

I chose the Job portion of the common lectionary this morning because Job is so well known, and it's always good to re-familiarize ourselves with stand-out portions of the Bible! Also, I chose the Job passage because our world seems to be suffering more intensely than usual: the continual warfare, the devastation of Hurricane Helene down south, and ongoing fears about resurgent viruses. A good friend of mine, a church moderator for many years, often referred to Job as "his hero." The phrase we often hear is: the "patience of Job," and as usual the nuances of words make a big difference! Job wasn't really that "patient;" he argued and railed against his God. A more accurate phrase than "patience of Job" might be the "faith" of Job.... The fact that he kept talking with God, conversing, even protesting and arguing with God. I thought of various sermon titles, and one was "Life is not fair!" I think it is a good thing to remember the honesty and frustration of Job, being struck with inexplicable illnesses and losses. We too feel that way at times... Why me, Is there any reason for this? Any lesson I'm supposed to learn?

I'm on the side of saying that much suffering is just inexplicable, so another sermon title I considered was: "Senseless Suffering!" It's like the question of lightning strikes: one golfer gets struck by lightning... but why did other golfer not get struck? ... Maybe you know the joke: because he was using a 2 iron, and even God can't hit a 2 iron! Despite the silly joke, we know that destruction at the hands of nature can seem quite random. I AM on the side of inexplicable things in life; I don't think "everything" has a reason. And that may be one point of the book of Job... JOB DOES NOT GET A CLEAR ANSWER FROM GOD ABOUT REASONS FOR HIS SUFFERING. And neither do we. Oh, we can *find* reasons, and find lessons that we have learned from illnesses, but it's hard to believe that God "sent" us the suffering to teach a lesson. It's hard for me to believe in Eastern reincarnation regarding tragic suffering

- that something in a past life must have been the cause of tragic and seemingly unjust suffering in this life. For me, I believe strongly in freedom; the virus, the cancer, the lightning strike or hurricane had its own freedom.. God was not controlling its every move.

The story of Job basically tries to deal with the reality of suffering, especially “innocent or unjust suffering.” This implies that there is suffering that is deserved, suffering that is a consequence of our actions. Imprisonment is a just consequence for those who commit serious crimes. Sickness may indeed be the consequence for those who have abused their bodies. Retaliation from an enemy can cause deserved suffering if we have attacked; we call that a “just” retaliation, even a “just” war. Job’s friends try to convince Job that he must have done bad things in life, that he must have sinned badly to get inflicted with sores and many losses.

But the book of Job does put down the theology of those friends. They are out of line to keep pressing Job with what he must have done wrong, how he must have sinned somewhere to be in such pain. In the gospel of John, Jesus also puts down a “cause and effect” reason for sin and suffering. About a blind man, Jesus was asked: Who sinned, this man or his parents? Jesus did not explain a *cause* for his blindness, and certainly did not say that it was due to sin. Jesus simply taught them that the power of God is seen *through* his blindness and his healing.

It has been said that that Jewish theologians do not try to explain every move of God (God is a great mystery whose name is not even to be spoken), but prefer to simply tell the stories of people’s experiences of their God. This is true of Rabbi Harold Kushner who wrote the famous book “When bad things happen to good people.” Notice the title was not *Why* bad things happen, but *When*! This is the case with the book of Job. Sorry to give away the ending, but Job *experiences* God as coming in a “whirlwind” of questions that put Job in his place... “Hey, were you

there when I made the seas, the mountains, etc... and you dare to question ME?" Job has an *experience* of the greatness of the Creator, and his own smallness, rather like the words of Psalm 131: "I have quieted my soul, and do not try to figure out things too great for me." We could say that Job learns humility, even a kind of blind faith, or trust, in his God.

I often revisit the wisdom of a Christian theologian by the name of Diogenes Allen; He was a professor of philosophy and theology at Princeton Seminary ... Brilliant man, he chose his words very precisely. Writing about the reality of suffering and death in this world, Prof Allen argues that suffering is not only a reality, but a *necessity* if we view God as perfect love. Allen insists that there can be no perfect love in this world, no sense of being satisfied completely. The reason for this is that we all were born as separate realities, with an innate self-centeredness (just watch a 2year old!) Love, as concern for the sibling, for the neighbor, is something that can grow, but it can never eradicate seeing and living from our own center as the center of reality. This implies that GOD SUFFERS... Yes, as Allen says: God "respects us as centers of powers so that (he) does not interfere with our lives in such a way as to force us to recognize the reality of other things." Within God was the "necessity of withdrawing (himself) so that we might exist as centers of reality in our own right. So God endures the outrages we perform against each other." In simpler words, God gives us freedom, and weeps to see what we do with our freedom. From the story of Job, we could say that God was "allowing" Satan to inflict Job with sores, because God created and allowed freedom in the world, including the freedom to hurt one another, God weeps, and endures the outrageous things we do to one another... and Christ voluntarily going to the cross is our premier example of God enduring outrageous, unjust killing by stepping back to give us freedom.

Regarding specific answers to prayer assured by followers of a “health and wealth” gospel, or a “name it claim it” gospel, Prof. Allen calls this “bad religion.” It ignores the reality, even necessity, of suffering in life, the reality of limits, of the impossibility of total satisfaction, health, etc. Learning to deal with life’s imperfections, ours and others, is the way of love, the way of grace. Allen says that “what we can expect from God with complete confidence is the presence of (his) goodness.” As we see in Jesus, the love of God is a “suffering love,” that graciously waits for us to “take the focus off ourselves” and desire communion with the presence of perfect love, to make the continual move from self-centeredness to being other-centered.

The story of Job reminds us that our living reality includes both joy and suffering ... as Job says to his wife: “Shall we receive good from God and not also evil?” It seems to me that Job had such a strong relationship with God, or sense of the divine, that he was able to withstand the hard times of life, even terrible pain, as he kept trust in his Maker to still have goodness and good opportunities for his life. We all endure some times of hardship or suffering, the limits of this life. One friend in faith recently said something like: “As we age, we may be getting bruised and battered along the way, but we are not being stopped; we are not giving up.” When I do a funeral, I usually quote words from the United Church of Christ worship manual that say that in the death of our loved one, we are “awakened to the shortness and uncertainty of life.” This may be why God allows suffering and death; we learn and re-commit to living each day to the fullest, increasing *love* as much as we can! Perfect Love was Jesus’ strength over suffering and death. So Carpe Diem, Seize the Day, and face every hardship and suffering with as much Love and Goodness as possible! Amen!