

From the Pulpit of Knox Presbyterian Church

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Job 1:1, 2:1-10

Tuesday morning is my Monday and it begins with prayerfully discerning the direction of my preaching for the following Sunday. This week brought lots of possibilities. It being World Communion Sunday I could preach on what binds and unifies Christians around the world in the face of all that divides us. It being the Sunday we receive the Peacemaking Offering I could preach on God's hope for all relationships, communities, and nations – Shalom. Then there is the Sunday lectionary. I could preach from Hebrews where the writer packs into a few verses a wealth of images concerning Christ and there is always more to learn about our Lord and Savior. I could preach from Mark's Gospel where Jesus' directs his attention to marriage which brings up for the disciples questions about divorce. Given what's happening in Texas where the courts are struggling with a gay couple who has filed for a divorce in a state that does not permit gay marriage, that would have been an interesting sidebar for the sermon. I decided to go with Job, a book that addresses the suffering of the righteous, the innocent, the undeserving. What was I thinking? This is one, if not the most difficult of all theological questions.

One of the first books that noted author Philip Yancy wrote was titled "*Where Is God When It Hurts?*" On the night of 9-11 he emailed his publisher and proposed that a special edition of this 1977 book be published with all of the proceeds directed to a victim's fund. *Zondervan* quickly jumped on the idea and by Friday of that week had 500,000 orders, selling as many copies in twenty-four hours as they had sold in the previous twenty-four years. Such a response demonstrated that one of the most urgent questions on people's hearts in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks was "Where is God when it hurts?" It's a question that people of faith have been pondering and struggling with for centuries. If God is all-powerful and all-loving, then why is there is so much pain and suffering in the world? If God is good why is it that the good, the righteous, and the innocent suffer?

I would assume that most of you have wrestled with the problem of suffering, perhaps it has even tested your faith. I know people who have questioned their faith because of the suffering they are facing or observing in the world. I know some who have lost their faith as a result. I know others who have come to faith in the midst of great heartache and suffering. I know others who have been transformed by suffering. And then I know others who testify that without faith they would be unable to endure their anguish, their grief, their pain, their suffering.

The best known story of the problem of suffering is the story of Job. The first scene in the story begins with letting us know that Job is a very good and faithful man, a man who feared God and did not have an evil bone in his body. Then the scene shifts to the heavenly court, where Yahweh and Satan are engaged in a discussion about Job. Now it's important to note that Satan here is a heavenly being, one of God's divine counsel members, and not the Satan portrayed in the New Testament, the cosmic enemy of God, the personification of evil. Yahweh points out to Satan that Job is the epitome of righteousness but Satan argues that Job fears God and is righteous for the simple reason that God has blessed him in every way. Yahweh accepts this as a challenge and allows Satan to test Job's faith. Now at this point I must say that I have a hard time believing in a God who goes about testing our faith. I believe that it is life itself that tests our faith and that it is God who helps me endure or overcome whatever life may bring. Nevertheless, the suffering of Job is a test of faith imposed on Job by God with the help of Satan.

Now let's understand the severity of the test. Remember that Job is enormously wealthy with seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yokes of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants, but in a single day he was wiped out. "The Sabeans ran off with his asses and oxen and slaughtered the hired hands. Lightning struck his sheep barn and burned up the whole flock, not to mention the shepherds. The Chaldeans rustled his camels and made short work of the camel drivers. And a hurricane hit with such devastating effect the house where his seven sons and three daughters were having a party that there wasn't enough of them left in the wreckage to identify. What happened next was that Job came down with leprosy... He prayed to die but his heart went on beating. He prayed for the sun to go out like a match, but it kept on shining. His wife advised him to curse God and then go hang himself, but he stopped just short of that because he was a very good man and very a religious man..." (Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, pp.64-65) which seems to indicate that he faith was not dependent on whether he was blessed.

I think Job's response to his wife is key to gaining a bit of a foot-hold in our wrestling with the why of suffering. Job says, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" Or another way to phrase the response, "If we accept blessings from God, we must accept trouble as well." Like Job's contemporaries we have assumed or tend to believe that there is a connection between blessing and faith, and likewise between unfaith and suffering. We tend to think, if we are faithful – good and righteous – we will be rewarded. If we are unfaithful – far from good and unrighteous – we will suffer the consequences. I think the writer of Job is countering these assumptions, because the reality is that sometimes faithfulness does indeed yield blessing and sometimes it doesn't.

Sometimes unfaithful, far from good people, do get what they deserve and sometimes they don't. And just because you are a person of faith is no guarantee that you will be spared from some kind of suffering now or in the future.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro was once asked by a 60 year old man, "I still don't understand the purpose of suffering – particularly the suffering of innocent people and most particularly innocent children. Can you give me an answer or an explanation?" The Rabbi replied, "I wish I could explain why such things happen, but none of the theories I have encountered work for me. Suffering is simply a reality. Evil is simply part of the warp and woof of humanity."

Suffering is a reality. So the question is: "How are we going to endure it and triumph over it. I like what Helen Keller once said, "Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of overcoming it." The gift of faith is what gives us the will and the strength to endure and overcome our own suffering. It is faith in a God who bears us up on eagle's wings, a God who circles us in love like a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings, a God who became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace in truth. It's the kind of faith expressed in words found penned on the wall of a concentration camp in Germany: "I believe in love even when I don't feel it. I believe in God even when He is silent."

When I contemplate how to align the reality of suffering with my faith in a loving God, I can't help but think of a poem that I heard quoted often as a child.

"God hath not promised Skies ever blue,
Flower-strewn pathways always for you.
God hath not promised Sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow, Peace without pain.
But God hath promised Strength from above,
Unfailing sympathy, undying love." (Author unknown)

For some people this is not a satisfactory answer to the question, "If God is all-powerful and all-loving, then why is there is so much pain and suffering in the world?" For the moment it works for me because without the gift of faith, I could see myself drowning in despair because of the reality of pain and suffering in our world.

For those who are struggling with their faith because of the reality of suffering, I would like to hope that we as a community of faith provide some solace, some relief from their struggle. Consider Philip Yancey's response to a man who came up to him shortly after the special edition publication of his book, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* (Philip Yancy, *Finding God in Unexpected Places*, p.72)

The man said, “Sorry, I don’t have time to read your book. Can you just answer that question for me in a sentence or two?” Taken aback, Yancey thought for a moment and said, “I guess the answer to the question is another question. Where is the church when it hurts? If the church is doing its job – binding wounds, comforting the grieving, offering food to the hungry – I don’t think people will wonder so much where God is when it hurts. They’ll know where God is: in the presence of God’s people on earth.”

Friends, wherever you may be struggling with the question of suffering, claim anew your faith in a loving God who gives you the will and strength to endure and overcome it. Like Job, let us not falter in the face of suffering but instead hold onto our faith in the Holy One who abides with us and will not forsake us. And in thanksgiving for the gift of faith, may we continue to be a church where’s God’s love and presence are known especially in the lives of those who are suffering.

For God’s glory and praise. Amen.