

**MARK 10:46-52**

*They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'*

*Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.*

It started out quite lovely for Job:

*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. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. (Job 1:1-3)*

According to the story God and Satan enter into a playground bet and Job becomes fair game for Satan's attempts at victory:

*One day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the eldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, 'The oxen were ploughing and the donkeys were feeding beside them, and the Sabeans fell on them and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you.'*

*While he was still speaking, another came and said, 'The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; I alone have escaped to tell you.'*

*While he was still speaking, another came and said, 'The Chaldeans formed three columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you.'*

*While he was still speaking, another came and said, 'Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house, and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you.'*

*Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshipped. He said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.' (Job 1:13-21)*

In the blink of the eye his livelihood is gone. His business is gone. His children are gone. And that's just the first chapter.

In the second chapter Job is covered in painful sores from the top of his head to the bottoms of his feet and his wife turns on him and on his God. And then it gets worse still... because his friends show up.

*When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.*

So often in the retelling of this story, it is forgotten that Job's three friends began this narrative by being helpful. They sat and said nothing. Then they speak... which is less helpful.

One of them accuses Job of doing it wrong, the second tells him he needs to pray more and finally the third tells him he needs more religion.

The friends assume the system and consequently they assume Job's guilt. They don't ask "what happened" but rather, "what did you do?"

Each friend of Job receives a scathing response filled with righteous anger – defending himself – and eventually Job scares them away. Then he turns to God with that same self-righteousness and God doesn't scare so easily:

### **Job 38:1-7, 34-41 (NRSV)**

*Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:*

*'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?*

*Gird up your loins like a man,*

*I will question you, and you shall declare to me.*

*'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?*

*Tell me, if you have understanding.*

*Who determined its measurements—surely you know!*

*Or who stretched the line upon it?*

*On what were its bases sunk,*

*or who laid its cornerstone*

*when the morning stars sang together*

*and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?*

*'Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,*

*so that a flood of waters may cover you?*

*Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go*

*and say to you, "Here we are"?*

*Who has put wisdom in the inward parts,*

*or given understanding to the mind?*

*Who has the wisdom to number the clouds?*

*Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens,*

*when the dust runs into a mass*

*and the clods cling together?*

*'Can you hunt the prey for the lion,  
or satisfy the appetite of the young lions,  
when they crouch in their dens,  
or lie in wait in their covert?  
Who provides for the raven its prey,  
when its young ones cry to God,  
and wander about for lack of food?*

### **The Word of the Lord...**

Arguably the best Old Testament theologian of our time, Walter Brueggemann, reminds us that "the book of Job is dramatic fiction. It does not purport to be history; it is theater designed to voice an alternative reality and to invite listening Israel to reimagine its explanation of reality, which had mostly gone uncriticized<sup>1</sup>."

Good theater is aimed at self-awareness. Here the story has been written and presented to ask a question that persists today: Why do bad things happen to good people? To which God gives a resounding, "What if it's not about you?"

God... of *course* it's about us. Have you seen the self-help section of the Barnes & Noble? Didn't you read the Oprah Book Club "Secret" to happiness as also preached by Joel Osteen?

If I **want** it bad enough – it's mine.

    If I envision money...

        If I project a promotion...

            If I dream of a parking spot...

I. Will. Have. It.

Easy to point my finger out there, but a genuine audit brings up the memories of words gasped through my own tears....

"How could this have happened to me?"

    "I did everything right..."

"What in the world is God doing to me?"

The drama of Job puts God on the stand and asks boldly and accusingly, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

Is it true God that children have diseases?

    Is it true God that students die in car accidents?

Is it true God that young people die in war?

    It says here that houses burn, wells run dry, spouses leave, cancer spreads, pain debilitates, and so on and so on... what say you to these charges?!

Finally God is on the stand... and takes the 5<sup>th</sup>? Pleads no contest? What is this answer?

*Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:*

*Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you declare to me.*

*Will you even put me in this wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?*

*Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his? (Job 40:6-9)*

What is this answer?

Cruel? Sarcastic?

Angry? Arrogant?

Sympathetic? Instructive?

God's grace is not found in the understanding, it's in the knowing.

