

Year B, Proper 22

October 7, 2018

✠ In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN

Some years ago when I was preparing for my final interview before being accepted as a postulant for the permanent diaconate, I was assured by our bishop that the interviewing committee just wanted to get to know us better. “The interviews will just be informal conversation. This is not a test,” he reassured us. Now the interviews took place on April 22nd, 1995 - just a few days after the Oklahoma City bombing.

And so there I was in a little living room space with about a dozen people I didn’t know, judging me. And I’m waiting for the casual conversation to begin when a grizzled old priest on the committee said, “Son, our country just experienced a significant incidence of domestic terrorism that cost many innocent lives...so tell me, why do bad things happen to good people...why does God allow us to suffer?”

My first response was to blow a whistle and call a penalty for illegal procedure, or foul ball or something. That’s hardly the opener for a casual conversation. I honestly don’t remember what I said or how I handled the whole situation. I obviously passed the test because I am standing here. But, what a difficult question: why does God allow us to suffer?

Now, many well-meaning people would say that the answer to the question, “Why does God permit suffering?” can be found in the Bible. Of course - suffering is punishment for our sins. Throughout the Old Testament the people of Israel are rewarded for being faithful to God...and the people of Israel are punished for straying from God and living sinful lives. Easy answer - We bring suffering upon ourselves!

And so that brings us to the story of Job, part of which we read this morning. If you have ever read the book of Job or are aware of the story, you know that Job is a righteous, faithful man

– blameless and upright, scripture tells us – who becomes the focus of an experiment in faithfulness between God and a heavenly being who is referred to as “the accuser” or “*the satan*.” In this heavenly experiment, Job – a blameless and upright man – is brutally punished...for what? He is not a sinful man. Scripture tells us that Job “feared God and turned away from evil.” And yet, Job, basically a good person, suffers. Aren’t we all basically good people? And yet, like Job, there is suffering in ***our*** lives. The vast majority of the world’s population suffers from want, suffers from ignorance...suffers from needless violence.

There are those who would teach that people who suffer...people who have less, have obviously led sinful lives, or were not faithful enough. These same people would tell us that those of us who have “more,” – more money, larger house, more cash – more blessings – have led lives without blemish. If we are faithful God will send us a check for \$10,000. If we are not faithful, then it is open season on our heads.

So back to Job. Any reputable, modern Biblical scholar will tell you... and I hope you understand - the book of Job is a story...and important story. It’s a story not so much about God’s justice, but, as one scholar put it, “[it’s a story] about the transformation of a man whose piety and view of the world were formed in a setting of wealth and happiness, and into whose life burst calamities that put an end to both.”¹ Job is a man of great wealth and reputation who loses everything, and the question Job, his wife, his friends...*we* ask is, “why”?

In the end, we never really get a straight answer about why terrible things happened to Job. God essentially answers Job’s question of “why” with a litany of the wonders of God’s creation. “The universe,” God seems to say, “is simply too big for us mere humans to understand.”

¹ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-book-of-job>

I do not believe that God who loves us... suffered for us... died for us – I don't believe that loving God treats his creation like objects to be toyed with. I'm here to tell you what I hope you already know...it doesn't work like that. Job was blameless and upright...and he lost everything. In our world the blameless and upright sometimes do suffer...and the sinner sometimes does win and sometimes does get ahead. And even if you read Job from chapter 1 verse 1 through to chapter 40 verse 17 we never get a satisfying explanation as to why bad things happened to Job...and so we never get an answer to the question, "why do bad things happen to good people."

I do believe that God does not cause suffering...God does not afflict us...God does not punish us. God bears with us in our suffering...God sustains us in our affliction...God rejoices with us, God sheds tears with us. In the midst of personal tragedy or national tragedy, God is with us. God carries us from the suffering and pain of our Good Fridays to the joyous Easter celebration of new life in Him.

In Job's story, Job never gives up on God...Job never curses God. Even in his pain and confusion and frustration and anger, Job never stops loving God...and God never strayed from Job.

Ultimately Job is restored... comforted in a way that only God can comfort...healed in a way that only God can heal. We may never know why there is suffering in the world, but as Christians...for each of us... there is solace and comfort and healing and strength in the loving arms of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

AMEN

Ad maiorem Dei gloriam