

Last weekend was a three-day weekend for many and a four-day weekend for families in the Wachusett School District; which meant that a fair number of you were out of town. So let me recap the sermon I preached very briefly as a reminder to those who were here and as an update to those who were not; since today is kind of a sequel.

Last weekend we heard some tough words from Job. You will recall that Job was a guy who had it all: beautiful wife, well-adjusted kids, great job, good health, and plenty of friends. And then the bottom fell out. He lost it all practically overnight. It sounds a bit like a fairy tale and maybe it is just that. We don't need to go on a quest for the historical Job to find truth in this story, though, because I think what is so scary about the Book of Job is that it can and does happen just this way in real life to good people far too often. In pastoral ministry and in my everyday life I meet people who have way more than their share of troubles, usually because of circumstances way beyond their control. And once things begin to spiral downward it is difficult to turn all of that around. What is amazing to me, and scary to me, is just how quickly an ordered life can unravel. All of a sudden the economy takes a nose dive and the company we worked for is closing its doors to open a plant in China. Gone is the salary we had assumed would cover college tuitions and the mortgage on the summer place. Before you know it your marriage is falling apart and the kids' grades are dropping...

So last week we heard Job crying out to the God whom it is no longer clear is even there. It's just too dark for Job to tell: he looks to his right and left, in front and behind, but he can't find God. And he needs to find God because he wants his day in court. He wants to make his argument, to make his case before the Almighty: what has happened to him is not fair. And we kind of left it there.

Preaching those words wasn't easy (and I don't imagine hearing them was any easier.) But the fact of the matter is that we owe it to God and one another to speak truthful words here, even when those words are difficult ones. Job is no whiner and his complaint is justified, I think. His questions are fair ones that go to the heart of faith: if God is just and if God is powerful then why is there so much pain and suffering in this world? If we gloss over the Good Friday stuff of our lives, then we have no business proclaiming Easter hope.

So today we continue with the narrative and God shows up like a whirlwind in the midst of thunder and lightning! Imagine that! Imagine yourself praying for a sign, praying for God to show up and it happens just like that.

Only God doesn't show up sheepishly to be cross-examined by Job. Nor does God show up with answers as to why the just suffer or to be more specific why *this* bad stuff has happened to *this* good man. God shows up loaded for bear. God shows up with God's own set of questions. In fact that is the first thing I want you to notice because I think it is of profound importance theologically. Job had one question for God: “why me?” God literally comes at Job with a whirlwind of questions: “gird up your loins like a man, Job and I will question you...”

- Who is this...?
- Where were you...?
- Who determined...? Who stretched...? Who has put...? Who has given...?
- Can you lift? Can you provide? ...Can you send...? Can you hunt...?

We'll have to wait until next week to hear how Job responds but for today it is our task to reflect on God's whirlwind speech. What does it mean?

One interpretative trajectory focuses on the sovereignty and inscrutability of God. *God gets to be God, not us.* God's questions remind Job (and more importantly the reader of the Book of Job) that we aren't as smart as we think we are. God's ways are not our ways. That isn't an answer to the question of human suffering but it's a clear reminder that the universe doesn't work like a clock, and God isn't a giant engineer in the sky. I think of the film, *Bruce Almighty*, which I love not only because I happen to be a fan of Jim Carrey and Morgan Freeman and Jennifer Aniston but because I also think underneath all the laughs there is a pretty serious point directly related to the topic at hand.

You may recall that Morgan Freeman plays God in that film, but he's tired and in need of a break so he leaves Jim Carrey in charge for a while. One of my favorite parts is when he just grants every prayer request as if prayer was like throwing a coin into a wishing well. Everyone wins the lottery; I mean *everyone* who wished they would win does win. So the “jackpot” is split so far that the winnings total about 49 cents each! Granting every prayer request leads to chaos, because most people don't really know what is best for them but only what they think is best for them. So one might imagine Morgan Freeman speaking these words out of the whirlwind to Jim Carrey and essentially the message goes something like this: “Do you want to switch jobs for a while, Job? I'll take a little vacation and leave you in charge of the universe for a week or so and we'll see how that goes, alright? You up for that?” Gird up your loins like a man, boy!

