

## Deep Well Questions: “Why do We Suffer?”

*Job: 1:1, 2: 1-10*

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 person 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.

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Burden and blessing--  
two blossoms  
on the same branch.  
To be so lost in this radiant wilderness.

The short poem we used as our Call to Worship this morning is by a favorite poet, Gregory Orr. It comes from his autobiographical book entitled, *The Blessing* which is tale from when he was twelve years old. It's a tragic story about how he accidentally shot and killed his younger brother during a hunting excursion. It's detailed about the guilt and shame he embodied since he pulled the trigger. The replaying of the shot fired, and the sounds of screaming haunting his dreams. It was a depth of sorrow which he could not escape. Some tried to tell him it was not his fault with antidotes, including his Sunday school teacher, who, in trying to comfort him told him his brother was with Jesus and his death was somehow, “all part of God's plan.” Which left him wondering, what kind of a god would include such heartbreak and suffering in “the paln??

It's a Job question. It is possibly the deepest human question we have. If God is loving, why is there so much suffering? It is the earliest question scripture attempts to wrestle with through Job's folklore tale. We know the story: Job is faithful. Job has abundance. So the Accuser, who is called *Hasatan* or “the Satan” says, “It makes sense Job is faithful: he has it all! A big house, lots of resources, lots of kids who will inherit it. He's got it made! But take it away, and I bet he will sing a different tune about God.” Notice: The accuser attempts to draw a connecting

between our faithfulness and our blessedness. Except, we know what happens: the blessings start becoming burdens. Job now is under a downpour of curses as he starts losing it all—from possessions to beloved family members—and when confronted by his family and friends to blame God—or by telling Job he must’ve done something wrong to illicit such suffering, he remains true to his convictions. “What should we receive the good from God, but not the bad?” Blessing and burden. Two blossoms on the same branch...But still we wonder, don’t we? If God is loving, why do bad things happen?

So, let’s search for the meaning of the story. Is it that we too are to remain devoted even throughout life’s trials? Maybe. Is the takeaway that God is in charge of giving and taking away blessings, and God is God so don’t bother questioning it? I hope not! But I wonder if the deeper truth is simply that suffering happens, and while we naturally attach some divine purpose or plan to it, it really has nothing to do with God at all. Yes, sometimes suffering is put upon us, through some act of violence like war, or hate crimes, or small hearted religion. Sometimes it’s a freak accident or a natural disaster—wrong place at the wrong time. Others are brought about by genetics. But the truth is that suffering is webbed into our human experience. Jesus addresses this issue when a group of people ask him about a tragedy where a bridge collapsed on a bunch of Galileans. They ask, “Did they die in such a tragic way because of their sinful actions?” And Jesus, says, “No, of course not! God has nothing to do with it.”

I remember during my chaplaincy, sitting with a young woman in the emergency room, whose new husband painted planes for Boeing. He fell off the four-story ladder and died instantly. As she wept, she kept saying, “This doesn’t make sense, we are good people. We give to charities. We might not go to church, but we’re good people.” Then she turned to me and asked, “Did it happen because we didn’t go to church?” Somehow she attached her suffering to her faithfulness. It’s normal to go there, but it’s not true. So perhaps the deeper truth of Job’s tale is that we can do everything right and still suffering happens because it is webbed into our human experience. Some of it we have control over, most of it we do not. But as Jesus clearly says it has nothing to do with God’s judgement.

So, perhaps the question isn’t necessarily why do we suffer—although we wonder—but more, what do we do with suffering when it happens. Because, we can do everything in the name of love and hate still happens, the system still happens, the accident still happens, the disease still happens, the cross still happens. St. Paul in his final letter to Rome as he sits in prison says that suffering isn’t merely something that we survive. It is something which *can yield something hopeful and can become a transformative force for the good*. To which, I for one, might initially cringe and scoff at. But he says, it can produce resiliency, endurance, hope, compassion, and most of all an avenue for bringing us together for healing.

And when I think about it: how many of us have known someone who has died too soon? How many of us have either had a loved one with cancer or have had cancer ourselves? How many of us have struggled with finding acceptance or accepting ourselves? How many of us have been on the receiving end of racism or sexism or some phobia because of someone else’s stuff? Live long enough and suffering happens. But maybe, just maybe by the grace of God, it has the potential to bring us closer because we all go through something at some point. And then we find ourselves getting to be the church.

Burden and blessing—  
two blossoms on the same branch.

Every once in a while, I look through old church photo albums in the library—call me nostalgic. Next to the photo binders is a black binder celebrating the church's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, from 2009. Written in the binder are some member's reflections of Trinity. Some stories talk about the warmth of Trinity. Some speak of a fun memory. But do you know what each story has in common? They all tell of a moment when they lost a loved one and the church showed up: to show support, to bring a casserole or a pot of soup, to be someone to lean on through their darkest moments. One person put it this way: "I don't know how people without a church connection keep going when they are in a situation where it feels like the world is flat and they are standing on the edge of it."

It's painful to think about but we will all end up on that edge if we haven't been there already. And when the world seems flat, it's a mystery how God might be transforming even the darkest moments to bring love, and dare I say, maybe even a blessing into the world [point at the cross].

Burden and blessing—  
two blossoms on the same branch.  
To be so lost in this radiant wilderness...  
which doesn't feel quite so impossible when  
we are standing on the edge of the world together. Amen.