

Job was a good man. He lived over 2500 years ago, and was a man of intelligence and sensitivity. He was faithful to God, “...blameless and upright who feared God and turned away from evil.” So if anybody ever deserved happiness and contentment, it was Job. He did all the right things, and yet he was afflicted with horrible suffering. You just heard it, he lost everything-- his animals, his tents, his wealth and worldly goods, his children, even his health, all gone. Wiped out instantly, inexplicably. And if that wasn't bad enough, he was covered with loathsome sores which covered his entire body. He was caught in a snare of despair, despondency and desolation. And Job was a good man.

“There is only one question which really matters,” writes Rabbi Harold Kushner. “Why do bad things happen to good people? All other theological conversation is intellectually diverting; somewhat like doing the crossword puzzle in the Sunday paper and feeling very satisfied when you have made the words fit; but ultimately without the capacity to reach people where they really care. Virtually every meaningful conversation I have ever had with people on the subject of God or religion has either started with this question or gotten around to it before long.” Why do bad things happen to good people?

A recent Gallup Poll asked people what they seek in a religious faith. The vast majority said they seek a faith that helps them with death and dying. The second thing they seek is assistance in dealing with suffering and loss. They want a religion that helps them address life's greatest problems in a very practical way. A religion that reveals why good people suffer so terribly in this life. And yet there is not a single religion in the world that can sufficiently answer the question of why the innocent suffer.

Now ours is probably a pretty typical congregation. And within our family of faith in recent months there has been an attempted suicide, people in serious financial trouble, several suffering with Alzheimers, a man currently bedridden with a broken back, a 43 year old man who died Wednesday of a brain tumor. These are all good people, and none of them deserved what came to them.

F. Scott Fitzgerald was one of America's most popular writers during the 1920s. But by the time he was 39 his world had fallen apart. His career hit bottom, he was ignored by critics and the public. He was broke, his wife Zelda was fighting mental illness, and he was losing his battle with alcohol. In a series of poignant articles Fitzgerald wrote for Esquire magazine, he described himself as one for whom life had lost all meaning. He wrote of how it felt to lose control of

absolutely everything, saying that, “In the real dark night of the soul it is always 3:00 in the morning day after day after day...” Have you ever laid awake at 3:00 in the morning, so worried that you did not know what to do? You know how Fitzgerald felt when he says “..it is always 3:00 in the morning day after day after day.” There is no rational explanation for such suffering. You’ve been there, and if you haven’t, I am sorry to say, you will. So why do good and innocent people suffer so much in this life? There are some answers to that question, but none of them are completely satisfying.

One answer is along the lines of the Buddhist perspective that suffering is born of human desire and really is just an illusion. We suffer because we want to control reality. God is good, the universe is just, and when life appears otherwise, it is the result of faulty thinking and incorrect perception. Socrates shared this belief, writing that “...nothing evil can befall a good man (and I am sure he meant to say “or woman”) in life or in death.” It is an outlook shared by Christian Scientists and many others. It encourages us to keep our eyes focused upon the flowers and not the weeds, to master our inner reactions no matter what life sends our way. It sounds appealing on some levels, but this is an incomplete answer. Pain and suffering are not fictitious. Tragedy and loss are part of the human experience, and it is unrealistic to pretend that they do not exist.

Another answer is the belief in a system of future rewards, and this has been used throughout human history. Things are bad now, but after death all accounts will be squared. Don’t worry about suffering here on earth, your reward will be great in heaven. Karl Marx offered a scathing critique of this philosophy when he called religion the “...opiate of the masses,” precisely because this promise of future rewards in heaven was used to encourage passive resignation and to justify oppression here on earth. And this argument was used to justify slavery, as well. February is Black History month, and it is so important for us to remember the shameful legacy of slavery endured by our African American sisters and brothers. They were repeatedly told to endure their suffering, it was the will of God, for even the Bible says “...slaves be obedient to your masters.” Their reward would come in heaven if they obediently endured their suffering here on earth.

Of course, this answer is also incomplete, because while we are promised eternal life beyond the grave, there are some forms of suffering which should be met with outrage and action, not passive acceptance and hope for a better life after death. We are called to make this world a better place here and now.

Another answer is found in the belief that good things can result from bad things. Challenges and hardships make us stronger and hopefully more compassionate, and everything can be used for a higher purpose. I happen to share this view, that we do learn and grow from our adversities and with God's help they shape us into wiser, better people. But I know that even this answer is incomplete. Some suffering does build character, but occasionally the effect is just the opposite. There are some forms of suffering which only beget more suffering. Children who grow up in violent and abusive homes often become violent and abusive themselves, there are no lessons or character development to be found in starving people or some of the brutal and horrible things that happen in this world. Not every story has a happy ending or a lesson to be learned.

