Job's Grief – Denial or Faith?

Every so often in life, we come up against circumstances that make us raise our eyes to the heavens and ask, "Why, God? Why did this happen?" The occasion may be personal and immediate: the loss of a job, the end of a significant relationship, a devastating illness, the premature death of a loved one. Equally moving may be a tragic event half a world away, where we actually know no one but in which our sense of shared humanity makes the horror of the situation resonate. Consider this past week's headlines, which have featured floods in the Philippines, earthquake in Indonesia and tsunami in Samoa, all with appalling loss of life.

The question of why suffering comes into human lives has been a major theme in theology, philosophy, the arts and literature for as long as those disciplines have existed. It is one of the enduring mysteries of human existence. Today, we will begin a month-long exploration of the Biblical book most associated with this question – the Book of Job. I want to state most emphatically at the very beginning of this endeavor, that if you are expecting to walk out of worship at the end of the month with this great question completely answered to everyone's satisfaction, then you are sadly mistaken. What I hope to do, in fact, is to raise questions about our understanding of God and of suffering and to offer partial answers about what a faithful, God-honoring response to suffering might be for those who follow in the path of Jesus. The real work of integrating these thoughts into lifestyle will be done by each of us on our own as we consider which of the many ideas I will put forward actually makes sense to us in our own situations. If that doesn't sound appealing to you, let me suggest that you come to church anyway, for the fellowship and the songs and prayer, and then you can take a nap during the sermon.

My quixotic decision to attempt a survey of the Bible's most problematic book was inspired by the Revised Common Lectionary but I'm not even adhering to an expected course of action in this regard. I'm simply not satisfied that the four passages listed in the Lectionary are the best four to characterize Job and his journey through suffering. This is due in part to my own reading over the past month or so as I prepared for this series – and I want to especially thank Dr. Pam Scalise for her recommendations of two excellent books, Gerald Wilson's volume on Job for the New International Biblical Commentary and On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent by the Peruvian Liberation theologian, Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez. But as I have read and re-read Job and books about that book, I've also become convinced that one way to understand Job's journey is through the widely-accepted stages of grief first proposed by Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book, On Death and Dying. I don't think that this idea could possibly be an original one on my part but if I read or heard it somewhere, I can't remember to whom I should credit it.

More on that later but first, let's do a quick survey of the Book of Job for those who may not have read it for a while or who may only be familiar with the story by reference without having read the book itself. In the form we have it, the book consists of two sections: a prose section, which tells the actual story of Job in a prologue in chapters one and two and an epilogue in the last half of chapter 42, and a poetic section which makes up the bulk of the book and presents the arguments between Job and the four friends who have come to comfort him in his grief. Scholarly consensus is that the prose section is at least based on a very ancient story of a righteous man who endured terrible suffering, though the rendition in the Bible may have been written by the same poet or poets who composed the remainder. While the basic story is set at

the time of the Patriarchs and may have roots that old, the poetic section is thought to be much later, almost certainly from the time after the Babylonian Exile.

The story itself begins in almost storybook fashion: "There was once a man in the land of Uz…" Inasmuch as no one is certain where Uz was, we might almost begin, "Once upon a time" or "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...." The man in question is Job, "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil." We are told that he is fantastically wealthy, with a large and happy family that Job frets over lest his wealth should corrupt his children. All in all, a very impressive guy. The scene then switches to heaven, where God is reviewing his heavenly court. A character called "ha-satan," The Adversary, arrives and God begins to question him. It's important to note that, despite the way it's printed in our pew Bibles, this character is not Satan (with a capital "S"), the Devil as we have come to understand him as the personification of evil, but rather a loyal servant of God with a very particular job. It is the Adversary's role to roam the world, as the Scripture says, to go to and fro on the earth and to walk up and down on it, examining human beings and preparing cases of prosecution for the guilty for the court of God. God asks the Adversary, "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." The Adversary, as his job calls him to be, is skeptical. "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." And so God grants the Adversary permission to test Job by taking away anything that he has, sparing only Job's own person. In short order, raiders from other countries steal Job's oxen, donkeys and camels and kill his servants, lightning strikes his sheep and kills both sheep and shepherds, and all of his children are killed when a windstorm destroys the house where they are feasting. The Bible tells us, "Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. 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.' In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong-doing."

In Chapter Two, as we have already heard, the Adversary receives permission from God to put Job to an even sterner test. Having maintained his integrity in the face of overwhelming loss, Job is now afflicted with a disease that would have not only been physically agonizing but also rendered him ritually unclean by the standards of the time, making him a social outcast. Still, Job refuses to blame God for his plight. When his wife urges him to end his suffering by cursing God and dying for it, Job rejects her advice as foolishness. "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" he asks. Three of the leaders of the region come to mourn with their old friend, scarcely able to recognize him in his disfigurement and reduced circumstances. They sit in silence with him for seven days and nights before daring to speak and offer first, their condolences, and then their advice about his condition. We will turn to their opinions and Job's responses in upcoming weeks. A fourth, younger man also offers his opinions on the situation and, finally, the voice of God is heard in response to all that is said by Job and the others. In the epilogue, God rebukes the would-be comforters and tells them that Job is the one who has spoken truly about God. The friends are sentenced by God to a regimen of sacrifices and told that they will only be saved by the prayers of Job for them. Ultimately, Job is rewarded by God for his faithfulness with possessions doubling his previous wealth and with

sons and daughters in the exact number of those who were killed. "After this," the book concludes, "Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days."

