**21 Pentecost**

**October 18, 2015**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

For the past few weeks we have been listening to readings from the Book of Job as our first lesson, and we will hear another reading from Job next week. This is a strange story that has three main characters: God, Satan, and Job, along with a few minor characters to move the story along. It is a story of what happens to one’s faith when all the personal trappings of wealth, status, and even family are stripped away. Instead of being judged by human terms of power and politics, Job is eventually judged by his unwavering faith in God in spite of all the woes that God has allowed Satan to throw at him.

I imagine most of you probably know this story fairly well. Job, a man of wealth, power, prestige, good health and a loving family loses everything because of a wager between Satan and God. Satan poses a profound question to God: “Does Job fear God for nothing?” That is, does Job serve God only because it is profitable for Job … that is, because God has been good to Job? To test the theory God allows Satan to strip Job of all his wealth, his means of living, his status, and even allows for all his children to be killed. When Job had lost everything … all his property, his livestock, and his family he:

*“arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. 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.” (Job 1:20-22)*

But the wager between God and Satan was not over yet.

*“Then Satan answered the LORD, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch* ***his bone and his flesh****, and he will curse you to your face." The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life." So Satan … inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes. Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." But he said to her, … Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.” (2:4-10)*

Job’s three friends then enter the picture to console Job on the one hand, and give him spiritual advice on the other. Essentially their argument is about God and God’s justice: Either God is a just God and Job did something to anger God and therefore incur God’s wrath, ***OR*** God is not a just God and therefore not worthy of worship.

During these few weeks we have heard this argument develop, and we have watched as Job’s faith is transformed from a distant piety to an intimate communion with God, despite the afflictions that were beset upon Job.

Like the Book of Esther that we read from about a month ago, the Book of Job is one of several books of the Bible that are works of fiction, yet tell a powerful truth. In the poetic language of the book, God is at work in the universe, even “to bring rain to a land where no one lives.” And God is fully aware of evil. At the same time God cares for Job so much that God reveals himself personally and shares with Job the vision of cosmic responsibilities. A God who confesses his burdens to a human being is a God who is profoundly involved in human destiny.

This is not just some esoteric tale out of the long-ago past. The story of Job surrounds us today and is lived out even in our midst. We may not have herds of cattle, and flocks of sheep, and countless servants. We may not have had the winds from the desert collapse the roof over the heads of our children and kill them all. But I think we all know something about the pain that Job felt.

Almost every time I watch the news there is one report or another that tears at my heart. I haven’t heard many stories recently of desert winds causing the collapse of a roof, but I have heard the account of the mudslides in California that have swept homes off their foundation, and reports of the flooding in South Carolina that swallowed whole houses with only their roof visible. And if we take the roof collapsing metaphorically, I imagine that the families in Roseburg, Oregon … or anywhere in this country where a senseless mass shooting has happened … feel like the roof has collapsed in their homes. If we take the argument that Job’s three friends poses to him and rephrase it as a question in today’s language it is: “Why does God let bad things happen to good people?”

Of course these stories in the news don’t include our own stories that are happening under our own roofs … illnesses in our families, painful breakups of long term relationship, deaths of loved ones, struggles with addictions, children who are out of control. The fact is that our own faith, like Job’s faith, is tested all the time. We may not experience the extreme nature of the woes of Job, but I think many of us certainly have known something of what Job was going through.

And so often … counter intuitively … those troubles actually bring us closer to God. When things are good and normal ... whatever that is … we can sit in the pews and say our prayers, but from a distance. When the calamities of the world catch up to us … a sudden serious illness, a tragic death in our family, the loss of a secure source of income … our prayers begin to have an urgency … and an intimacy … that was not there before. Even the question, “Why does God let bad things happen to good people?” … when asked by the one undergoing the trial … opens a new level of the relationship with the divine presence of God.

