



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: October 18, 2009

Beyond Job's Complaint, Robert B. Culp
Job 38:1-7, 34-41

About 15 years ago, Jan walked into my church study in Maryland, and she proceeded to tell me her story several weeks before she and her family would join the church. She was a successful pediatrician, was married to a brilliant research physician at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, was mother to two adorable daughters who were preschoolers ... and she was dying of ovarian cancer.

In the months that followed, Jan attended church regularly, with her getting her picture taken with her girls for the church pictorial directory, even though she was in a wheelchair, was on oxygen, and had to arrange for the photographer to take her picture quickly while she held her breathing tubes on her lap. In subsequent weeks, she invested enormous energy in videotaping messages and writing special notes for her girls to be viewed and read on particular birthdays that Jan would miss after her death. She was amazingly at peace with her situation, and asked me to ensure that her daughters and her husband would receive the care and love of the church family after she died.

Several weeks after her death, I visited with her husband and their two girls, and after the nanny escorted the girls upstairs, Jim and I sat down and began to discuss all that had taken place in far too short a period of time – Jan's diagnosis, her brave efforts in experimental treatments, her strong faith and love of her family. At some point in our time together, Jim said, "Bob, I know that Jan asked you to check in on us, and that she was worried about me ... and my faith ... and how the girls would do after she died. I want you to know that I do believe in God. It's just that God and I are not on very good speaking terms right now."

Each one of us in this room, I suspect, knows what Jim was saying. For not only have we known such individuals who have suffered unspeakable tragedies and times of suffering within their lives, but also we ourselves have known times along our own journeys when the goodness and love of God have somehow been covered over by the heavy weight of our own suffering and sorrow ... times when we have struggled in our own conversations with God. And in this

first-hand knowledge, we have experienced, whether we have known it or not, a poignant kinship with Job.

Job has been called one of the most compelling figures in religious literature. We know him as a man who did everything right, a blameless and upright soul who feared God and turned away from evil, and a man who enjoyed the blessings of family and riches and health. And yet, he was a man who, through no fault of his own, was suddenly wiped out and suffered every kind of wrong.

Over a short period of time, Job veritably lost everything that was his – all his oxen and donkeys, his sheep and camels; all his servants who sought to protect his livestock; all his buildings and barns; and all ten of his children who were killed when the house where they were having a party was utterly destroyed by a ferocious wind.

Now initially, Job endured such painful losses with his characteristic and legendary patience ... grieving, of course, but still giving voice to his trustful faith in the Lord “who giveth and taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord.” But then in this ancient folktale involving God and Satan’s cosmic wager over this faithful soul, Job was hurt physically, in his own body, suffering boils and sores whose pain was unbearable. It was then that Job’s patience wore thin, and he erupted, cursing the day he was born.

Fred Buechner puts it this way: “Job said that if he had his way, his birthday would be stricken off the calendar entirely and never so much as mentioned again. He prayed to die but his heart went on beating. He prayed for the sun to go out like a match, but it kept on shining. His wife advised him to curse God and then go hang himself, but he stopped just short of that because he was a very good man and a very religious man and there were some lengths to which, even though he was almost out of his head with the horror of it all, he couldn’t quite bring himself to go. And that was the crux of his problem – the fact that he was a very good and a very religious man and knew it. Why had God let such things happen to him?”

It’s the question of theodicy; namely, how is it possible for an all-powerful and all-loving God to allow such suffering and evil to befall innocent souls within the created order and God’s own family? What are we to believe when bad things happen to good people? Biblical scholar Bart Ehrman calls this issue “God’s Problem,” the name of one of his most recent books, which he has subtitled “How the Bible Fails to Answer our Most Important Question – Why We Suffer.”

Indeed, the lack of any resolution in his mind after years of faithful struggling led Ehrman as a Christian pastor to turn away from his faith, to reject the God of his tradition, and to acknowledge himself to be an agnostic. Ehrman’s struggle reflects something of the intensity of Job’s struggle, but it also exposes our own spiritual wrestling, especially within an age where the sufferings and sorrows we know are sometimes more than we can seemingly bear.

It may not be the kind of answer for which we yearn in the face of such searching questions, but I suspect it is the struggling on our part that is important, and the integrity of our caring enough to wrestle with God first-hand that ultimately is what counts within the course of our spiritual journey.

For the better part of some 37 chapters, Job goes at it with God, pleading his case as an innocent man who is suffering undeserved pain and terrible losses. From the standpoint of the conventional wisdom of his day, which was basically that the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished, his plight makes no sense at all to Job – he was a good man and all his suffering was unfair. To complicate matters, his well-meaning friends gather around him and pepper him with meaningless clichés about God and about the faithful life God expects of us, accusing Job of certainly having done something sinful to bring on such personal tragedies, and at the same time seeking to defend the honor of God, for they know that God certainly does not make mistakes. But Job knows that he is not guilty. The more he suffers, though, the more platitudes his friends shower upon him.

