

**22 Pentecost  
October 21, 2018**

**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.**

So, why do bad things happen to good people? Why do people who seem to be compassionate, and loving, and deeply faithful end up with tragedy in their lives? Is it because they have sinned in some way and don't know it ... and God is angry with them? Could it be that God just doesn't care, or maybe is as all powerful as we believe God to be? Maybe it is because we don't pray the right words in the correct manner.

These questions have been with us since the beginning of human being's relationship with the Divine. For the last two weeks we have been hearing readings from the Book of Job as our first lesson, and we will hear two more readings from Job in the weeks ahead. 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 description of what happens to one's faith when all the personal trappings of wealth, prestige, 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. It is an ancient tale trying to answer the question "Why?" In the end it is really an account of steadfast faith in the midst of adversity, and how that leads to a deeper intimacy with the Divine.

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.

I imagine most of you know the story 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 because it is profitable ... 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 prestige, 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.

As we have heard this argument develop in the past couple of weeks, we have watched as Job's faith is transformed from a distant piety to an intimate communion with God, despite the woes that were beset upon Job. For me this is the main point of the story. It doesn't answer the question of "Why bad things happen to good people?" But it does tell us about what happens when we move beyond the question and trust God to be God.

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. And, we may not have lost all that wealth, as well as lose all our children. But I think we all know something about the pain that Job felt.

Job's children died when the desert winds blew in the walls of their abode and the roof collapsed. The roof may not have fallen on their children, but just look at the devastation in the Florida Panhandle because of Hurricane Michael. Many of the homes have no roof at all ... lots of the houses are totally gone! I don't know the people who lived in those homes, but my bet is that many of them were righteous people. They led good lives ... they went to church ... they were charitable and compassionate. Yet everything was destroyed.

Last evening we hosted Dining With Dignity on the Commons. One of the homeless men who volunteered to set up and take down had a debilitating illness that caused paralysis of his right hand ... and he was right-handed. He had had his own business. He sold off his tools, furniture, and home trying to keep afloat until he had nothing left. He came to Florida because it was too cold to live outside in the state where he came from. He lost his family, all his possessions, his home, and his livelihood. But he was a good and righteous person. He treated other fairly. He had ... and still has ... compassion for those who are worse off than he is. Yet ... in spite of all ... he is living in the woods ... trying to do the best with what he has, which is not much. And eating his one meal a day at Dining With Dignity.

The evening news tells us even more about these kind of tragic events around the world. Another tsunami in Indonesia ... a bombing of a school in Yemen ... flooding in Texas ... another earthquake in Haiti.

Of course these stories in the news don't include our own stories that are happening under our own roofs ... chronic illnesses in our families, tragic accidents, 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.

So what is the answer to the question that Job's three friends posed to him? Is God entirely just and therefore Job must have sinned in some way to incur God's wrath? Or is God capricious and unworthy of our devotion and worship? The question then, and the question today, I believe, is a false dichotomy. Either choice is untenable, and yet God can be found in the midst of posing this profound question. Indeed, it is in the struggle to resolve this irresolvable paradox that one can fuse an intimate bond with the God of our creation.

We live in a world where we are rewarded according to our value, and we are punished according to our crime. The most obvious currency 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 prestige and power at work in the question James and John ask Jesus in the reading from Mark's gospel.

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. At that moment 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 anguish similar to what Job must have felt. Not just for the many losses he experienced, but anguish in the place of questioning God's role in our lives and our relationship to God.

So, again I ask the question: Is God entirely just and therefore Job must have sinned in some way to incur God's wrath? Or is God capricious and unworthy of our devotion and worship?

As I said before, I believe the question then, and the question today, is a false dichotomy. Either choice is untenable, yet I do believe that God is found in the midst of posing this profound question. Indeed, it is in the struggle to resolve this irresolvable paradox that one can fuse an intimate bond with the God of our creation. Job could have chosen either answer. Instead he chose to stay in relationship to the divine presence of his God. It is in that struggle that Job's faith ... and 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;*

Amen.