As most of you know my son Christopher was disabled in an auto accident over 30 years ago when he was just 12 years old. He had a traumatic brain injury and is paralyzed on his right side and uses a wheelchair. Christopher lives with his mother in rural Eastern North Carolina … his house is a few hundred yards down a dirt road from her house. He is somewhat isolated, but for the past 15 years Luke Jones, a neighbor, has visited Chris almost every weekday on his way to work as the Lead Correctional Officer at the county jail. As you can imagine, Chris considers Luke one of his best friends.

In the early hours of Tuesday morning, Luke was returning home after his shift. He rounded a bend in the road and his pickup hit a logging truck that had gotten stuck pulling onto the highway. The driver of the logging truck had shut off the truck’s lights to conserve the battery … obviously Luke did not see the obstacle in time. Luke died on the way to the hospital … his funeral was yesterday.

Christopher doesn’t have much in the way of worldly goods, but Luke’s death has shaken the foundation of the home he built for himself, and it is as if the roof has collapsed on top of him. His language impairments from his head injury make it difficult for him to speak … to express his feelings. Yet, in my conversations with him over the past few days it is obvious that he has the same questions that faced Job … the same questions that he has asked many times … “Why does God let bad things happen to good people … like Luke … and like Chris?”

So what is the answer to the question that Job’s three friends posed to him? Is God entirely just and all-powerful God … therefore Job must have done something to invite God’s wrath? Or is God capricious and therefore unworthy of our devotion and worship? The question then, and the question today, I believe, is a false dichotomy. For me, either choice is untenable, and yet I believe God can be found in the midst of just posing this profound question. Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? I do not have an answer. However, I know for a fact … from my own experience … that it is in the struggle to resolve this irresolvable paradox that one can form an intimate bond with the God of our creation.

We live in a world where people are rewarded according to their worth, and they are punished according to thier crime … that is the currency of the world’s values. The most obvious is the Almighty Dollar, but there are other currencies as well … publicity or notoriety, being first or being last, love or hate. And we see the currency of status and power at work in the question James and John asked Jesus in the reading from Mark’s gospel this morning … they wanted to be seated on each side of Jesus at the banquet table in the sky. But all the other disciples were invested in that currency as well. They got angry at James and John when the learned what they had asked of Jesus.

But back to Job. In the end Job holds fast to his innocence, even praying that there might be someone in a future generation who would tell his story to redeem his name … he just wanted it to be enduring and asked that the monument to his struggle use lead letters hammered into carved rock so that it would last at least a few generations. It is right after those verses that we hear the words from today’s lesson: God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind, asking Job “impossible” questions and drawing Job ever deeper into the mystery. One might hear these words as that of a God aloof from humanity … at times they even sound sarcastic. But the story of Job is instructive for us in our day, just as it was to the ancient Israelites. As we will hear in next week’s reading, Job has the experience of an intimate communion with God.

*Then Job answered the LORD:“ …I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.”*

Many of us have known grief and anguish similar to what Job must have felt … and the grief and anguish that my son Christopher is feeling. This is not just anguish over the losses Job experienced … and Christopher is undergoing … and many of us as well … but the angst in the questioning of God’s role in our lives and of our relationship to God.

So, again I ask the question: Is God entirely just and therefore Job must have done something wrong in some way to invite God’s wrath? Or is God capricious and therefore unworthy of our devotion and worship? Why does God let bad things happen to good people?

As I said before, I believe the question then, and the question today, is a false dichotomy. Rather, I believe that God is found in the midst of posing this profound question. Indeed, it is my experience that in the struggle to resolve this irresolvable paradox one can form an intimate bond with the God of our creation. Job could have chosen either answer his three friends posed. Instead, he chose to stay in relationship to the divine presence of his God. It is in that struggle that our faith is transformed from an understanding in mere words to an intimate encounter with the source of our Being. As Job says in the end:

*I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you;*

Today I pray for Luke Jones who died this week, and I pray for my son Christopher. I pray for all of us who are caught in that horribly difficult place of trying to make sense of these tragedies that happen in all our lives. I pray for all of us who ask the question, “Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?” … especially the good people who have bad things happen to them. And I pray that we may all find a more intimate relationship with our God … even when we don’t have answers.

Amen.