

Pentecost 18B 2009

Proper 22

Texts: Job 1:1, 2:1-10

Psalm 26

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

Mark 10:2-16

“Shall we receive the good from the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” Job 2:10

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

This is one of those Sunday’s when the readings for the day are all difficult. They are not difficult in that the message is hard to find, but difficult in the way the messages need to be preached. I get to preach either on a question that has vexed theologians for thousands of years should I decide on the Old Testament lesson, or I get to preach on the very difficult and sensitive issue of Mark’s teaching on marriage and divorce. As one of my clergy colleagues put it this week, “where is the good news in all of that?”

My choice for preaching was sealed when early Thursday morning I learned of a terrible accident that claimed the lives of two Sewanee students and left another two critically injured. On their way to an early morning crew practice, the car they were riding in was hit broadside by an 18 wheeler. Two beautiful young women, with great intelligence and promise, were killed instantly. The other two suffered severe injuries to their limbs, one of them has a broken neck and will be in a neck and back brace for many months.

My heart has been very heavy all week. As a mother with children the same age as those killed and injured the biggest fear I have was realized by four families that I do not know yet have a connection to. As you have guessed by now the sermon will be addressing the Old Testament lesson.

Today we have a reading from the Book of Job, that incredible story that is considered the finest Wisdom literature in the Judeo-Christian writings. The story of the faithful yet suffering servant is not indigenous to the Hebrew Bible; it is found in many cultures writings,

some much older than our scripture. The questions it poses are questions every culture from the beginning of time has wrestled with.

The Book of Job deals with some of the most difficult and necessary questions about God that humanity could ever consider, namely, if God is all-good, why is evil and unnecessary suffering permitted to go on? If God is all-powerful, why won't God stop it?

These are questions around the issue of what is known as theodicy, the attempts to reconcile God's power and goodness with the unnecessary and undeserved suffering of God's people. Whereas these questions have always been asked, they became much more than just a theological mental exercise in our day and time due to the Holocaust. God's justice, or perceived lack of it, was put front and center into a world grappling with the deaths and suffering of tens of millions of people and the attempted annihilation of an entire race.

The argument seems to go like this; if God is all-good, God would never allow such suffering. As we all know, and as some of us have directly experienced, suffering does exist in this world, so therefore God cannot be good. The second argument is, if God is all-powerful than God could stop these tragedies from occurring. Because tragedies do continue to occur, God is either not powerful enough to stop them or doesn't care enough to intervene.¹

It seems to me that we have put God in a box with these arguments. We conceive through logic what we believe to be the answer to these difficult and painful questions. We do this, I believe, as a way of trying to control uncontrollable events.

Part of the tearing of the soul that occurs when we experience unwarranted and unmerited suffering is precisely because we aren't in control and if we aren't in control and if God isn't in control, than life is capricious and chaotic and as a result nothing we do or say matters. If we aren't in control and God isn't in control, if nothing we say or do matters, than we don't matter, and the loved ones we lost don't matter. And as humans we can't deal with the notion that we do not matter.

¹ Gerald Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss* 1995 p. 150

Often times when tragedy strikes, when someone we love dies or is diagnosed with a terminal illness, when our spouse or child has to endure daily difficulties due to a handicap or disability, we want to know the answer to one question, and all of you know what that question is, and have probably asked it yourselves. Why?

Why has this happened to us? Why has this happened to me? Why has this terrible turn of events come upon our doorstep? I'm a good person, I have a relationship with Jesus, I treat my fellow human beings decently, I pay my taxes and work hard at my job so, Why!

We want to know why thinking it will make things better, thinking "well, at least I have the satisfaction of knowing," as if by knowing why we could rewind the accident or illness, could undo what has up-ended our life and our world. But knowing why cannot do any of those things. Knowing why is a threadbare blanket given to a frightened, anxious, and cold human being.

Job's wife tells him to get it all out, to curse God and then decide to die because things are so bad. Neither Job nor his wife had any idea how bad things were going to get. As if the physical malady wasn't enough, later on Job will lose everything that has ever meant anything to him.

Job doesn't know why all his riches were taken away, or why all his children were taken away or why all his material possessions were destroyed and his cattle stolen. Job's friends want to sit around and think the situation through and they think they know why it all happened. Their supposition as to why all this happened to a servant of God gave Job no comfort. Surmising "why" did nothing to lessen the grief and loss, the pain of emptiness, the rage at how unfair it all was.

C. S. Lewis, the great English novelist and apologist for the Christian faith writes poignantly about finding love late in life in an American woman by the name of Joy. They corresponded for a few years and when she went to England to meet him she asked him to marry her. He did, and he found a happiness he had never known. Three short years later Joy died of bone cancer. The bright light of his life went out.

Lewis had a tumultuous relationship with God afterwards. Then one day, as he was wrestling with the question of why this happened to him,

his question was answered by another question, “Why not me? Am I so different or so special that I should walk through life unscathed, unknowing of what suffering is or feels like?” The “Why not me?” question turned Lewis’s life and relationship with God around. As a result Lewis was able to live and breathe again.

A little earlier I stated that by thinking that God could either be powerful or good, or neither one, we were putting God in a box of our own making. We were asking the transcendent God to conform to our ways of thinking so that we could deal with an overwhelming situation or set of events. We need to have something or someone in control because if there is no control we don’t matter and the horrendous pain and suffering we are a part of doesn’t matter.

The whole point of the Incarnation is that we do matter to God. We matter passionately as do our loved ones, as does all creation. It is because our suffering is so intense and matters so much that God came to earth to be among us and to share in that suffering. It is because we matter to God that God becomes vulnerable, becomes unfairly accused, unfairly tried, unfairly executed and as a result can enter into the deepest, darkest, most painful places of our hearts.

God knows what it is like to lose someone he loves more than himself. God knows what it is to suffer unjustly at the hands of others. God knows. Because God knows suffering and pain, God is with us and our loved ones in our suffering. Because God is present in our suffering we are never alone in it. Never. God chose to enter our pain, not walk away from it. God chose to love us and share all that we go through, every moment of every day, in every circumstance.

There are questions we will never have answers to, not in this lifetime anyway.

The best we can do is to know that we walk through life and death loved, cared for and never alone. And that knowledge is more comforting than the threadbare blanket of knowing why.

Amen.