Throughout these chapters, Job not only rejects the conventional wisdom of his friends, but he also expresses a deeply-felt desire to meet God face-to-face, so that he might confront God with the unfairness, the injustice of his suffering. Frustrated and exhausted by the arguments of his friends, depleted and depressed amidst the painful losses he has known, Job sits down on top of a dung heap and declares his innocence and his plea once more: “I am clean, without transgression. I am pure, and there is no iniquity in me. I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I championed the cause of the stranger. But these now turn away from me, and you, Lord, have cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes. I cry to you and you do not answer me. Oh, that I had one to hear me! Let the Almighty answer me!”

And at long last, the Lord clears his throat and speaks to Job out of the whirlwind, giving perhaps one of the most powerful and moving speeches that God gives in the entire Old Testament, bringing Job to his knees in awe and wonder. In some respects, God’s booming address reminds me of Dorothy’s audience with the Wizard of Oz ... with flashes of lightning and thunder amidst the vivid scenes of God’s creative activity within the history of the world: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements – surely you know!”

And so goes God’s response to Job’s complaint over the next four chapters. Now, admittedly, some have viewed God as a great cosmic bully in this exchange with Job, but others have seen God as a great cosmic artist here, a singer of sorts, of such power and magnificence, so

caught up in the incandescence of his own art that he never notices that he has long since ruptured the eardrums of his listener Job and reduced him to a quivering pulp.

Even so, God never really answers the searching questions of Job. In fact, God's speech reflects a great deal about God's creative omnipotence and power, and goes a long way in making it very clear that God is God, and Job is not. The questions of Job's sufferings and sorrows, though, seem to be left unaddressed. And as Virginia Woolf is reported to have written to a friend the morning after reading the book of Job, "I don't think God comes well out of it."

It's at this point that God pauses in his rebuttal to Job's complaint, and Job breaks in with his humble confession: "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you."

Indeed. Paraphrasing Fred Buechner, in God's presence, Job saw the glory of God shot through with sheer, fierce light and life and gladness, and heard the great voice raised in song so full of terror and wildness and beauty ... and from that moment on, nothing else mattered. All possible questions melted away like mist, and all possible explanations withered like grass. What Job had wanted and yearned for more than anything else was an answer from God. Instead, what he received ... what he got ... was God himself, in all his magnificent glory.

Barbara Brown Taylor observes that if there is any answer to the vexing problem of unjustified suffering in Job, it is only this: that for most of us, the worst thing that can happen is not to suffer without reason or explanation, but to suffer without God, without any hope of consolation or comfort or rebirth. Because all other pain pales next to the pain of feeling ourselves abandoned by God and left all alone.

What the story of Job reveals to us is that God does not abandon us in the end. When there is nothing left in Job's life – when all the flocks have been stolen and all the children have been buried and when all Job can do is to scrape his sores without relief, what is still left is the God of all creation ...

- * the God who laid the foundation of the earth;
- * the God who has walked the recesses of the deep, even amidst those valleys where the shadows of suffering and death are known;
- * the God who has created Behemoth and Leviathan, and every single thing that breathes and has life.

The One to whom we cry out is the Lord of Life, and this One never runs out of life and from this One we may always ask for more.

In this wondrous folktale tucked in the pages of the Bible, we learn from Job, as we also learn from the Psalmist and the prophets and even Jesus himself, that we do not have to be

polite as we ask answers from God. When you consider Job's complaint, and the raging fists of anger raised and expressed by other faithful souls within God's family, it is probably true that God prefers such authentic (and faithful) outrage over against the empty, platitude-filled piety of Job's friends.

In other words, when we are suffering in pain, we are permitted, and even encouraged, to express ourselves as loudly and insistently as possible. As William Safire once noted, it seems that "Devout defiance pleases God." For the promise is that God will come to us where we are, searching us out with a stubborn and understanding love. Indeed, God will open our closed fist in the end to take us by the hand, leading us into a first-hand experience of the sacred that not only shatters our second-hand religion, but also transforms us in the process.

Let us pray: O Lord, we confess that in times of need and struggle we yearn for answers and explanations and reasons. And yet, oftentimes what you share, amidst silences as well as whirlwinds cloaked in mystery, is a responsive nearness and an abiding love that draws near to us, and listens to us, and stays close by our side. Thank you, dear God, for your loving presence, through Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.