “Well, yeah, because you take care of him. What if you *didn't*? What if he lost his home and his livestock and his servants and his family? Would he *still* love you? Or does he only fear you because of what you *do* for him?” And God says, “Let’s find out. Do whatever you want to him. Just don’t kill him.” And so Job loses his livestock and his servants and his home and his children. It is all taken from him.

It's helpful to understand that most biblical scholars do not view the book of Job as an historical account of something that actually happened to a real person. This is a story that is being told in the form of a poem to help the people of Israel understand their *own* suffering. It is thought to have been written around the 6th century B.C., at a time when the people of Israel had been invaded by foreign armies and sent away to live in foreign lands. Like Job, they have lost their homes and their livestock and their families. This story is being told as a way of making sense out of what has happened to them; they are processing their suffering.

We look at this story as addressing the question of *why*. *Why* do bad things happen to good people? *Why* do the righteous suffer while the evil prosper? We look at the world around us every single day and see evidence of that. Innocent people suffering through violence and war and famine; victims of injustice and oppression. People who never smoked a day in their lives getting lung cancer. *Children* getting sick or being abused. We see this every day, and we look to this story to help us understand *why*. But – *spoiler alert* here at the very beginning – the story of Job will not help you understand *why*.

There is a movie called *American History X*, in which Edward Norton plays a 20-something year old man named Derek who is a neo-Nazi. He is sent to prison for murdering two young black men, and while he is *in* prison, all of his beliefs about race begin to be challenged. At one point he is brutally assaulted by a group of other skinheads; these people who were supposed to be his *brothers*. He ends up in the infirmary, where his former high school teacher, an African-American man, comes to visit him. In the course of their conversation, he says to Derek, “There was a time when I used to blame *everything* and *everyone* for all the pain and suffering and vile things that happened to me, that I *saw* happen to my people. Blame everybody. Blame white people. Blame society. Blame God. I didn’t get any answers because I was asking the wrong questions. You have to ask the right questions.”

One of the problems with the way that we approach the book of Job is that we come to it asking the wrong question. We come to it asking *why* – *Why* do bad things happen? *Why* do the righteous suffer? – but that is *not* the question that the book of Job primarily addresses. Look at what Job does after his livestock and servants and home and children are taken from him. It says, “Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, fell on the ground *and worshipped*. He said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the

Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’ In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing.”

When the teacher says that to Derek – “You have to ask the right questions.” – Derek says, “Like what?” And the teacher says, “Has anything you’ve done made your life *better*?” It’s then that Derek begins to realize that all of the choices he has made, everything he has *done* in response to the pain and the suffering and the challenges that he has faced in life, they’ve all been wrong. All the anger and hatred and violence have only made his life worse. The question that Derek comes to understand, and the question that the book of Job addresses, is not, “Why have these bad things happened to me? Who is to *blame* for them?” The question is, “When bad things happen, how will you *respond*?”

In our reading from today, after Job has lost his livestock and servants and home and children, God says to Satan, “You see my servant Job? He *still* persists in his integrity.” Satan says, “Well, yeah, he still has his health. Take *that* away from him, and he will curse you to your face.” So it says Satan inflicted sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job’s wife says to him, “Do you *still* persist in your integrity? Curse God and die! Just give up already!” But Job says, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?”

Job responds to suffering by remaining faithful to God. The book of Job is not about *why* bad things happen. It is about how we *respond* and *remain faithful* when bad things happen. When we face suffering, will we still hold on to God?

And that’s not to say that we can’t be *angry* about the pain and suffering and injustice that we see in the world or experience in our lives. It is perfectly natural to be angry about the perceived

unfairness of what is happening. Even Job gets *angry* with God at points in this story. The *point* is, he keeps having the conversation with God. God is big enough to handle Job's anger (and ours). Where Job remains *faithful* is that, even in his anger and frustration and all his questions, he never stops directing himself to God. He never stops trying to hash it out with God. He never lets go of God throughout this whole long, complicated story. He keeps holding on to God.

And when we look at the book of Hebrews, what we see there is that God is not *immune* to our suffering. God is not some stone-faced deity that is unmoved by human pain. What Hebrews tells us is that God is *right there with us*.

It starts with the affirmation that Jesus Christ is the “reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being.” That we look at Jesus and we see God, because Jesus Christ is God. And that even though he was above all things – all things in heaven and on earth were subject to him – he didn't just stay in heaven, far removed from the pain and suffering of the world. He was made lower than the angels and crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death. That's a mouthful, but *hear that*. It says that Christ was crowned with glory and honor *because* of his suffering, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. Christ suffered. And if Jesus Christ is the exact imprint of God's very being, then in Jesus Christ, *God experienced suffering*. And so *we* trust that in *our* pain and sadness and suffering, we are not alone, that God is *with us* in that, because God has *experienced* suffering, too. Suffering is a part of the life of God. We belong to a God who can *identify* with our pain.

Hebrews refers to Jesus as “the pioneer” of our salvation. What does a pioneer do? Think of Lewis and Clark. A pioneer leads the way through difficult landscape so that others may follow. A pioneer makes a path where no path currently exists. And it says that the *way* Christ made that

path was through *suffering*; that Christ was *made perfect* through suffering. Theologian Craig Koester writes that “Christ did not escape suffering but entered fully into the situation of those who suffer. And the goal was to make a way forward through suffering in the confidence that God’s will for them was ultimately life.”¹

While we *do* experience pain and suffering and death in this life, that is not God’s *will* for us. Whatever pain and suffering and sadness you might currently be facing, that is not what God wants for you. God’s will for us, as revealed in Jesus Christ, is *healing* and *resurrection* and *life*. God’s will for us, for this world, is not *suffering* but *glory*. And the way that we reach that, according to Hebrews and Job, is by holding on to God, remaining faithful to God, even through the suffering and sadness and pain. Because when *we* face suffering, we do so with a God who understands what that is like and doesn’t give up on us, but remains faithful and takes us by the hand to lead us through that difficult terrain to something *good*.

So the question is not *why* bad things happen. It is *when* bad things happen, how will we respond? Will we remain faithful, holding on to God, even in our anger and confusion? Will we trust Christ to lead us through it? Will we take *others* by the hand and make a way for *them* through the suffering and pain that *they* are experiencing? Even if all you can do is muster the energy to stumble up to this table, dip a piece of bread into a cup and eat it, *that* is an act of faith and holding on to God, and in doing so, you will be reminded that Christ was broken and poured out *with* us and *for* us; that suffering was not the end of *his* story, and it will not be the end of *ours*.

¹ Craig Koester, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3790