Another interpretive trajectory starts at the opposite end—with Job. One thing about suffering—and this is an observation, not a judgment: suffering can make us very self-centered. Our world becomes smaller and smaller. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in her work on the stages of grief, spoke about isolation and depression as stages one who is going through loss has to navigate. That is very real, I think, and part of what has happened to Job. Granted, his friends are real schmucks. But nevertheless, Job's very real pain has meant the loss of family and a rift with his friends. He's all alone in the world and worst of all it feels as if even God has abandoned him.

So the mere presence of God is a kind of grace because at least he knows that he is not alone. But God's speech also points him outward to the natural world, that is back to the world beyond himself. I once took a Continuing Ed class on Job that was team-taught by a Biblical Scholar and a Professor of Pastoral Care. The latter insisted that we misunderstand and confuse Pastoral Care with being nice. So we think a good pastor (and by extension, God) ought to focus with Job on his loss and ask him how he is feeling about that. But in fact that kind of approach can contribute to keeping a person stuck. He argued that God is like a tough but wise therapist in this speech; a truth-teller who helps Job make a break-through to a new place. So one might hear God's whirlwind speech as something like this:

Job: you need to go on a whale watch and consider Leviathan that I made for the sport of it. Or take a walk along the ridge of the Grand Canyon, or hike the Rockies or camp underneath Pleiades and Orion in Acadia National Park. Or consider the glorious array of maples from the top of Mt. Wachusett on a clear autumn day in New England. Sit on your porch during a lightening storm and consider. Consider the ravens and the mountain lions. Consider the lilies of the field, Job.

Now this trajectory isn't mutually exclusive from the first one. In fact, I think they are really just two sides to one coin. The first focuses on God's sovereignty and the second on human limitations. In both cases we are reminded that the job of being the Almighty is not open. In both cases we are reminded that we aren't in control. I think God is saying it's a big world out there and it's not all about us. That doesn't mean that God doesn't care about us, but simply that our measure of the universe can't always be about what is or is not working for us at any given moment. That in no way means that our pain is less real when we suffer. But sometimes when we can transform that pain into something like service we find healing, even if not explanations.

A child is killed by a drunk driver and there is no answer to that question of why God has “allowed this to happen.” But there are other drunk drivers and there other children and when mothers get M.A.D.D. together and step beyond their own circle of pain to embrace the needs of others, both they and the world are in some real and tangible way set on the path toward healing. Or a man sits and waits for his chemotherapy and notices this incredibly brave nine-year old girl who has lost all of her hair and it dawns on him that he is not the only one fighting this terrible disease and the link between them is strong enough to inspire him to keep fighting, not only for himself but as part of something bigger than self.

Maybe *Bruce Almighty* really is onto something, because maybe part of the healing process is to be able to step back and laugh. Did we really think that the question of human suffering has an answer we could possibly comprehend? Are we that arrogant as to believe that a question that the greatest minds throughout the centuries have wrestled with can be answered like a simple math problem? That God can show up and say: “*Well, Job, your questions are very fair so let me sit down and explain to you how this universe thing works...*” There will be time at the end for further questions!

Suffering is all too real, and no light matter. But the question “why me?” may not be the best or only question for us to ask. As someone has written, “why *not* me?” It's only when we can move away from being stuck on that first question that new and better questions can be asked. The Book of Job doesn't answer the question about why the just suffer. What it does do is to point us toward new and bigger questions that have the potential to lead us to hope. *New life is possible*. We are, after all, an Easter people. We gather here on the Day of Resurrection to remember the Paschal mystery, which is just another way of saying that Good Friday never gets the last word. It is hope that brings us together in communities like this one, not only to share our joys but to share our sorrow and pain as well. It is into this time and this place, into our lives, that the inscrutable, sovereign Creator still speaks what I hear as good news:

*Remember that you are dust. Holy, beloved, blessed dust shaped into my own image to be sure. But still, in the end, creatures and not the Creator. You are called to be human, not God Almighty.*