

Bad Things and a Good God

9th Weekend after Pentecost – July 16/17, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Job 4:1-2, 7-8; 38:1-4; 40:1-2 (New Living Translation)

[After Job has lost everything his friends come to sit with him in silence for seven days. Then they make the mistake of opening their mouths.]

Then Eliphaz the Temanite replied to Job:

²“Will you be patient and let me say a word? For who could keep from speaking out?

⁷“Stop and think! Does the innocent person perish? When has the upright person been destroyed? ⁸My experience shows that those who plant trouble and cultivate evil will harvest the same.”

[After long discussions of all the possible reasons for Job’s suffering, God arrives with a word of his own.]

Then the LORD answered Job from the whirlwind:

²“Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? ³Brace yourself, because I have some questions for you, and you must answer them.

⁴“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much.”

Then the LORD said to Job, ²⁴“Do you still want to argue with the Almighty? You are God’s critic, but do you have the answers?”

Isaiah 53:3-4 (NRSV)

³He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.

⁴Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.

Where is God when it hurts? It is one thing to say that God is with us in our suffering but why doesn't he do something about it? Such questions have challenged God's people for four millennia. Today, we consider them ourselves.

As I write this, just hours ago terrorists killed dozens and injured hundreds in a series of bombings in London. A few months ago, an enormous tsunami swamped entire islands killing hundreds of thousands. Last week, Patti, Robby, and I visited the Sachsenhausen concentration camp just north of Berlin. Half of those sent to this work camp by the Nazis died.

How could such things be? Where is God in all this? Why do so many terrible things happen to innocent people? To anyone? Is God truly all-good and all-powerful? These questions are not new. The book of Job may be the oldest story in the Bible and it takes these questions head-on.

“Do you have the answers?”

The basic story of Job is simple. He is a “blameless and upright” man, wealthy and devoted to God. Coming before God, the Accuser claims that Job is devoted to God only because he has been very blessed in his life and that if Job loses everything, then he will turn against God. God allows the Accuser to take everything from Job – his family, his home, his wealth, even his health. Job has no idea why such suffering has fallen on him. Job’s friends come to comfort him and for seven days, they simply sit with him. But they can’t resist trying to answer the questions posed by Job’s suffering. Surely, Job has done something wrong. Or perhaps his family did. Somebody must have, they say . . . for bad things don’t happen to good people. But, of course, you and I know that they do. Bad things happen to good people

One Question for God

This week begins a four-week series on questions for God. Last April, we asked our congregation to write on an index card, the one question they would most like to ask God. We received about 150 responses. We’ve sorted through the questions and done our best to categorize them by grouping together similar questions. The four largest groups were questions about (1) suffering and evil, (2) heaven, (3) God’s will and our own, and (4) grace and forgiveness. Over the next four weeks, we’ll consider each topic in turn.

Obviously, each topic is vast. We can do no more than to briefly consider some of the most helpful thoughts on each topic. Nonetheless, we hope that you’ll find this series to be especially thought-provoking and challenging, providing a lot of dinner-table conversation.

Each week, I’ll be using the text boxes to discuss a specific question from an index card that gets at the heart of the topic. Because this series is only four weeks long, we plan to use the questions as the foundation for future series as well. If you’d like to add a question to our list or simply comment on this series, please e-mail me at sengle@standrewccl.org.

all the time. Sometimes it is at the hands of other people, but sometimes it is the indiscriminate suffering caused by a tsunami or an illness.

In the end, after Job's friends have demonstrated their foolishness and pride through all their futile explanations, God arrives, putting human wisdom in perspective. This is God's world and Job's friends are foolish to think they can answer all the questions. They do not have the answers and they won't ever get them. In the end, Job never gets answers as to why such suffering befell him. Humility is a necessary virtue when we come to these questions ourselves. One index card read, "I guess the main question is WHY??" As hard as it may be to accept, there are some questions, some of the most important questions, to which we will never get satisfying answers. Job certainly did not.

Can God be trusted?

If we are not going to get all the answers we seek, then where are we left? In his book, *Can God Be Trusted?: Faith and the Challenge of Evil*, John Stackhouse traces both the theological problems posed by evil and suffering, as well as possible solutions that have been proposed. He rightly concludes that the key question posed to us is whether we will trust God even in the face of our own unanswerable questions. Will we trust God's promises that, in the end, we will enjoy a renewed and transformed world free from tragedy, illness, suffering, and even death? Will we trust that God is all-powerful and all-loving even though, at times, it doesn't seem possible to us?

"Are the bad things that happen to us punishment for sin?"

In the ancient world and for many people still, the bad things that happen to us are *necessarily* the result of something we've done, some sin we've committed. Certainly, this is how many of the Israelites understood the world to be. For most Jews, the prosperous were blessed by God and those who struggled or were struck by tragedy were reaping the consequences of their sin. In some Jewish communities, those who were lame could not be leaders for these very reasons.

