

Stewarding Our Suffering

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
 Settle our hearts.
 Still our minds.
 And stir our imaginations,
 That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Job answered [his friend]:

Today my complaint is again bitter;
 my strength is weighed down because of my groaning.
Oh, that I could know how to find God—
 come to God's dwelling place;
I would lay out my case before God,
 fill my mouth with arguments,
 know the words with which God would answer,
 understand what God would say to me.
Would God contend with me through brute force?
 No, God would surely listen to me.
There an upright person could reason with God,
 and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.
If I go forward, God is not there;
 or backward, I cannot perceive God;
on the left God hides, & I cannot behold God;
 I turn to the right, but I cannot see God.
God has made my heart faint;
 the Almighty has terrified me;
If only I could vanish in darkness,
 and thick darkness would cover my face!

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Stewarding Our Suffering

If you're looking to read the Bible for inspiration, I would not recommend starting with the book of Job. Smack in the middle of the Old Testament, the book of Job tells the story of a man named Job who loses everything—his wealth, his home, his family, and eventually even his health. As he sits on an ash heap scratching his open sores with a potshard, all that remains are

four friends who want to explain Job's tragedy to him so he can at least understand why this has happened and hopefully make some life changes so that it won't happen again, and a wife who tells him all is lost and he might as well die.

So, if not for inspirational reading, you might turn to Job looking for wisdom—it is, after all, often considered one of the Bible's books of Wisdom, along with Psalms, Proverbs, and the Song of Solomon. And, indeed, were you to read the first two chapters of Job, you would surely conclude that the book was written to answer the question of why bad things happen to good people—in this instance, why bad things happen to Job, who we are told in the very beginning has lived an upright and blameless life.

However, while this is exactly what Job's friends try to do, the conclusion to the book makes clear that Job's friends fail—none of their explanations or theologies adequately or accurately solve the problem of suffering. Yet, despite categorically refuting the theologies and explanations offered up, the book itself offers no alternative, no explanation for why God allows bad things to happen.

Which begs the question of why this book exists, and why it was included in the Bible. What we do know is that the story of Job has antecedents in other ancient literature—similar stories were told in other cultures, and so we can know that the story of Job is not a history of a single man, but a parable or myth told and retold in order to teach us something about who God is and what a life of faith looks like. And it is clearly a story concerned with the question of suffering.

What we also know is that over two-thirds of the story is devoted to dialogues between Job and his four friends. Chapter after chapter, Job's friends give voice to the variety of explanations for suffering that were popular in that time. Which is odd when you think about it since the conclusion clearly consigns all of it to the rubbish bin of theological explanations. I think, however, that these bad theologies are given so much "air time" because they continue to give voice to our own implicit theologies—our own instinctual understandings of the relationship between suffering, God, and ourselves.

In the course of their many dialogues, Job's friends offer up multiple explanations for why Job is suffering. Their favorite explanation, the one they return to again and again, is that Job's suffering is a punishment for past sins. Job, however, never wavers in his assertion that he has lived an upright and blameless life and has nothing that would merit such punishment. And so, in between speculating on possible sins that Job might have committed, his friends offer up other possibilities—that suffering is a test of our faith, that it is designed to teach us something, that it is an opportunity in disguise, or that it is part of a larger divine plan.

And Job doesn't necessarily disagree, he just doesn't believe that he has been treated justly. Throughout the book, Job holds firm to his belief that he has lived an upright and blameless life and that what has befallen him must be some kind of divine administrative error. Indeed, as we heard in our passage for this morning, Job wants nothing more than to put his case before God so that God can realize that an error has been made. Both Job and his friends subscribe to a

worldview in which God's justice is black and white, where good and upright lives lead to reward while sinful and wasteful lives lead to suffering and tragedy.

It is, ironically, a very American theology—this belief that our fortunes or misfortunes are signs of our hard work and goodness or our laziness and sub-par morals. We might not put it so bluntly, but you can see this theology at work every time we try to understand or make sense of a tragedy. It's why when we hear that someone has died of COVID despite being vaccinated and careful, and we ask if they had any co-morbidities; why when we hear that someone has lung disease, we want to know if they were a smoker.

It's why the tragedies that horrify us the most are the ones we can't explain—the child with cancer, the health fanatic who dies of heart disease, the couple killed when a branch falls on their car while they're driving. These are the stories that challenge our implicit belief that suffering happens for a reason, that we have some control over what happens to us—that we can prevent our own suffering if we just avoid all the pitfalls that other people fall into.

But the book of Job lays waste to this belief. If you can wade through the thirty plus chapters of speeches between Job and his friends, you eventually find that Job gets his wish to confront God. After his friends have exhausted their arguments and explanations, God appears to Job out of the whirlwind and it becomes clear that God has heard Job's case. Yet, despite Job's confidence, God does not vindicate Job—God does not even seem to address Job's situation. Instead, God takes Job on a tour of creation and challenges Job's implicit claim that he understands how the world should work: "did you lay the foundations of the earth," God asks Job. "Do you know how the Leviathan was created or the feeding habits of the lions?" "Do you really believe you understand how all of creation hangs together? Do you really think it is as simple as you have made it out to be?" For multiple chapters, God shows Job how complex and intricate creation is and asks him if he would like to try running the world for a day.

And, at the end of God's eye-opening tour, Job is satisfied. Or, if not satisfied, at least humbled—humbled and willing to accept that perhaps he doesn't know, that perhaps God's justice isn't as black and white as he assumed, and that, perhaps, there is no good answer for why we suffer, why bad things happen to good people.

We want there to be a reason for suffering. Ideally, we would like an explanation or cause—something we can use to prevent tragedy from befalling us. But, if that's not possible, we'll settle for a reason—a test of our fortitude, a teaching opportunity, an cosmic architectural layout that requires one door to be closed in order for another door to be opened. You can hear it in the things we say to people who are suffering: "at least you had or still have ...", "God must have needed ...", "someday you'll look back and understand ...", "everything happens for a reason ...".

But the book of Job insists that these are all lies. It may be that you learn something from your tragedy, that an opportunity presents itself, that you can find a silver lining. But none of

those explain suffering—God might make something good out of something bad, but God does not cause the bad to create the good, nor is God’s justice a simple one to one correlation that we can predict and control.

The book of Job insists that the closest we will ever come to knowing why bad things happen to good people is to know why they don’t happen—they don’t happen because of something we did, they don’t happen to teach us a lesson or to create new opportunities or to test our faith or to form our character. Nor do they happen because God is absent. The book of Job insists that bad things happen (they just do), that God is present in the midst of them, and that sometimes the only response we’re going to be able to muster is to rail against God and the unfairness of it all. And, it is this response that God lifts up at the end of the book of Job as being the most faithful response offered by any of the characters involved.

Thanks be to God.