

18th Sunday after Pentecost – **October 4, 2009**

Job 1:1 and 2: 1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1: 1-4 and 2: 5-12; Mark 10: 2-16

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?"

Satan answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it."

The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason."

Then Satan answered the LORD, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face."

The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life."

So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes. Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die."

But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?"

In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

SUFFERING IN THE LIGHT OF GOD

This is a tough set of readings to face on returning to the pulpit – maybe I should have stayed in Africa! The most difficult for me – the one I don't feel at all ready to preach on yet – the one I would rather ignore but feel guilty for not addressing in some way – is the Mark passage. It is one that all but the most self-righteous of us can hear as nothing less than an attack on a decision that they or someone they love may have taken after much suffering and deep thought. A decision that may still fill that person with guilt, shame and doubt. Divorce is not uncommon in our culture – no matter your opinion on what *should be* the fact remains that most families are touched in some way by the break-down and break-up of marriage and the suffering that comes with it.

I could tell you things about understanding the passage in the context of its own time. I could insist that if we just read it carefully enough it won't sound so harsh – so clear.

And I could equivocate on the sanctity of marriage in general which makes divorce, somehow less of a problem in our minds. But the truth is that I don't question the Christian commitment to marriage as a life-long bond lived in mutual faithfulness. I believe that an enduring promise is just that – not because of a *law* or a sense of *moral righteousness* but because God calls the creation good – very good. God yearns for the creation – for each of us – to come into meaningful relationship with one another in a helpful, healthy and harmonious way – in a marriage this means we desire a promise that endures in hope.

That said, I also believe that the church owes pastoral faithfulness to those who find themselves unable to continue in their commitment to their marriage. To those who are suffering the agony of divorce – not just the immediate participants, but their family, friends and church as well – to those in the pain of a relationship shredded beyond repair – to those who by God's grace may have the blessing and privilege of another relationship – to those who read this passage and shake their heads with anger or despair, the church must minister with compassion despite the words of the Gospel of Mark. To have compassion is to bear another's burdens – to suffer with – it is about responding in some sort of helpful way to the suffering we encounter in this world. Our book club discussion of *The Shack* touched on the question of suffering yesterday. The consensus was that somehow we all suffer – we all have burdens to bear and we struggle to understand both our own suffering and the suffering of others within the light of our faith – within the light of God. And so we turn to the question of suffering, addressed but not ultimately resolved in the Book of Job.

The Book of Job wrestles with but does not explain the mystery of suffering, especially unmerited human suffering. It does not justify the ways of God with the human creation. It does not give us easy answers to the difficult and troubling questions of life, yet it probes the depths of faith in the midst of suffering. In the time that this story – this long philosophical poem really – in the time this epic was told, as in our own time, there were those who could see good people getting sick, upright citizens dying, committed marriages floundering – while proud and selfish and seemingly less worthy people prospered. The author, like so many of us, had heard all the learned, clever and pious attempts to explain life – to explain suffering and poverty and pain – and he, like many of us, was pretty dissatisfied with those explanations. And so he writes the poem that is the Book of Job on the subject of why God lets bad things happen to good people.

These few verses from the prologue of Job open the door to the whole story. It is a *once upon a time* tale about a man named Job who is so good, so perfect, that you realize at once that he can't be a real-life person but is in truth a character in a story meant to teach us. Job is an excellent and righteous man. One day when all the members of the heavenly court were gathered, the Satan comments on the things he has seen on earth. God asks if the acuser, Satan, has noticed Job; to which the Satan responds, "Of course Job is pious and obedient – you make it worth his while, you bless him. Does Job serve you because it is profitable? Would he remain faithful if you pulled the proverbial rug out from under him and really allowed him to suffer?"

And so the plot line develops – Job's family, home, livelihood, possessions, and health are all gone. His every moment becomes physical torture compounding the mental and

spiritual agonies. He is urged by those closest to him to denounce God – anything it takes to get some relief.