But the book of Job is like a blaring trumpet reminding us that things are not that simple. Yes, sin has consequences, often tragic consequences. We are created to live in one manner but often choose to live in another. We can't be surprised that life often takes bad turns as a result of our own bad choices.

BUT . . . we cannot reverse the equation. Though sin leads to bad consequences, we can't conclude that suffering *necessarily* results from sin. Job suffered but he had not sinned. This is one of the main points of the book. Job doesn't know why he has suffered but he knows that he didn't bring it on himself.

SO . . . there is truth in the statement:
If you sin, then you will suffer.

But Job's friends reversed the statement:
If you suffer, then you have sinned.

The reversal is an error in reasoning and the book of Job is a critical corrective against it.

"A man of suffering and acquainted with grief"

Written hundreds of years before Jesus, today's passage from Isaiah paints a dramatic picture of one who takes upon himself the suffering of us all and in so doing is despised and rejected. Christians, of course, see in this passage a portrait of Jesus Christ, whom we proclaim to the world as the one true God incarnate. What a dramatic claim we make - we proclaim a God who suffers. But what is the real meaning of this for our own suffering? Here is one thought.¹

Who are you? How do you think of yourself? What most defines you, provides your identity? Perhaps it is your role as a mother or son or executive or teacher? Certainly, when we are suffering in grief, illness, or tragedy we are, for a time at least, most defined by that suffering - all else that we are seems to fade into insignificance. Somebody suffering from cancer may find it hard to think of themselves as anything other than a cancer victim.

Yet, Jesus' own suffering shows us the incomprehensible extent of God's love for each of us - "God so loved the world that he gave his only son . . ." There is no one for whom I would allow my own son to be crucified. I am simply not capable of loving as God loves. In contrast, even in the most terrible circumstances of our lives, it is God's concrete love expressed in Jesus' suffering that grounds our own worth. Patti's brother-in-law, Bill, is not first and foremost a cancer victim, though he may feel that way at times. He is first and always, God's beloved child.

Each of us is defined by God's love for us. It is God's love and our knowing that we are loved, that not only sustains us through suffering but enables us to put it behind us, always pressing forward to the future. Just as Jesus' crucifixion is the concrete expression of God's love for us, Jesus' resurrection is the concrete affirmation, indeed fulfillment, of our own eventual freedom from evil and suffering.

¹For more, see David Kelsey's article, "Imagining Redemption," in the June 28, 2005 edition of *Christian Century*.

Daily Bible Readings

(some biblical perspectives on suffering, evil, and the renewal of God's creation)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Genesis 1:1-2:3 God creates the world and creates it good.</p>	<p>Day 2 Job 3 Job curses the day he is born and expresses some of our own feelings in the face of suffering and evil.</p>
<p>Day 3 John 15:1-17 On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus speaks to his disciples about true love (see v. 13).</p>	<p>Day 4 1 Peter 3:8-22, 4:12-19 The early Christians were well-acquainted with suffering, even suffering for doing good.</p>
<p>Day 5 Micah 4:1-5; Revelation 21:1-8, 22:1-5</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Questions for God

A new Sunday morning four-week teaching series with Scott Engle

9:30 in Wesley Hall – begins today

In April, Rev. Hasley asked the congregation to write on an index card the one question they would most like to ask God. We had nearly 150 responses. We've reviewed and organized the questions. Beginning today, Scott Engle will teach a four week series at 9:30 in Wesley Hall on the questions for God.

July Book Recommendation

Can God Be Trusted: Faith and the Challenge of Evil, by John Stackhouse

When we collected questions for God from our congregation, the most asked category of responses focused upon the difficulty of reconciling our belief in a good God with all the suffering and evil in the world.

Historically, this topic has posed perhaps the most significant philosophical challenge to the Christian faith.

This book is a good introduction to the questions and some possible answers. What I like most is Stackhouse's historically informed and humble approach. He rightly acknowledges that the final question is whom we will trust with questions that can never be fully answered.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

You might begin by talking about Job. He has suffered terribly, losing everything – all for no apparent reason. Assume that you are one of Job's friends. You've come to comfort him and the conversation inevitably turns to the explanation for Job's sufferings. What possible explanations might you suggest? What explanations might you hear from others? What is your reaction to God's pronouncements that the answers are unknowable and that it is foolish for us even to ask?

What do you think is God's role in the world's evil and suffering? Share some things you've heard people say about God when confronted by tragedy, such as "this is all part of God's plan." How do these statements make you feel about God?

How can God be all-powerful and all-loving and yet there be such pain in this world? Could it be that he is not as powerful as we think, as some people suggest? Or might God not be as loving as we think, as others suggest? How do we hold together our proclamation that God truly is good, that he is all-powerful and all-loving? What would you say to those who reply that given the world's suffering, this is so much sentimental nonsense?

Finally, in the study, I suggest that our primary identity ought to be as someone who is deeply and concretely loved by God. How would you explain the point I'm trying to make? How could this help to sustain us during times of suffering and trouble. This involves much more than feeling, it is about understanding who we truly are, no matter what the circumstances.