God’s Answer to Job

First Presbyterian Church
Wilmette IL
Job 38

Suffering is not punishment. If you remember nothing else that I say this morning, remember that. When something goes horribly wrong in your life, don’t think for a minute that it is "God’s will" for you in some individual or personal way. It’s not. Suffering is not punishment.

Children think that it is, of course. That’s why it’s so very dangerous for them emotionally when they are seriously ill, or badly injured or—heaven help us!—abused by an adult or by kids on the playground. A child does not have the emotional strength or the psychological maturity to face a world in which bad things happen by chance, a world in which bad things happen *randomly*, for no specific reason that anyone can explain. It’s easier, or safer—or *something*—for a child to imagine that he deserves this. That’s an easier "out" for a kid, somehow, because guilt makes sense of pain. Guilt make sense of pain for a child. Guilt explains pain and makes it tolerable. That’s how a child thinks.

As adults, reading the newspapers, studying history, watching our friends die of cancer, we can see for ourselves that the childish way of thinking is *wrong*. We understand—intellectually at least—that suffering cannot be "God’s will" if God is good. Only an evil and malicious deity would freely inflict the pain that we see all around us if we look with open eyes.

Where does that leave us? *Where does that leave us?* That’s what the story of Job is struggling with. The poet who wrote the Book of Job makes three large and general points. The first one is this: Job’s sufferings, Job’s terrible losses, are not punishment for sins. The three "comforters" are absolutely and entirely wrong. Job is right when he insists upon his own virtue and innocence. But Job does go wrong when he thinks that God is doing all this to him on purpose,

deliberately, with malice of forethought. God is not "doing this" to Job on purpose.

I like the explanation of this issue offered by John Polkinghorne, a distinguished nuclear physicist who was, for a long time, a full professor at Cambridge University. In a lovely little book called *Quarks, Chaos, and Christianity,* Professor Polkinghorne explains it this way:

> We tend to believe that if *we* had been in charge of creation *we* would have done it better. With a little more care about the details, we would have kept the beauty of sunsets, but eliminated germs like staphylococci. The more we understand the processes of the world, however, the less likely does it seem that this would be possible. The created order looks like a package deal.

As he goes on to explain in some detail, for instance, evolution depends upon the same mutations that cause cancer. The essential dynamic character that is manifest at the human level by free will is manifest all through the creation in how everything operates according to the independent, orderly principles of its own nature. God created a dynamic world, a world that has evolved life as we know it. Birth and death, building-up and eroding away, are fundamentally necessary not only for biological life but also for the autonomy and freedom of the created world as we know it. In short, God has made a world that is outside of God's own day-to-day, detailed, and absolute control.

Mutations and malice, evil and suffering are an inescapable part of creation. The pain that we all endure—some folks more than others—is not "God's will" for us in some personal, specific way. God is neither malicious or indifferent. The fact, or the moral paradox, is that suffering is part of the "package deal" that is a living, evolving, dynamic universe.

Well, fine. That's okay as far as it goes, I guess; but I'm not sure it goes far enough. Maybe the world needs a little less of that dynamic freedom and a little more of predictable goodness and divine compassion. That gets us to the poet's second point here. That's the second explanation that he makes. The Job poet

insists that good unquestionably outweighs evil in the grand scheme of things. The poet insists that the world has a grandeur that is far beyond human comprehension. Yes pain is very real, very real indeed. But the depths of pain and suffering are exceeded by the incomprehensible grandeur and goodness of creation itself.

That's a tough claim to make convincing. It needs the extraordinary persuasive power that is easily lost—or at least diminished quite a bit—in translation. In Hebrew, I have been told, the reading for this morning is nothing less than stunning. I read that years ago. And so I go for a walk almost every morning, and on that walk every morning I look for it. I try to put the *New York Times* out of my mind, I try to silence the voices of all my own personal worries and concerns, and I try to find my way instead to Psalm 19, which begins, "The heavens declare the glory of the Lord, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork." And I watch the geese eating the grass in the park before they leave for a season, and I watch the trees grow new leaves and then lose them, trees that stand bare for a season year after year. And I pray, as I walk every morning, for the strength and the wisdom to keep my own pain in perspective, to see my own seasons of loss and migration as part of a pattern that is both larger than I will ever understand and, in the end, unquestionably the work of a good and loving God.

Some mornings it works. Some mornings it doesn't. And on the mornings when it doesn't I remember Etty Hillesum, a brilliant and sophisticated young Dutch Jew who wrote a letter from Westerbork, a transit camp in the eastern Netherlands, which was the last stop before Auschwitz, where she died. She describes herself standing in the corner of the camp, her feel planted firmly on God's earth, overcome with gratitude for God's immediate and sustaining presence with her. Of course, not every morning was like that even for her. To expect that it could be, she writes, would be inhuman. It is enough, she writes, it is more than enough and furthermore perfectly astounding, that she can feel God's comforting presence to her even as Europe collapses around her.

And that's the God that the Job poet presents to us. That's his third point, and it's easily missed. The Job poet argues not only that suffering is never "God's will" for us but also that God is present to us in the midst of our suffering. Just as God was in Auschwitz, or in Rwanda, or in the Balkans, or on the streets of Ruallah, or in the engine room of the USS Cole refueling in Yemen.

A friend of mine has suffered all his life from chronic depression. It comes and it goes without much reason, and when it comes on he knows to get help. Nonetheless, he lives with a very dark soul just as some people live with a very bad knee. Once in a while he limps in very visible ways. He said one time, with a passion I have always remembered, that at the deepest darkest bottom of the deepest darkest well of his despair, there is not *nothing*. There is God. There is, always, at the very worst of the very worst of it, a pair of hands that hold him. That's the voice from the whirlwind in the Book of Job.

ob says to God at the very end, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee." God came to Job, and God came to Etty Hillesum, and God comes to my friend who gets depressed. Back in chapter 19, Job had insisted to those sleazy "comforters" that God would one day show up and make plain the fact that Job's suffering is not something he deserved. Job is no child, after all. He knows that guilt does *not* justify suffering. Job's claim in chapter 19 is the passage made familiar by being set to music in Handel's *Messiah*: "I know that my redeemer liveth, and in my flesh I shall see God." Twenty-three chapters later, Job does.

The world is a good and orderly place because it is, at last, the creative work of a good God. God is good, the world is good, and when we are so overwhelmed by our suffering that neither of those claims seems valid, then above all other times God is with us, whether or not we realize it. Keep in mind, when life is too much more than you can manage, that last phrase from the Prologue of the Gospel of John. Let me end with that, this morning: it's short enough to carry with you all this week:

The light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not. Amen.