

October 6, 2024
“Love Happens”
Job 2:1-10 / Psalm 26
Pastor Tim

The biblical character of Job is a poster child for the age-old truism, “shit happens.” Pardon my language.

Pain happens. Loss happens. Devastation happens. Trauma happens. Violence happens. Grief happens. Suffering happens.

Sometimes suffering is caused by injustice, by evil, by people causing each other suffering. By people causing the earth to suffer, which in turn, as we know all too well, causes others to suffer.

Sometimes we cause our own suffering, whether we mean to or not.

And sometimes suffering just happens. It is a natural part of life, as Buddhism asserts; a basic characteristic of our existence, the first of Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths—described by one commentary as “a contingency plan for dealing with the suffering humanity faces.”

In particular, our desire and ignorance are named as causes of our suffering. Desire for pleasure, material goods and immortality; desire which cannot ultimately be satisfied. And ignorance to do with not seeing the world as it really is, fueling things like greed, envy, hatred and anger. In these and other ways, we can effectively cause our own suffering.

The Fourth Noble Truth lays out what Buddhists call the Noble Eightfold Path, steps toward spiritual enlightenment and the end of suffering.

But back to Job, whose suffering – dare I say it – takes on biblical proportions.

In our reading this morning, that suffering includes the infliction of leprosy: “loathsome sores ... from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.” Physical pain and discomfort.

But it's much worse than that. Job was a man of great wealth. Before our reading, he literally loses almost everything. His livestock are stolen away. His servants and all his

children are killed. He loses his livelihood, all his servants, and almost all of his immediate family. Only he and his wife survive.

The leprosy comes AFTER all that, suffering upon suffering. Job's story is a caricature of human suffering. It's so bad that his wife, as you heard in our reading, castigates him for not lashing out at God.

"Do you still persist in your integrity?" she asks. "Curse God, and die." Your integrity means nothing now. God has abandoned you and us. Put yourself out of your misery.

And as the story goes, Job responds with a theological zinger: "Shall we receive good from God and not receive evil?"

Shall we receive good from God, and not receive evil?

It is a question fundamentally rooted in the belief that God is the source of both blessing AND suffering. After all—again, as the story goes—Job's suffering is apparently the direct result of a backroom deal between God and Satan.

God lifts up Job as a "blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil." God commends Job for persisting in his integrity—there's that word again—even after his property is taken away, and all his servants and children killed.

It is Satan who pushes the envelope, looking to further test Job's integrity – to test just how blameless and upright he really is. And again with God's permission, it is Satan who takes Job's suffering a step further with the infliction of leprosy. Pain upon pain. Suffering upon suffering.

Now we should note here that the book of Job is curiously structured. It begins in the prologue, as in our reading this morning, with prose—the first two chapters. And it ends in the epilogue with prose—the final chapter, chapter 42, verses 7-17.

Everything else is poetry. Poetry portraying a rolling dialogue between Job and his three so-called friends, then a fourth perspective from someone called Elihu, and ultimately between Job and God.

There is not scholarly consensus, but I resonate with the theory that the prose sections were tacked on later. To clean up the story. To theologize and explain away the suffering.

Starting with—let me say—the theological nonsense that God, the God we know as the God of Love itself, gambles away people's lives to make a point. And ending with what amounts to the happiest of all possible endings under the circumstances: Job's fortunes restored, two-fold. He gets new property. He gets a whole new family, and dies content at 140 years old, "full of days."

In between all that Job curses the day he was born. Job wrestles with the why behind the what of his suffering, stuck as he is—and as so many are—in the misguided theological assumption that God blesses and protects those who are good and faithful and righteous, and curses and punishes those who are not. That God is omnipotent, all-powerful, in control of life and all our lives.

His friends—and I say "so-called" friends because, after sitting shiva with Job for the required seven days of his initial grief, just beyond our reading—proceed to argue—each in their own way—that he deserves what he got.

They theologize their way around the age-old question of why bad things happen to good people by insisting that Job must've done something wrong, and so is rightly being punished by God.

And Job is stuck in the same assumption, though he insists he has done nothing wrong. Nothing to deserve all this.

But such response reveals what is true for many of us: that we are profoundly uncomfortable with ambiguity, with uncertainty, with chaos. We are uncomfortable when things are out of control, out of our control, when suffering happens for no reason. So we desperately cling to the ultimately harmful theological conclusion that at least God is in control. That puts God behind every blessing and every curse. Every reward and punishment.

If we are thriving, enjoying prosperity, surely God must be blessing us. And if we or others are not, are suffering, surely God must be punishing us or them. Surely there must be a reason. Surely God has a plan.

Job's "friends" are uncomfortable with Job's suffering, so they explain it away. Because it's easier.

But I don't believe that's how God works. I refuse to believe that's who God is.

