

God's Discomforting Answers

October 15, In the Year of Our LORD, 2006

Gates Presbyterian Church

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Job 23:1-9, Psalm 22:1-11, Mark 10:17-31 and Hebrews 4:12-16

Just think how often someone says, "when I get to heaven, the first question I am going to ask God is or, the first person I want to meet is" As Christians, saved by grace through Jesus Christ, it isn't too presumptuous to think we will "get to heaven" and face God – and there are undoubtedly much humans want to know of their God. Most of us have personal and perhaps self-serving questions we want to pose and people we want to meet. Just one of those I want to meet is my grandfather, The Rev. Ralph Gilbert English, who died just months before I was born which led my parents to reverse my given names from Steven Ralph to Ralph Steven.

My guess is that most of our inquiries will begin with the word "why." "Why did this happen?" "Why did that have to happen?" "Was there a purpose behind" And ... after the personal, why did such and such happen questions are asked, I suspect most of us will get to the nitty-gritty and get to some timeless and universal enigmas:

- Why *do* innocents suffer?
- Why do bad things happen to seemingly good people?
- Ah – and that tricky inverse – why do people whose deeds are evil seem to prosper?
- Why can't an all-powerful, all-present God just ... fix things! Is God like some celestial clock maker who set the universe in motion, wound it up and walked away?
- What about tsunamis, hurricanes and earthquakes – doesn't God control nature?
- Why do people get sick – especially children who are so fragile, so innocent, so ...
- Doesn't God care?

There are those who think those questions the ultimate in blasphemy – that asking those from this lectern means I am going to bring down the wrath of the Almighty and another one of the church's roofs will start leaking - when we are just starting to pay for this year's work! However, we know better, because those questions were asked by people of the Bible – and have been asked throughout time!

Let's get to those first two: why do innocents suffer and why do bad things happen to otherwise good people. Certainly that question was on many peoples' minds after the school shootings in an Amish school and elsewhere around the country. That must be asked each time a soldier's body is returned for honor and burial – and grief and loss. I know that was on our minds when thousands of our citizens were killed in the attacks on September 11, 2001. Most were simply going about their day-to-day business unaware there were people who hated so much as to take their own lives and fly jets into skyscrapers and office buildings. We have seen the photos of those innocents, of lives snuffed out, some in an instant and some in unimaginable horror.

Many persons whose lives are recorded in Holy Scripture asked these questions as well. Often in desperation, people of faith wondered aloud whether God was listening or in some instances to wonder the ultimate anguishing question - whether they should even have been born. Today, we heard David's words of pain found in the first verses of Psalm 22 – words Jesus recited while

dying on the cross: “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me.” Listen to Jeremiah’s lament in the 20th chapter of his book:

Cursed be the day on which I was born! ... Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame? [Jeremiah 20:14a, 18]

Then we have the Book of Job. Anyone who speaks of the “patience of Job” hasn’t read the book. Here is the *prima facie* example of an innocent person who suffers, who loses everything but his life. Job’s friends are sure they know the reason Job is suffering; Eliphaz claiming Job must have sinned, Bildad sure all Job need do is repent and Zophar, sure that Job has committed some hidden sin that deserves punishment. The crux of the story, however, is about Job and his relationship to his God. In the passage we heard read this morning, we get a summary of Job’s feelings when he is at the low point, the nadir, the depth of despair. Job is *anything* but patient. As discussed during Bible class this past Wednesday, Job gets to the point that he loses all sense of proportion, all sense of who he is in relationship to his Creator, and, while absolutely sure of God’s power and dominion, he, is still determined to get an answer from God; indeed scripts the answer Job expects, that God has made a mistake. Lacking any humility, the realization that perhaps he isn’t in a position to take on God, Job, to quote a commentator, is “prompted by a desire for self-assertion, self-defense, and self-vindication.” Echoing the sentiment of many, Dr. Samuel Terrien of Union Theological Seminary writes this condemnation of “patient” Job:

Job is more than ever convinced of his own righteousness; he has such an exalted and persistent conception of it that even the unjust God who has perverted his right would in the end recognize its validity and yield to the law of ultimate justice.