One way to read the story is that Job never curses God but remains steadfast in his faith and is ultimately rewarded. I suppose that is a comforting reading for some. Others likely keep their doubts and complaints about that interpretation to themselves. The author of the Book of Job would be bothered by such a simplistic, moral-of-the-story take on things. The author wonders what kind of God would bring such suffering on the creation? What kind of faith urges blind obedience in the face of injustice and cruelty?

In the story Job does complain against God – condemns the divine in the bitterest language. Job's friends try to convince him not to lose faith despite the calamities that have befallen him. They try repeatedly to make the point that God will eventually see to it that the good prosper and that the wicked are punished. They suggest that Job must be to blame for the suffering he is experiencing. Job complains and the friends defend God until, at the climax of the story, God appears and God speaks.

Unfortunately when God speaks in the Book of Job not every question is entirely cleared up. We come to the end and we still wonder...

Harold Kushner sums it up with three statements that everyone in the book, and most of the readers, would like to be able to believe:

- God is all powerful and causes everything that happens in the world – nothing happens without God willing it.
- God is just and fair, and stands up for people getting what they deserve – God is ultimately good.
- Job is a good person.

As long as Job is healthy and wealthy we can believe all three of those statements at the same time with no trouble at all. But when Job suffers we have a problem. And the thing is that Job does suffer – we all suffer. I saw suffering in Malawi and South Africa last month and suffering in India in 2007 that was inescapable. You can't open the newspaper or turn on the TV or walk down the street or talk to your family and friends without encountering suffering of some sort. So now we have a problem. We can no longer make sense of all three propositions together.

If God is both just and powerful, then Job must be someone who deserves what is happening to him. If Job is good but God causes his suffering, then God is not just. If Job deserved better and God did not send his suffering, then God is not all-powerful. What is it to be?

The usual response, and the direction chosen by Job's friends in the story, is to assert that Job must not be a good person – he must deserve what is happening to him. Unfortunately the first verse of the story makes it very clear that Job is a good person and God reaffirms it with almost the same words in Chapter 2: *"Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man*

who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason."

The Indian people devastated by the tsunami a few years ago did not bring catastrophe upon themselves any more than those suffering in the Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Samoa deserve the natural disasters that are currently afflicting them. Malawians are not suffering in poverty because of some sin on their part any more than you and I are well fed because of some piety on ours. People around the world who suffer disease or hardship or pain in relationship do not necessarily suffer because they are bad people.

That leaves two propositions – either God is not just and good or God does not cause everything that happens. I believe that the author of the Book of Job concludes that God is good and that Job is good and that we have misunderstood what God's power is all about. Bad things do happen – good people suffer along with those who are perhaps not so good, but it is not God who wills it. God would like all people to experience the abundant blessing promised in creation. God chooses to be in communion with Job in the whirlwind – reminds us again that our God is not about power but about relationship. We are not compelled to obey but invited to do so – encouraged to serve God and one another as a free gift – called to participate in God's love for the world without guarantee of material reward or the promise of comfort in this life.

God is at work in the universe. God cares for creation – God cares for Job so much that there is a moment of divine self-revelation – an experience of the vision of cosmic responsibility. A God who confesses the divine burdens to a human being is a God profoundly engaged in human destiny – a God so committed to being in relationship with the creation even if it means letting go of some power in respect for human independence. How could God be in any kind of meaningful relationship with humanity if God manipulated all circumstances?

Innocent people suffer in this life – things happen that no one deserves. But when it happens, it does not represent God's punishment – the misfortunes and suffering do not come from God. Our God is one of justice and goodness rather than one of power – so our God can still be with us when bad things happen. God created us and called the creation "good". God does not desire our suffering and any suffering we experience is not the result of God's hand, however we can turn to God for help. We can seek God so that we can be strengthened and comforted.

This understanding of God as a God of relationship is affirmed each time we come to the Lord's Table. Here we are reminded of the length to which God is willing to go to draw us into relationship – to lead us to grace. God comes to us – not in a position of power, but in the fragility of the manger and the brokenness of the cross – and as God comes to us, in all circumstances of life from joy to suffering and all that lies between, we are invited to come and to rest in God. **Amen.**