

“Answering to God”

Job 38: 1-11

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Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do some families not have enough to eat and why are some children homeless? Why does a young hard working man get cancer? Why does a weekly prayer circle in a Charleston church get attacked with tragic senseless violence? Why do bad things happen to good people?

This is the question that most of us have asked at some point in our life, and it is the question that is asked over and over again in the book of Job. Job was a book that was written by people who were trying to understand human suffering. A way, way, way, long time ago people believed that if you were good, God would protect you, and if you were bad, God would punish you. Job was a story that was told to help people understand a new way of relating to God--one where it was understood that no one, no matter how good or faithful or kind someone was, no one was immune from pain or suffering. It was a way that helped people understand that even though God does not cause that suffering, God is right there supporting us when it happens.

Job was a good and righteous man--he was wealthy, he was happily married and has beautiful, smart, obedient sons and daughters. He had a strong faith in God. His faith was so strong that when God and Satan are hanging out together in heaven, as they did from time to time, God says to Satan, "have you seen my friend Job? There is no one else

like him on earth! He is the best, and he would never do anything evil." Satan thinks this is just because Job has never been tested--he says that God has made Job's life too easy. God says, " No way! Job would be good and faithful no matter what. Do what you want to Job's life, without physically hurting him, and you'll see that I'm right." Satan agrees and makes it so Job loses all his money. His sons and daughters are taken away from him. Job weeps and is devastated, but he says, "God gave me everything and God took it away. And still I will praise God."

Back up in heaven, God says, "Haha Satan! What did I tell you? Job didn't turn to evil." Satan replies, "That's only because you didn't let me physically harm him! People change when it's them you hurt, not just the things and the people they care about." God doesn't think this is true, so God agrees to let Satan hurt Job, as long as he doesn't kill him. Soon Job is covered in painful, disgusting, puss-filled sores from his head to his toes. But still he won't turn against God. Everyone around Job--his wife and his friends--think this is God's fault and tell Job that God must be punishing him for something bad he has done. Job wishes he had never been born, he questions his whole life, and he wallows in his misery, but still he won't blame God.

Finally, Job turns to god. He says, "Lord, why is this happening to me? Aren't I good person? Why are so many bad things happening to me? Don't you care about me?" God's response to him is the passage we read this morning. God says, "Job, are you really asking me if I care about you? Are you really asking if I look after you? Who do you think created the foundation of the earth? Who shaped the mountains and the valleys and determined how long the deserts would be and where the ocean would begin and end?" We only read 11 verses, but God continues talking for a total of 129 verses and details

every aspect of creation--all of the animals and different parts of the earth and how God thoughtfully created them and looks after them. When God is done, Job says, "Okay! Okay! I get the point! You care about me." Job never figured out why he suffered--or why anyone suffers--, but for the rest of his life he understood that it wasn't God who caused his pain and that no matter what he faced, God would be looking after him.

Thanks to the story of Job, we still believe that today. We don't know why bad things happen to good people, but we know that God does not wish for it to happen, God does not cause it as some sort of punishment, and no matter what we face, God will be right beside us caring for us and loving us because we are God's creation and nothing is more important than that.

Sometimes we forget this. Sometimes our pain and our grief is so huge that we forget how much God loves us. Sometimes everything feels so difficult to face that we start to wonder if we did something to deserve it. It becomes hard for us to connect with God, let alone take comfort in hearing that God cares for us and loves us. When someone is in that place of despair and anger and hurt that's where the rest of us come in. That's when we need each other to the most.

I was reminded of that this week after the tragedy at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. I see how this has caused grief and fear for so many of our sisters and brothers--not just in Charleston but all over our country. We are called to be an example of God's love. To say no to violence and racism and senseless pain and to work together to create a world that feels safe for everyone.

Our National Minister for Youth and Young Adults, Waltrina Middleton, lost her first cousin this week in Charleston. In a moving letter, Waltrina quoted CS Lewis, "It is

easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to cord a box." She continued in her own words, "but suppose your life depended on that invisible rope that is your faith? Today, the weight of that invisible rope tugs at my trembling heart, and such invisible faith is tested as we walk through the valleys of the shadows of death all around us."

Waltrina and her family know what Job knows--they know that our God who so carefully and tenderly created our world did not also create evil. She knows that even as she may struggle to understand why this week's events occurred, that through her faith she will find strength and comfort.

The nine people who lost their lives this week are my inspiration as I head to Buffalo with our Juniors and Seniors today. They have renewed my passion for being a light in the world and living embodiment of God's love for whomever I meet. This week we were all reminded, yet again, how much hurt there is in the world and how much work needs to be done to bring about healing and peace and hope.

Even when someone is in such a bad place they can't see God's love, they might be able to see our love. As Christians we are called to be that love for other people--to care for them, to help them, to support them, no matter what they are going through. We are called to remind them that they do not deserve their suffering and they have not done something that is causing them to be punished. We can remind them that sometimes bad things happen to good people and we don't know why that is. We do this because someday we might be in a similar place, and we do this because we know what it feels like to have the world pulled out from under us, to be knocked down, and we know that with love and support you will eventually make it through.

All of us going on mission trips this week will have the opportunity to do this. We will meet people in soup kitchens and homeless shelters and worksites who have had a hard life and who understands what it means to suffer. These are good people. Some will be veterans of the Army or the Navy, some will be dreaming of escaping the poverty they were born into, some will be refugee immigrants working to build a better life for their children. Whatever the story or reality is, we are not called to pity people--we are just called to love. To offer individuals the best we can give with our work, our kindness, and our support. Be present. Be open to someone with a different experience of life than your own. And even if it is just for a week, or a few hours, or even a few minutes, love them. Love them with your actions and your words. Be God's love for everyone that you encounter. Be God's love for each other when you are away from home or tired or having a difficult day this week. Support each other. Lift each other up.

Why do bad things happen to good people? I can't answer that for you, because I honestly don't know. As Job found out, we can't always change the bad things that happen to people, but we can change what happens next. We can be that beacon of peace and hope and love--God's love--that we all so desperately need. Amen.