If we believe in a God of UNCONDITIONAL love, we cannot at the same time believe in a God who makes backroom deals to test our faith. A God who, as the saying goes, both giveth and taketh away. A God who judges and punishes and manipulates our lives in order to make us more faithful, more righteous. A God who protects us from harm and pain and suffering.

Oh how we wish, with every fiber in our beings, that we could protect our loved ones from harm and pain and suffering. But we can't. And neither can God.

Or MAYBE God can and chooses not to? That's another common theological refrain but that, of course, opens up a whole other theological can of worms. Why would God choose not to? Or choose to sometimes but not other times? For some and not for others?

The truth is, life happens. God has made it so. That IS the unpredictable order of things, like it or not.

And so while life happens, so does death. While joy happens, so does pain. So does shit – again, pardon my language.

So does suffering. Some caused by injustice, evil, by people causing each other and the earth suffering. Some we cause ourselves, by our own attachments and desires and ignorance, as Buddhism teaches. And some just happens.

We are forced to reckon with the randomness of suffering. Everything DOES NOT happen for a reason. Life is not always fair. God does not have some mysterious plan; we ARE the plan. God does not judge and punish and manipulate our lives to make us more faithful

and righteous and just, but God does call us—within our own free will—TO faithfulness and righteousness and justice. To love. That IS the plan.

One biblical commentary suggests that the “central theme of the book of Job is the possibility of disinterested righteousness.” Disinterested righteousness.

“The author asks whether virtue depends on a universe that operates by the principle of reward and punishment.” The author asks, in essence, whether “people will serve God without thought of the carrot or the stick ...”

In other words, will we learn to love for its own sake? Will we learn to love—as God does—unconditionally? Will we learn to love, with integrity (there's that word again!), without need for rules. Without thought of reward or punishment, carrot or stick.

As the Psalmist pleads, “Vindicate me, O HOLY ONE, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the HOLY ONE without wavering.”

To love God, to serve God, IS to love our neighbors as ourselves. To love even those we consider enemies. To love without WAVING, even in the face or in the midst of suffering.

That's the integrity we're talking about. That's what the prophets asserted, with an emphasis on love consistently manifested as justice, as the common good. That's what Jesus insisted, with no theological gymnastics required.

To love God, to serve God, is to love the whole of Creation in and with which all our lives are interdependent. With all our heart and soul and mind and strength.

If you read through the eventual response from God to Job's pleas for an explanation of his suffering, you'll see that God does not provide an explanation. Because there isn't one.

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins ..., I will question you, and you shall declare to me. (38:2-3) ... Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?” (40:8-9)

What God DOES do is paint an elaborate picture of divine beauty and majesty from the very beginning: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” God gives Job

some much-needed perspective. God simply but forcefully redirects Job back to an understanding of his proper, relatively ignorant, interconnected place within the vast, mysterious, glorious, love-filled, life-giving whole of Creation.

Job questions where God is in the midst of his suffering, so God reminds him that God is always present through the gift of Creation. God's presence, God's love for us, is baked into the fabric of Creation, from the beginning of our lives and the beginning of life itself.

God is not punishing Job. God is not the cause of Job's suffering. Sometimes suffering just is, caused by others, caused by ourselves or without any cause at all. But if suffering is, so is beauty and blessing and grace and love.

And as those loved by God from the very beginning, we are the ones called to co-create, with God, such beauty and blessing and grace and love. God continues to love us THROUGH the beauty and blessing and grace and love we offer ourselves and each other.

What Job needed from his so-called friends was love, not the barrage of judgment and blame they threw at him, rooted in a theology that only served to pour salt on his wounds. What he needed was love.

What Job needed from his friends was for them to help ease his suffering by assuming his suffering as if it were their own, as with the charge found in the letter to the Hebrews to remember "those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." That is what it looks like to live as though we are interconnected – as asserted in the letter to the Corinthian church and celebration of the One body, that "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it;" and "if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

Suffering happens, but God insists that love happens all the more.

Isn't that Easter in a nutshell? Jesus undergoes all manner of suffering, including the cruelest, most painful punishment the Roman Empire could come up with, because of his commitment to love like God does. And his insistence on organizing others to claim and proclaim that same love.

Jesus is killed. Unjust suffering happens at the hands of the political and religious authorities of the day, but the message of Easter is that love happens all the more. Love doesn't die on the cross. New life emerges from the tomb.

"Shall we receive good from God and not receive evil?" That's Job's initial question, but it's the wrong question. God doesn't work that way.

The question is: "Shall we love as God does, unconditionally?" As Jesus did? Or shall we not at least try, in and through our lives, with as much integrity as we can muster, to bring love, beauty, blessing, grace? Try, in and through community, to ease each other's and our own and the world's suffering?

That is the question. And that, friends, is our calling.

In the midst even of suffering, love happens. But only if we make it happen. God is counting on it.

May it be so.