

sermon-10/25/09 Newport Presbyterian Church
“God in the Whirlwind”
Job 42:1-6, 10-17

Job is a tough book to understand. It has infuriated some and confused others down through the years as they have tried to make sense of undeserved suffering. The ending is particularly difficult.

That is exactly where we enter the story in our scripture lesson for today. We read most of the last chapter in the book of Job. It would be helpful to know the outline of the whole story before we try to unpack this ending. So, here is a very brief summary of the entire book.

Satan makes a wager with God that Job would curse God if things turned sour in Job's life. God says, “Go for it. Make him miserable and you'll see.” Then we hear about one very bad day in Job's life where he loses all his children and his possessions. Finally Satan plagues Job with horrible sores all over his body.

Job is distraught but does not curse God. Then we hear from some of Job's so-called comforters who give him advice on how to deal with his calamities. Job doesn't buy their way of thinking. He doesn't curse God, but he continues to question God. One day God comes to Job out of the whirlwind and speaks to him.

That brings us to our scripture lesson. We read that Job is bowled over by his experience of God. He says he had heard about God from hearsay, but now he has actually experienced God and it is enough. Finally, we read how God restores all that Job had lost on that bad day and he lives happily ever after.

We need to know that the first two chapters of Job, where we hear about Satan's wager with God, are written in prose. And the last part of the last chapter in Job, where we read about Job receiving back all that he had lost, is also in prose. The rest of the book is poetry. Many scholars feel the prose sections were added later to try and explain how this suffering took place and to bring a happy conclusion to the book.

Unfortunately Satan's wager with God is more troubling than it is helpful in explaining Job's suffering. Why would God let Satan do those horrible things to Job? And the happy ending is almost ridiculous. One commentator said it was like giving Shakespeare's King Lear a happy ending. It just feels inappropriate. How can giving Job more children make up for the children he had lost? No parent among us will buy that solution to the pain of losing a child.

So, what are we to make of this book and its ending? First, Job is telling us that chaos, suffering and loss are part of life. Some seem to experience more of those realities than others, but no one escapes experiencing some. It is just part of living in an imperfect world. Sometimes it is the luck of the draw whether we suffer more than others or not.

It is how we deal with the chaos and suffering that is crucial. Some turn to their religion's traditions and the conventional thinking of those traditions. Job's comforters represent that approach. They were just mouthing the conventional wisdom of that day that said if someone suffered they must have deserved it.

While most Christians today don't agree with that perspective, part of our traditional wisdom in Christianity says that God is all-powerful. If we need help in dealing with some illness, or suffering, we just need to turn to God and ask for God to intervene and make it better.

The trouble with that understanding of God is that God does not seem to intervene in some of the most horrible situations, like the holocaust, for example, but apparently does intervene in others. What are we to make of a God who would help someone find their lost keys but stand by and do nothing when children are being abused, when millions of innocent men, women, and children are slaughtered? Such a God, as one commentator put it, feels untrustworthy at best.

But if we see God as already among us as the Spirit in which we live and move and have our being, then God would not be intervening in terms of some being outside us. God is already among us. This God's presence, as that same commentator put it, helps us get through the chaos and injustice without our giving in to the chaos and living bitterly. This may be a different way of understanding God than many of us grew up hearing. Let us explore this counter understanding of God.

Job is a help here. He does not buy his comforters' traditional wisdom. He continues to question God, even being brutally honest with God in ways some find almost disrespectful. When God, in chapter 42 in the few verses our lectionary skips, commends Job for his approach and condemns his comforters, the questioners among us smile. It is ok to question traditional approaches to theology and God.

Basically the book of Job is saying tradition, while helpful, can also be a hindrance. When life gets tough, our intellectual understanding of God is often not all that helpful. What is most helpful is an experience of the Divine. What is most meaningful is to be bowled over by a presence that is far beyond even what we can imagine.

That is what the last chapters of Job are trying to show us. God comes to Job in chapter 38 out of the whirlwind his life had become. And things change. When the NRSV says Job despises himself, we are tempted to see this as his saying he was wrong for questioning God. Despise here is better understood by the NEB's translation of 42:6. That verse is translated, "Therefore I melt away." God's presence becomes everything. All else, even his suffering, is lost in wonder.

Does this explain Job's suffering? The simple answer is: No. Does this explain our suffering? No. We certainly don't believe God is making a wager with Satan to cause our suffering. And we don't believe God is punishing us for some mistake or sin we did.

That makes God a monstrous judge, some Santa Claus in the sky seeing who is naughty or nice and then giving out rewards or punishments.

But, as one commentator has noted, how we view God's relationship with us in the midst of our circumstances is more important than the circumstances themselves in terms of determining how we get through the tough things that come our way.

I remember a situation in my church in Bremerton a few years ago. Right before I arrived, a middle-aged man in the church was diagnosed with cancer. It was a tragedy. He died a year later. But, as I walked with him through that year, he came to see his illness in a positive way. It was not that he would ever wish to have cancer. But that cancer caused him to turn inward. It led to a deeper experience of God in his life that was evident to his wife, his co-workers, and to me. In many ways he was healed in that year even though he was obviously not cured.

Instead of becoming bitter and angry, he focused on God in the midst of the tragedy. Sure we all prayed for a cure. Sure it was terribly tragic when he died in his 40's. But, that year in his life was filled with wonder and it changed him.

We know Job was changed by his experience of God in the midst of his suffering. It is here where we get to the one detail of that happy ending I find helpful. It says that Job gave his daughters an inheritance along with his sons. It is easy to pass right over that little fact. That would be a shame.

It was an incredibly radical thing for Job to do. That is the only instance in all the Old Testament where women were given an inheritance along with their brothers. It was simply not done. Only male children received an inheritance. For Job to move away from that traditional way of doing things shows how profoundly affected he was by his experience of God.

Does this answer all our questions about innocent suffering? Hardly. We desperately want our questions answered. Neat little answers to complicated questions, however, are a big problem. They lead to trivializing life. They tempt us to believe we can tie up all the mysteries of life in our clever intellectual conclusions. It leads to a faith stuck in our heads and makes an experience of God less likely. Why would we want or need an experience when we have it all explained by our little theologies?

When life is unfair, when we suffer, when we cry out in pain, which is more meaningful: an intellectual explanation as to why this is happening, or being held in the arms of one who loves us? Job says it is the latter. Thank God for Job. Amen