



Pentecost 5 – Proper 7 (B)

Suffering

[RCL] Job 38:1-11; Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

People suffer. Indeed, it very much seems that good and innocent and righteous people suffer, sometimes horribly. What's more, and maybe worse—the guilty succeed, and the evil prosper, sometimes wonderfully. These simple facts of life have been a serious challenge to every single religious tradition in human history. And every single religious tradition in human history has had something to say about human suffering, about what it means, and where it comes from, and how we can best deal with it.

We want to know why, and we want reasons, and we want it all to make sense. Philosophers, theologians, saints, mystics, and all sorts of others have all had a go at this, and they have tried to put it all together, and they have tried to articulate, to explain clearly, whatever they have put together. Everyone wants answers.

Now, one of the answers that our tradition has offered is that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, there really is a direct correlation between our behavior and our fate. Be good and things will go well for you; be bad and bad things will happen. So, if good things are happening, you must be doing right, and if bad things are happening, well, there has to be a reason for that, too. This is a very attractive, indeed compelling, way of looking at life. It appeals to our sense of justice; it seems religious; and it offers an explanation that appears to make sense. Also, this formula can be found in several places in the Bible, especially in the book of Deuteronomy. We all carry at least a little of it around with us all the time.

And there is a grain of truth to this. That is, behavior has consequences, and there is often enough of a connection between doing what we ought not do and unpleasant things happening. The reverse is also true, and there are from time to time real and observable benefits from virtue.

But it doesn't always work that way; it doesn't always work that way by a long shot. As much as we would like the universe to be clear and simple, the basic facts of our experience pretty much refute the claims of Deuteronomy. The evil do prosper; the righteous do suffer. There are no guarantees, one way or the other.

Which is where Job comes in. The Book of Job, which we don't get to hear very often on Sunday mornings, offers a Biblical perspective to all of this which is an alternative to the more familiar stuff in Deuteronomy.

You know the story, at least in general, and the details are not the most important parts. It's about Job, and Job is righteous. He is not just innocent; he is righteous, the best of the lot. And Job suffers. Job suffers horribly. All sorts of really terrible things just rain down on him and on his family. And Job wants to make sense of his pain and his loss and his humiliation. So, he asks "Why?" over and over, and, bless his heart, Job insists on telling the truth.

Next, several of Job's religiously-minded friends come by to talk to him about this. And they all say different versions of the same thing. They all insist that the world makes sense and that God is fair. So, if Job is suffering, it must be because Job deserves it. He must be guilty of something. If Job would only repent, if he would only say that the blame is his, then maybe God would stop doing all of this awful stuff to him. This is the traditional teaching, the orthodox response.

This is what religious people were supposed to believe.

But Job isn't buying the traditional answers. Job says that he doesn't deserve this, that he is righteous, and he then insists that if anyone is out of line in this whole enterprise, it has to be God and not Job.

That's the truth as Job knows it and sees it, and he's not going to let go of that truth no matter what his friends say, and no matter what his religious tradition says. Job wants to know why.

This is where today's reading comes in. After insisting that he is innocent and God is to blame, Job once more demands to know "Why?" And the Lord answers Job out of the whirlwind, and says what we just heard. Job asks "Why?" and God says, "Where were you..."

Did you notice that what God says to Job is not comforting? It's not reassuring and it certainly doesn't answer Job's questions about why these terrible things are happening to him. In fact, God never says anything at all about Job's troubles. Instead, what God says to Job is, basically, "I'm God and you're not." Which, at least on the surface, is not terribly helpful. Job already knew that.

What God says, as powerful and as beautiful as it is, simply doesn't directly respond to what Job is asking. God never says anything about "Why?" In fact, this passage sounds like it's saying either that God has missed the whole point of Job's question, or that God can do anything God wants to do because God is bigger. God laid the foundations of the Earth and Job didn't.

In part, that is what is going on. Notice that God doesn't tell Job that God has a plan and that it's the best plan; God doesn't tell Job that everything will all turn out all right in the end; God doesn't tell Job that Job

deserves it; God doesn't tell Job that Job will understand everything by and by. God doesn't even tell Job that God has an answer to all of these "Why?" questions but he just isn't telling Job. For whatever reasons, God simply does not give answers to questions like Job's. Period. He just doesn't.

God is making it very clear he is not a transactional God—it's not true that if we put in a particular behavior then we are guaranteed a particular result—like a vending machine or an ATM. We don't put in the right behavior or say the right prayers and thus are sure to get the result we want. It just doesn't work that way, and if we're honest about it, we all know this.

But something else, something very important is going on behind all this frustrating divine evasion. What is most important for Job and his questions, for the whole Book of Job, and for us, is not what God said. What is most important is that God spoke to Job—and not to any of Job's orthodox-sounding friends. God, who did lay the foundations of the earth, who did shut in the sea with doors, who does comprehend the expanse of the earth—this same God reaches out to Job, the questioning and argumentative critic. God speaks to him and makes himself known to him. God seeks and offers relationship—not answers, not quick fixes, not what Job wants—but relationship.

Again, God is not a transactional God, giving guaranteed results. God is a relational God, a God who offers and seeks relationship. That's enough; it has to be enough; and it can be enough to make a difference. It's enough, finally and after much struggle, to satisfy even Job. It's not the same thing as an answer, but it will do. God seeks and offers relationship. That's what there is; that's all there is in this story.

Something very similar is going on in the story of Jesus rebuking the wind and storm. (Remember, in the New Testament, boats are almost always stories about the Church). The point here is that Jesus is always in the boat and that he is awake. The promise is not that there will be no storms; the promise is not that the wind and the storm will always stop when we want them to. The promise is not that the disciples will always be safe. That's not the way it is, and Mark knew that perfectly well when he told this story.

In fact, the disciples learned quickly enough that they were not immune from any of the tragedies of life—in fact, they seemed especially prone to them. For a long time, it looked like Job would make the perfect patron saint for the Christian Church.

But what the disciples and the Church also learned early and never forgot was that, wherever they were, and whatever was happening to them, they were not alone. Their Lord was there—he was with them, knowing them and loving them and never letting go.

As with Job and the disciples, what the Lord offers us is relationship—his presence and his love—and not answers, in the middle of whatever we have to face. Like Job, we have caught the ear of the one who laid the cornerstone of earth; like the disciples, we are never alone, no matter what happens to that boat, or to us.

One powerful example comes from a scene in the movie “Selma,” in which Martin Luther King, Jr. visits Mr. Cager Lee, an 82-year-old man who is in the morgue identifying the body of his grandson, Jimmie Lee Jackson. Jimmie had just been killed by a state trooper during a peaceful protest in Selma, Alabama. Dr. King first says, “There are no words,” but then, like any preacher, he offers some words. They are very good words. He says, “I can tell you one thing for certain— God was the first to cry.”

“God was the first to cry.”

What God offers Mr. Lee, and what he offers us, is relationship—maybe not often in the form of a voice from a whirlwind, or as a handy miracle that fixes things, but most often in a gentle reminder that we are not alone, and that God is with us and shares our pain.

If we look for that, if we look for the loving presence of God himself, in the very heart of whatever is happening, we will find it. We won’t find answers or exemptions or solutions, but we will find this. It is not always what we want or hope for, but it is there, and it is real, and it is enough.

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