

THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES Job 1:1, 2:1-10

1 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...

2 One day the heavenly beings^[a] came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan^[b] also came among them to present himself before the LORD. 2 The LORD said to Satan,^[c] "Where have you come from?" Satan^[d] answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." 3 The LORD said to Satan,^[e] "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." 4 Then Satan^[f] answered the LORD, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives.^[g]" 5 But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." 6 The LORD said to Satan,^[h] "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life."

7 So Satan^[i] 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. 8 Job^[j] took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

9 Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse^[k] God, and die." 10 But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman 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.

Footnotes:

- a. Job 2:1 Heb *sons of God*
- b. c, d, e, f, h, I, Job 2:1 Or *the Accuser*; Heb *ha-satan*
- g. Job 2:4 Or *All that the man has he will give for his life*
- j. Job 2:8 Heb *He*
- k. Job 2:9 Heb *Bless*

STEWARDSHIP SCRIPTURE Ephesians 2:19-22

2 19 So now you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, you are fellow citizens with God's people, and you belong to God's household. 20 As God's household, you are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21 The whole building is joined together in him, and it grows up into a temple that is dedicated to the Lord. 22 Christ is building you into a place where God lives through the Spirit.

Reader: The Word of the Lord.

People: *Thanks be to God.*

There is a book that became a best seller in the early 1980s—perhaps you remember it? It was called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, and it was written by Harold S. Kushner, a rabbi who had contemplated this issue deeply and painfully, having watched his son die at the age of fourteen, losing a battle to a condition he was born with and fought his entire life. Rabbi Kushner goes to the Book of Job for insight—a book of the Bible that could have shared that same title, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* but which was written 2500 years earlier.

Barbara Ann read us a very peculiar story from the Book of Job this morning, didn't she? If our ears heard it right, God and Satan have made a bet about Job. Satan has said that Job is only being faithful because he has received so much blessing—a beautiful house, a beautiful family, servants, wealth—and God has suggested that even if all that was taken away, Job would still be faithful, would still love God and abide by God's laws.

This is how you know that it is a *story* and *not history*—not to mention that it is grouped with the Wisdom literature like Psalms and Proverbs, not with the History Literature like Kings or Chronicles. “There once was a man in the land of Uz” so the story begins—and if your thoughts run off to Dorothy and the Wizard of Oz—I wouldn't blame you and I wouldn't be surprised if that is how the writer of that story came to name his “Oz”.

The purpose of the Job story is to reflect on suffering. The “why” of it and the “when it happens to good people” of it. These questions didn't start with us! They certainly date back to our ancestors of 2500 years ago and undoubtedly back before the written word. Life was wonderful in the land of Uz...until it wasn't. We see Job—who had a really nice life, one we all want, one we have, perhaps, bits and pieces of ourselves—lose everything!

His home, his children, his wealth—and now this morning—his *health*. This morning we meet Job covered with sores—loathsome sores—from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head.

His wife—who, too, is in agony over the loss of her children and her home tells Job to “Curse God, and die.” Get it over with. *End this thing*. She, like Job, believes God is doing this to Job. But Job is not so quick to cave. As Job's wife said, Job has his *integrity*, but we might refer to it as his *faith*. Job, we are told, “did *not* sin with his lips.”

Why do bad things happen to good people? It's a question that most all of us ask at some point in our lives. It just doesn't seem fair.

Did you notice that Rabbi Kushner entitled his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* and not *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?*

But *Job* asked the question “WHY?” of God—and he asks it for all of us. He holds onto it like a bulldog, demanding God give him—and us—an answer. “I will

give free rein to my complaint and speak out in the bitterness of my soul. 2 I will say to God: Do not condemn me, but tell me what charges you have against me. 3 Does it please you to oppress me...? (Job 10:1b-3a) Job dug in his heels and demanded an audience with God, and we—we stand *right behind* Job and say, “Yes, ask God why this is happening to me...uh, I mean...to *you*.”

Why are these things happening to me? Why are they happening to you? Why do these bad things happen to us good people? *Job dug his heels in for 37 chapters*, demanding a response from God and God was silent. But when God does finally answer him, God goes on for *four* chapters. Here are some of the key points:

- Where were you (Job) when I planned the earth?
- Tell me, if you are wise.
- Do you know who took its dimensions, measuring its length with a cord?...
- Were you there when I stopped the sea...
- And set its boundaries, saying, “Here you may come, But no further”?
- Have you seen where the snow is stored,
- Or visited the storehouse of the hail?...
- Do you tell the antelope when to calve?
- Do you give the horse his strength?
- Do you show the hawk how to fly? (Job 38, 39)

In other words, “What do you, Job, know about running the world?”

In other words, “why” may not be a question to which we get an answer. As God said to the prophet Isaiah, “(M)y thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9)

But, *sometimes we can* figure out *why* a bad thing happened to us. Sometimes we contribute to our own misery. *Our* bad choices. *Our* addictions. *Our* failure to attend to the important things in life while we fussed over the trivial. That does explain some of the bad, doesn’t it? But, that doesn’t explain every bad thing. At some point, we may just hit a dead end, a brick wall, get no answer.

Like: Why do some people get cancer who are so careful to live healthfully, while others who live their life like Russian Roulette don’t?

Why does an innocent person get shot while a gun toting angry shooter is spared?

Why can't some get a job when they are loyal, honest, trustworthy and sincere—and really good at what they do—yet mediocre employees and liars and embezzlers still have their jobs?

Shall we demand *our* audience with God? Will we simply be told, “Hey, what do *you* know about running the world?!”