Job was convinced he was right. The dilemma is that when we are driven by self-righteousness and the desire to serve our own needs, humans don’t ask the right questions (oh, we *think* they are the right questions) and then we script answers to our liking. We want to believe God will bless us if we get a formula of praise and prayer just right. At times, we believe our nation or our grouping or our “kind” have a closer handle on God’s truth – when perhaps some of us don’t have the foggiest idea what God, faith and spirituality are all about. Sometimes we get so caught up with what we think justice should look like that we, like people of Scripture, settle for some ultimate justice, convincing ourselves that if innocents suffer in this lifetime they will enjoy heaven all the more. And we are convinced of the inverse; that evildoers who live long and prosperous lives in this realm will rot in the flames of a well-justified hell.

Some even fall into the trap that when tragedies occur it is somehow God’s doing and God’s will, that God wants we the living, the survivors, to learn some divine message from someone else’s loss. While it is true God can “work all things for good,” that we *can* learn good lessons from horrid events, it is often human free will gone awry that causes tragedies. God *did not cause* a man to go into a schoolhouse in Amish country and line up ten little girls for execution. We are in awe that thirteen year old Marian Fisher volunteered to be shot in order to save the others, but God did not take her life in order to teach us about sacrifice or to remind of Jesus’ words about the first being last, the last being first and sacrificing everything to follow Him. The Amish have again reminded us of stoicism, what family is all about and how most importantly about forgiveness, but God did not cause this tragedy; it was *not* God’s will.

While Scripture brings us an understanding of God, we are not wise enough to fully understand God even though we have Jesus Christ whom the writer of Hebrews calls the Great High Priest. While we know God loves us, that God saves us through Christ, empowers us by the Holy Spirit and that God epitomizes love and grace, we need to take care lest we think we have *complete* knowledge of God and forget to be humble; in our humanity we are *not* on equal footing with God. We don't know the extent of God's mind and few of us understand and accept the depth of God's grace. In a recent book entitled "The Conservative Soul," Andrew Sullivan, writes:

If God really is God, then God must, by definition, surpass our human understanding. Not entirely. We have Scripture; we have reason, we have religious authority; we have our own spiritual experiences of the divine. But there is still something we will never grasp, something we can never know – because God is beyond our human categories.

I have read the entire Book of Job a number of times, read commentaries, discussed its impact, looked at the timeless questions Job and his friends ask, but I continue to marvel when I read the consensus of so many theologians, professors and philosophers – that the Book of Job isn't about answers to undeserved suffering or theodicy (the interplay of God's justice and the existence of evil). The prevailing sense is that Job was asking all the wrong questions and as a result, first in God's silence and then in the whirlwind, got discomfoting answers. Job's search for justice and vindication was overshadowed by the greater truth that he finally learned – that our search for God needs to be about how to live in consecrated ways and how to find fellowship with our Creator, Redeemer and Empowerer – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Today's reading from Mark's Gospel does not object to riches unless riches possess and drive the person. The rich man in our reading, whose riches possessed him to the point he could not conceive of walking away from them, missed the divine message Job, in his misery, missed as well – *that a person in fellowship with God is rich beyond all measure.*

The first sentence of the quote on the front of our worship bulletin mirrors the problem Job faced with his friends. Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar had easy answers and cheap promises ("When life seems chaotic, you don't need people giving you easy answers or cheap promises"). What Job needed was the advice found in the second sentence that compels us to find a home with God – no matter what. ("What you need is a safe place where you can bounce with people who have taken some bad hops of their own.") As discomfoting as God's answers can be, the ultimate issue is about fellowship with God and, by implication, fellowship with others in God's family, the church. The wisdom in the Book of Job echoes the first question and answer in our Longer Catechism – "What is our chief and highest end?" "The chief and highest end is to glorify God and fully enjoy Him forever."

In retrospect, perhaps today's sermon title befits what we will hear from the Book of Job next Sunday when God finally gives an answer to Job. The 38th Chapter of Job includes the most stinging words a human ever gets God – but that is for next week. Today, we try to comprehend that in *what* we ask of God and indeed *how* we ask God: are we willing to come before God in humility and realize that in asking, we might be discomfoted by the expectations of our Creator Who wants us to be about service before benefit, praise before petition, caring for others before self and fellowship with God and God's own as the most important pursuit of our being?

Amen.