

**Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost,
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish,
St. Francisville, LA
7 October 2018**

Job 1:1; 2:1-10

After the death of his son at an early age, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote an amazing book in 1981. "When Bad Things happen to Good People" is Kushner's attempt to understand his own grief and the reason his son died. The Rabbi believes that the problem is that when suffering happens to anyone, most people either blame the person who is suffering or they blame God. When it comes to the person, they say, "It is the person's fault, he or she deserved whatever evil happens to them". When it comes to God, people believe, "God has a hidden purpose, at the end all suffering will prove good for us, suffering is God's grand design to prepare us for a better place in heaven, suffering is God's great teacher, suffering is God's test, etc." All of these reasons assume that God is the cause of our suffering and attempt to understand why God would want us to suffer." The conclusion of the book is that suffering may have a reason other than the will of God. Kushner interprets the book of Job as a way to understand the problem of pain and suffering. So, let us get into Job.

Job presents us with sudden, unexpected, undeserved suffering. You are busy living your life, making your daily choices, investing in your family and in your profession, engaged in various relationships, and then, all of a sudden, you find yourself the victim of great suffering and pain. Whether it is a reversal of fortune, illness, or the premature loss of someone you love, you find that your life has drastically changed in ways you never imagined. The author of Job addresses this issue of suffering, through the trials and tribulations of its main character. We know that the book of Job is a rather old book because of its calling of God "Elohim", rather than Yahweh; there is no mention of the "Law"; no reference to the Covenants or the time in Egypt, and no reference to Exodus or Passover. These are important events for the nation, and they would have been mentioned if the story of Job had been written at a later point in their history.

The book deals with the problem of suffering. It attempts to reflect on three different aspects of suffering: The first is the question "Why does suffering happen?" The second question is, "Do innocent people suffer, or is suffering always deserved?" and the third question, "What am I to do when I suffer?" (New Bible Commentary: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004, pp. 463). At various places throughout the book, Job's friends answer the first question by stating that suffering happens as a punishment from God for sin, or as a warning from God

that people should abstain from certain sins. But, this is an insufficient answer because, if our suffering is a punishment for our sins or a warning to remind us not to continue sinning, how can we explain the fact that innocent people also suffer? Remember, Job himself is described by the narrator as a righteous and holy man (1:1); he claims his innocence many times (6:30; 9:15); and even God attests to Job's innocence and righteousness (42:7-8; IBID 463).

The book itself answers the second question decisively: innocent people suffer often, and their suffering is not always deserved. Famine, illness, poverty, violence, and all sorts of evil often afflict the innocent for no apparent reason. The third question Job addresses is, "How must I live while I am suffering?" I believe Job himself gives us the answer to this question in two very different ways. First, let me summarize Job's suffering: during a dialogue between God and his heavenly host, Satan, which in this story is allowed by God's authority to act on earth, accuses Job of being a religious man only because of the benefits that piety has to offer. Remember that wealth, a large family, and a fertile land are all thought of as blessings from God to the righteous. Since Job is extremely wealthy, Satan accuses him of having a self-serving faith in God that is only concerned with blessings. "Remove the blessings and Job would certainly curse the Lord," This is Satan's hypothesis.

Satan tests this theory and within one day, two mighty tribes, one from the North and one from the South, invade Job and take away all his herds and camels. The same day, mighty natural disasters coming from the East and the West, destroyed much of what Job possessed and, even destroyed the house where Job's 10 children and their friends were feasting, causing their deaths. Within a single day, Job lost all he had. And it is here that we see Job's first reaction to suffering; He accepts his suffering and refuses to turn against God by cursing his name. He remains loyal, even though he doesn't understand why he is being afflicted. He grieves in the usual way, by tearing his robes, shaving his head, and worshipping. He exclaims, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there... blessed be the name of the Lord". With this response Job invites us to endure our suffering with faith and confidence that, even though we don't understand why we suffer, God is on the side of those who suffer and his love and compassion will never leave us alone or orphaned.

There is another reaction to suffering we see in Job. Chapter 2 tells us of another gathering in heaven. God remarks to Satan about Job's righteousness and integrity. Satan exclaims "bone for bone" or "flesh for flesh". Basically, it is easy to remain detached about suffering when you are not the one dying. "Afflict Job in his flesh and he will curse your name," this is Satan's second hypothesis.

Satan attacks Job's health and he is covered with boils, has intense fevers, begins to lose weight, and feels pain all over his body. Job resorts to Laments for his misery and despair. He says, "Let the day perish in which I was born... let that day be darkness!" (3:1); and later on he says, "Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? (3:11). He feels persecuted, punished for a sin he did not commit, and he raises his voice in lament and asks, "How Long?" This is the second reaction to suffering, and this one is as acceptable to God as the patient acceptance of our afflictions. God is big enough to accept our desperate cries and laments. Remember Jesus' desperate cry, "If it be your will, take this cup from me; but your will and not mine be done". Remember Jesus quoting Psalm 22:1, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

Today, Job reminds us that suffering is not a punishment from God, but rather it is part of our fallen human condition. We are fragile, we are broken, we are finite. Suffering is the consequence of our fall. Sudden and unexpected chaos can happen at any time and in any place. Sometimes random tragedy afflicts people when they least expect it. We all will undergo suffering in one way or another until we are reunited with Christ. Job reminds us that we are not sinners because we exclaim in anguish at God, or because we question God in our own desperate pain. The truth of our broken human condition and the random and chaotic acts of nature is that at times God appears very far away from us; at times we see God as uncaring and unfair; at times we feel cursed by him. Our benevolent God allows the rhythms of nature to take their course, he allows humanity to be moral agents capable of making decisions. He does not treat us like a puppeteer treats his puppets. He allows our freedom to be expressed, and this freedom often results in great cruelty towards others. Humanity is capable of indescribable inhumanity. Our world is filled with tyrants and fools. And, we all suffer because of their apathy, their arrogance, and their ambition. We live in a broken world and suffering is to be expected.

God is not offended or appalled by our suffering. In fact, God will help us and will guide us through our difficult times. We are not alone! Our God cares for us and loves us. Even at times when he seems very far away, he will make himself known in our lives and he will help us deal with our afflictions. This incredibly relatable Messiah we call Jesus of Nazareth, knows what we are going through because he himself went through pain and suffering. He knows the sting of rejection and the agony of despair, and he will be with us to the end of the age. Reach out to him and he will guide you through your suffering. It is only in him that our hope rests. Let us pray today that God will make his presence known in our lives, and that he may bless those who suffer this very day. Amen!