Frankly, I look around the world right now and see famine, wars, the use of women and children as weapons of war. I read the papers and see story after story of abuse, political disharmony, murder, embezzlement. I think I could echo God in our Job story, because it doesn't look like we know all that much about running the world!

So much of the suffering in this world comes about because your free-will runs into my free-will, runs into someone who is abusing their free-will while someone else is capitalizing and maximizing their free-will profits so that there isn't enough for everyone but – with their free-will? – *they don't care*.

But, as people of faith, we are called to a “better way”. In Ephesians this morning we heard that we are “no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, (we) are fellow citizens with God's people, and (we) belong to God's household (with)...Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone,” and that “Christ is building (us) into places where God lives through the Spirit.” That is, we are called into community, one where my free-will and your free-will works in harmony to support, encourage, and heal.

We have *Job*—but we also have *Jesus*. Jesus understood suffering, he spent his ministry relieving suffering, and in the end he suffered for us. He understood that we contribute to each other's suffering. But in the midst of our suffering he challenges us to live life with faith in God – *even* in the face of uncertainty and *even* when bad things happening to good people. Which. They. Will.

I consider that “Rabbi” Jesus, like Rabbi Kushner—rather than answering the question “*why*” about suffering—would ask us, when *bad things happen to you* – how will *you* then live? Will you curse God and die? Lose your faith in the face of your trouble? How *do you* respond to the suffering in our own lives? And, when *bad things happen to other people*, how do you respond then?

On the very last night of his life Jesus established a ritual that we will partake of today—Holy Communion. With his suffering looming over him he did not curse God and die. Instead, Jesus used his free-will in this way: He said to his disciples, “²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14) And later after the Resurrection he reassured them saying, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20b)

We will not be able to avoid suffering—it is a human condition, I'm afraid. But *how* we suffer is a matter of *faith*. If our faith is primarily based on expecting

good things to happen to us because we are good people, then we are unprepared for life! If that is our faith then our faith has shallow roots. It is like a tree that counts solely on the rain for its survival. Its roots are shallow, close to the surface. The rain comes pretty frequently, so all seems okay. But give it one big wind—and BOOM—it falls over. Or withhold the rain and watch it fall down.

But that's not what most trees do, is it? Most trees send roots deep down into the earth to find underground springs and aquifers, so that in a storm its roots are anchored. *Our faith needs to be that deep.* It needs to be anchored in the Source of all. So that when the storm passes through, *we do not fall down.* We drink deeply of God's resources to weather us through our suffering—a human condition that we cannot avoid—but that also does not have to knock us down.

There are places I have gone in the world where I have seen deep roots of faith and it only seems appropriate that on this World Communion Sunday when all around the world people are sharing communion with us, that I would tell a story from another place, far away, in the land of Ghana. This shirt that I am wearing today was given to me by a Ghanaian pastor and on it are the symbols of the worship drum. I became acquainted with a small village in Ghana, called Awombrew, when the church I was pastoring entered into a relationship with them, helping the village to build schools for their children and provide vocational training for their adults.

In Awombrew life is hard. When we first met the people of the village, most of the children had nothing on their feet, the nearest middle school was 6 miles away, so most did not have an education *above* grade 5; and most did not even have a grade 5 education because there were only 3 class rooms and it could not accommodate all the children. The possibility that they would go without food for a day or two was real. The probability that their babies would die in the first few years was very high. The ability to purchase clean water for one penny a day was out of reach of most of the people.

That is the reality of Awombrew—suffering; the human condition. But now let me tell you about their faith. The Ghanians have a symbol of their faith which I've brought with me today. As you can see there is one side that reaches up to the heavens; and the other side that is like a root reaching deep into the earth. They say it means, "Except for God"...as in "*Except for God, I would not survive.*" "*Except for God, I would not have the strength to make it.*"

Their faith gave them hope and their hope made them active and as we worked with them they built their schools; and as their schools were built it caught the attention of the government who rewards hopeful villages. The government sent them teachers for their new schools. And then they sent them lunches for each of the school children—some rice, some stew, and a little baggy

of clean drinking water. Every day. *Every day!* A guaranteed *meal*. Every day—education!

They have deep roots. Their faith survives lifetimes of hardships. Instead of downcast eyes and crying there is much laughter and *worship*... is sheer joy. Dancing. Babies on their mamas back. The drummer, she drums. The children, they clap and sing. They sit together; helping the little ones up onto benches. They take the collection not once but *twice*.

And when they take it everyone dances up to the offering bowl and drops in what they have. For hours they praise God together. For what? A few branches bent over their heads? A little stew on the fire? A clean shirt and pants, a dress and perhaps—could it be—*sandals on their feet?* Yes! That is enough! God is good! (All the time!) All the time. (God is good!) It is enough because their roots go deep. Their faith in the face of their hardship has given them deep roots.

Today, we will have communion and *they will* have communion. Because the Good News has gone out to the ends of the earth, today we celebrate with people all over this globe who live in hardship *and hope*—all of us receiving our fortitude from our Savior who bids us come to the table.

As one person I read this week put it, “Only the roots grown deep into God will help us endure tough times. Put your roots down more deeply today. Spend time with the Lord...in the Word...(and) on your knees” (“Deep Roots” in *Breakfast with God*, 1996, p. 99).

We may not get an answer to the question, “*Why* bad things happen to good people,” but “*When* bad things happen to us,” our response tends to be in direct correlation to how deep our faith is. I invite you to put your roots down more deeply today as we share together at Christ’s table of sustenance, reconciliation and forgiveness. This is Christ’s table of hope in a world of trouble and suffering. Face your challenges *with Christ* and *with the support of your community* that surrounds you this morning. Deep roots. Deeper roots as we kneel today to receive Christ’s holy gift.

Blessings on the journey. Amen.