So why do the innocent suffer? The book of Job is a classic attempt to address this question. It was written between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries before the birth of Christ, while the Hebrews were in exile in Babylon. Job contains two separate stories. The first story begins with Chapters one and two. These chapters are written in prose and tell of how this righteous man became a pawn in a wager between God and Satan. God allows Satan to test Job by taking away everything he has in order to measure the extent of his loyalty to God. The final Chapter 42 is also in prose and concludes this story. After being tested and found worthy, Job is restored to his previous condition and given cows, oxen, children, all in double measure to what he had before. These chapters of prologue and epilogue form one story of Job, which teaches that goodness will be rewarded in the end if you have faith and do not complain. Having the proverbial "...patience of Job" is its own reward in the end.

The second story is contained in the main body of this book in Chapters 3 through 41. These chapters are written in poetry, suggesting they were written by a different author. The Job we see here in poetic form is not patient, not long-suffering, nor uncomplaining. In fact, he is just the opposite. This Job knows he has been wronged for no good reason, and life has been unfair. He is angry and demands that God explain all of the evil that has befallen him.

Three of Job's well meaning but bumbling friends appear to try and comfort him, but what can you say to someone who has lost his home, children, livelihood and is covered with boils and scraping his sores with a broken pot? "Man, I know exactly how you feel," doesn't quite cover it. "It is very hard to know just what to say to a person who has been struck by tragedy," writes Rabbi Kushner, "but it's easier to know what not to say. Anything critical of the person suffering ("don't take it so hard, try not to cry") is wrong. Anything that tries to minimize the

mourner's pain ("it could be so much worse, it is probably for the best") is likely to be unappreciated. Anything that asks the mourner to disguise or reject his feelings ("We have no right to question God, God has selected you for this burden") is wrong as well." Job's friends make all of these mistakes and then some! They are of very small comfort to their friend who needs compassion far more than criticism, who needs somebody to just hold him and not scold him.

Job pleads for an audience with God so that he can lay out his case and learn why God would bring such suffering to a good and innocent man. And Job gets his wish. "For God answered Job out of the whirlwind, appearing in majesty and might." God asks Job:

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?.

Where were you when I determined its measurements?

Where were you when I stretched the line upon it?

Where were you when I shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?

Where were you when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band? Have you commanded the morning to appear and the dawn to know its place? Have you entered the sea and walked in the deep? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? I have not abandoned you. I have made everything ... including you!"

Job is surprised, chastened and humbled and admits "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." Then he repents in dust and ashes before God.

Now I know this conclusion is not entirely satisfying, because God does not answer Job on Job's terms. God does not apologize or explain Job's suffering, but essentially appeals to "Executive Privilege," saying "I am God and you're not." And yet Job is able to accept this, realizing that God is worthy of trust even when everything has fallen apart. God is greater and more mysterious than Job will ever be able to comprehend. And so a defiant Job who demanded an explanation is deeply humbled. He hears a word from God and is satisfied. "I know that you can do all things," Job admits, "and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted." He finds a sense of peace in his relationship with God, not in a list of neat and tidy responses to his unanswered questions.

So, what are we to make of this lack of a direct explanation of suffering from God? I believe that the lesson here is that an encounter with God is never logical. It is a religious experience. And like all religious experiences, it cannot be classified or categorized. The faith we live by is not based upon proof, but trust,

not found in demonstration, but inner conviction. The power behind creation is not always rational or just. It is wild and mysterious and incomprehensible. Yet we continue to believe that even in a world where the innocent suffer, God remains loving, gracious and good.

So I conclude with some advice based upon what I have gleaned from the book of Job, and of course my advice is always worth what you pay for it. First of all, when you are suffering, do not pile unnecessary blame or guilt upon yourself. Do not succumb to self-hatred. Although his friends try to convince Job that he must be to blame for all of these problems, Job maintains a strong sense of his own self-worth. As someone once said, "When you are down on your luck, do not get down on yourself." (Refer to my sermon of two weeks ago on punishment for sin.) Your suffering is not because you are a bad person or deserve it.

Secondly, it is normal to feel anger, frustration, and depression when things fall apart. Honor your feelings and do not talk yourself out of them. Negative feelings will diminish over time, but we need to fully acknowledge them before we can be healed. And if you are angry at God, say so, just like Job did. God can take your frustration and anger, and still be God. Be honest with yourself and with God.

Third, and this I think is the most powerful lesson of this story, we need to stay open to change. Job is finally answered by God, but not in the way he expected. He is restored to life, but not the way he thought he would be restored. He gets everything back, but not as he anticipated. And this, of course, is the story of human life on earth. When we are suffering we want to go back to precisely the way things were before our world caved in, to bring back the past. But we have to let go of that old universe and loosen our grip on the past so that we can receive the new life ahead of us. Life is so much easier when we remain flexible and adaptable. Change is embedded into the nature of the universe.

So why do the innocent suffer? There really is no logical or satisfactory answer. We do not deserve the misfortune that comes our way, any more than we deserve the blessings. Life is a gift to either accept or reject, and when our world is turned upside down, like Job's was, it helps to remember that it is **not our world** after all. It is God's, a universe full of mystery and majesty beyond human understanding. Like Job, our challenge is to accept both the bad and the good, and to remain in close contact with God through every twist and turn of this mysterious life. Amen.