It's in the leaning on the everlasting arms.

It's in the ability to rest in the peace that passes understanding.

Gustavo Gutierrez writes: "...Yahweh's questions amount to God saying: Do you persist in staying locked into a world of easy explanations? Are you going to dispute my right to control what comes upon you? Are you trying to imprison my free and gratuitous love in your theological concepts? Do you want to make yourself judge of my actions?" "In that kind of universe," he continues, "God would not be God. It must be said, moreover, that these words are addressed not only to Job but to all those who, like Job's friends, seek to domesticate God, subject God to their will, decide whom God is to favor, and thus attempt to win a privileged place for themselves in human society."<sup>2</sup>

That is not a pedestal any of us want to be on.

So many in this room know the pain of a pregnancy that has not gone to term. It is a loss not just of life, but in that time it is also a loss of hope. I have sat in a cold hospital room saying good bye to a daughter whose smile I would never see, whose tears I would never wipe away, whose laughter I would never hear. And yet if we had her, we would not have him. He whose dimpled grin is remarked on by strangers, whose tears I know are easily tickled away, whose giggles can make a lung-weary grandfather smile.

Thank God it was never my place to make that choice.

<sup>3</sup>While boarding a plane on his way to a speech in Indianapolis Robert Kennedy received word that the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. had been shot in Memphis. That was all the information they had – no cell phones to get updates in the air – so they had the plane ride to sit, to think, to wonder. On the tarmac the news came that King was dead. A *Newsweek* reporter remembers seeing Kennedy recoil at the news "as if he had been struck physically." He got into a car, staring out the window, seemingly a million miles away. The tension built as they approached the site of the speech, a poor, African American neighborhood. Everyone noticed when the police escort, nervous about what would happen that night, dropped away. Most staff couldn't get in, because the whole area was cordoned off.

Kennedy arrived and he walked straight to the podium. A couple of thousand people had gathered to hear him, and none of them knew of the horrible news he was about to share. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "I am only going to speak to you for one or two minutes tonight, because I have sad news..." His voice caught. "I have sad news for you, for all of our fellow citizens and for people who love peace all over the world...and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and killed tonight in Memphis, Tennessee."

What followed was a remarkable speech, perhaps his best, in which he reflected on King's life, on our call as Americans.<sup>4</sup> But he also challenged them: "You can be filled with bitterness, with hatred, with a desire for revenge. Or we can make an effort, like Martin Luther King did, to understand and comprehend, and to replace the stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand, with compassion and love."<sup>5</sup> But one of the most remarkable pieces, towards the end of his speech, was a poem he quoted: "Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the human heart. Until...in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."<sup>6</sup>

God's grace comes to us in many ways – in times of joy and celebration, as friends are made, as babies are born, as we use our gifts for something beyond ourselves, whether in our law firm or on a mission trip to Mexico. But it comes, too, in times of crisis, as we receive a diagnosis, as we lose a job, (as we say good bye to those we love). That awful grace of God meets us in those places, rarely answering our question directly, but always, always, transforming us.

Sometimes the silence, the non-answer, is so full and so loud and so overwhelming you cannot help but cover your ears. And we are re-focused, re-centered, on the One it is about. Not us, not our families, not the fierce love we have for anyone or anything, but the God who brings it into being, sustaining it all, sustaining us.

God's grace is not found in the understanding, it's in the knowing.

It's in the leaning on the everlasting arms.

It's in the ability to rest in the peace that passes understanding.

Lord, in your mercy... hear our prayer.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence Fretheim, and David Peterson, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 394.

<sup>2</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> This powerful ending was provided by the Reverend Chris Tuttle. 29<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B. The Well – Austin, Texas – 2009.

<sup>4</sup> You can read and listen to the speech at <http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/rfk.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Joe Klein, "Politics Lost: How American Democracy Was Trivialized By People Who Think You're Stupid," (New York: Doubleday, 2006), pages 1-7

<sup>6</sup> Aeschylus, Agamemnon. This quote also comes from Klein's book. Kennedy misspoke, and his quote is not verbatim from Agamemnon. For more information on this see: <http://www.morec.com/rfk.htm>