Even this quick synopsis raises many questions and there is no way to deal with them all in the time remaining this morning or even in the weeks ahead. But I do want to consider the words of Job at the endings of both chapters one and two. When told of the loss of all of his flocks and of his children in chapter one, a scene reproduced in the work of Julius Schnorr von Carolsfelt on the front of the bulletin this morning, Job replies in words that have been used in countless funeral services over the millennia: "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." Confronted by his wife when his health has collapsed and he has become an untouchable, he says, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?"

The calm assurance of these utterances may provoke a range of responses in the modern reader. One honest retort might be, "Are you kidding me? If God gives and takes so capriciously from someone that even God says is an example of righteousness, then what good is God? What use is it to pursue righteousness?" And, indeed, we will hear an argument very close to this from Job in the weeks ahead.

The fact that Job becomes angry and then despondent over God's treatment of him and his family later in the book has led me to wonder if his response follows Kübler-Ross's classic paradigm of grief processing, in which case these traditionally pious sayings from Job may be an indicator of denial. They certainly bear the warning signs of a man who has become disconnected from reality. Job's bland confidence is almost understandable in one who has lost a fortune. Should we hear something of the sort from someone who'd lost everything in the stock market, we might nod our heads and say, "That person is a real saint. They have the patience of Job." But for someone to respond in this way having lost their livelihood in such an unexpected, cataclysmic way and after having suffered the sudden death of all of their children seems almost unimaginable. Perhaps, we are tempted to think, Job is in shock. He can't understand what's just happened to him. The rapid occurrence of tragedy upon tragedy has unhinged him. He is in denial.

But while it is true that the rest of the book gives us a picture of Job struggling through the process of his grief and pain, I wonder if there is something else happening here. Job's state of mind before he succumbs to grief and squats in silence on the ash heap in mute agony for seven days certainly could be a state of denial. His later arguments with his friends and with God show evidence of a brilliant and deep thinker, a man who is unlikely to base his life on simple aphorisms. Nevertheless, simple aphorisms are often used to summarize the most profound truths. In these two statements by an incredibly complex literary character, we find that the most basic level of this character is simple faith.

It has become easy for many of us in our sophisticated and cynical times to deride simple faith. Sometimes I wonder if I am in fact capable of it or if I am doomed to over-think everything – my own circumstances, the condition of the world, the lessons of the Scriptures. It is often a struggle for me to remember that Jesus himself held up simplicity of faith as the key to the Beloved

Community. In the passage which is today's Gospel lesson in the Revised Common Lectionary, Mark reports an encounter that Jesus and his disciples had with those who possess the most simple and uncomplicated faith of all – children. "People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them."

Job's initial response to the tragedies in his life was characterized by a simplicity of faith in God: "the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." While we are going to follow Job's struggle to make sense of and reaffirm this simple proclamation and perhaps struggle ourselves with the reality of suffering in our world and in our lives, we must always remember that people of faith throughout the ages have endured horrendous circumstances with just this simplicity of faith. We have seen shocking things in our lives – genocides in Europe and in Africa, the massacres of innocents, the televised deaths of politicians and astronauts, homicidal cult leaders and sexual predators – but suffering on a grand scale is no more unique to our time that the quiet suffering on an individual level that nearly all humankind has experienced. Again and again, people have been impelled to ask the question, "Why God? Why did this happen?" We are bound together in the family of humankind as much by our shared experience of suffering as by our DNA.

When God spoke to the Adversary on that day in the heavenly court, he called Job "my servant," which, as commentator Roger Hahn points out, "is the highest compliment the Old Testament ever pays to human beings." Through the suffering of Job and his baseline, simple faith, we may discover the ultimate goodness and faithfulness of God. But there is another to whom we often ascribe the title, "the Suffering Servant of God." That one is Jesus of Nazareth, who reluctantly but willingly took on the task of suffering a trial that not even Job was required to face in order to fulfill the will of God for his life. Just as we will see in upcoming weeks that Job cried out to God in his grief and despair, so, too, did Jesus cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And, just as we will read that Job ultimately returned to his faith and worship of God, so Jesus trusted God even at the last and again recognized God's parental love – "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Those words of Jesus and his greatest act of simple faith came about on the hill of Calvary, where he was crucified, just as he had foretold. He asked his friends to remember the sacrifice he made that day whenever they broke the bread and drank the wine. He promised that he would be with them when they did and that he would be with them until the end of the world, no matter what their circumstances. And so, my sisters and my brothers, as we consider the mystery of suffering even in the presence of a loving Creator, let us remember the simplicity of the faith of Job, the same simple faith that belongs to the children whom Jesus calls us to emulate, and let us remember that Jesus, who shares our suffering, has promised to be with us no matter what. As Jesus stands in solidarity with us, so let us remember on this World Communion Sunday to stand in solidarity with all of our brothers and sisters in Christ around this great and beautiful and terrible world, for we suffer together until the new Earth comes and sorrow and crying and pain and death shall all pass away. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.