

PROPER 22, PENTECOST 20, YEAR B, OCTOBER 6, 2024

The story of Job is centered around the question, “why do bad things happen to good people.” It’s an age old question that Rabbi Kushner addressed in his bestselling book “When Bad Things Happen to Good People” in 1981.

The basic story of Job is written like a folktale whose plot centers around a deal made between God and Satan. Remember, Job is a fictional character just as the protagonist in the story that is named Satan just means an adversary not a personified being as in Hebrew Satan it is not a proper noun.

So, the plot is Satan and God are hanging out and God says, “Hey, Satan, check out Job down there. He is good and righteous and loves me ever so much.” To which Satan replies, “Of course he loves you, you give him everything he could possibly want. He’s rich and healthy and has no reason to go against you.” And so a deal is made. A divine experiment. God allows Satan to take away Job’s stuff, and Job still remains faithful to God. Then God allows Satan to make Job sick, and Job still remains faithful. So, God wins the divine bet and Job’s health and fortunes are restored.

However, we know that life isn’t like that or that simplistic. Why does a child get diagnosed with cancer? Why does a hurricane wipe out whole communities, killing hundreds of people? Why does a good all powerful God let bad things happen to good people? This really comes down to a question about suffering.

In Job’s culture bad things don’t happen to good people because if bad things do happen to you, you’re not as good as you think you are. This is the position Job’s friends and neighbors take – you must have done something wrong to incur the wrath of God. This answer is problematic because if you believe that people only suffer as a consequence of their own personal choices, then there is no obligation to ease suffering. We simply heap more guilt on top of their pain. We still see this perspective today.

A young black man is shot by police and people say: Why was he in that neighborhood anyway? He should have just done what the cop said.

A woman is sexually harassed or assaulted and people say: How much had she been drinking? What was a nice girl like her doing at a party like that anyway?

This is victim blaming and it’s so tempting to do that because we would rather believe what happened to the person was a result of the victim’s own personal choices or sin. If suffering is a direct consequence of bad personal choices, then maybe I can avoid suffering myself.

Many popular preachers and books preach that God rewards those who make good choices and will be rewarded with good health, wealth and wisdom and they’ll tell you how just send them your money. In his book *Forty Acres and a Goat*, the Baptist pastor Will Campbell derides such teachers as “electronic soul molesters.” Genuine faith doesn’t manipulate God for material gain, fear of punishment, or avoidance of unjust suffering. But we still hold onto the idea that I can avoid suffering or bad things happening to me if I just make good choices and live a good and righteous life that will keep me safe from the evils of the world.

How’s that working out? In the story of Job his friends question him. He must have done something to incur the wrath of God. Then Job questions God. The truth is no clear answer to the problem of suffering emerges, but it is clear that suffering is not always the result of personal choices. Sometimes bad things do, in fact, happen to good people.

However, I also wonder from the story of Job whose suffering do we pay attention to? Job's horrific story is about him losing everything: He's a man of prestige and power yet his children and servants are killed; his oxen and sheep and camels are destroyed or stolen. Then, at the end of the reading this morning we hear for the first and last time from a nameless woman: Job's wife. A woman who has also lost her children, her servants, and her livestock. Isn't her suffering just as great as Job's? Yet she is quickly dismissed and belittled because she tells Job to curse God and die.

Seems quite harsh and most commentators and preachers have seen her as an instrument of Satan trying to cause Job to sin even more. However, Hebrew Midrash sees it a different way as to why she tells him that. There's an element of her grief that underlies what she tells him because she can't bear to see her husband suffering and in so much distress which she believes will lead him to the loss of his faith. It would be better for him to pray to God that he die, so that he will depart from this world blameless, exemplary and righteous, and not come to sin. In essence she is helping him maintain his faith.

I digress but it brings home the issue of whose suffering do we identify with? The book of Job reflects that natural tendency that we are instructed to care deeply for the suffering of Job while dismissing the suffering of his wife. I think that is a natural tendency for all of us to do. I think we are all inclined to pay attention to the suffering of people we identify with or who are most like us. When we hear of a natural disaster that happens to people in our own country we respond differently than to those in foreign countries who suffer a similar fate. I'm not suggesting that's wrong it's just our natural inclination to identify with those who are most like us.

But what does Jesus tell us about whose suffering we should pay attention to. There is a real contrast from the suggestion in Job, a wealthy and righteous man, about whose suffering we pay attention to and what Jesus says in the Gospels. Jesus paid attention to women, the poor, the foreigners, the outcast and his ministry was dedicated to paying attention to the suffering of those who had been systematically ignored and belittled by those in power. Jesus heals servants and responds to the suffering of mothers, he doesn't mock their pain. In today's gospel Jesus challenges the laws around divorce and adultery that disempower women. Jesus heals the woman with the flow of blood and calls her "daughter."

Jesus does not answer the question of why people suffer any more clearly than Job does. But Jesus does provide us with a different answer to the question of whose suffering we should pay attention to.

The ministry of Jesus challenges the human tendency to attend only to the suffering of those like us. Jesus recognizes, honors, and addresses the suffering of all people—particularly those most often neglected and dismissed.

From Jesus' perspective, the suffering of Job's wife matters. The suffering of people who have been ignored, denigrated, hated even killed for their religion, ethnicity, sexuality, immigration status or occupation matter. We may never be able to adequately answer the question of why good people suffer. But Jesus gives an answer to what is, perhaps, the more important question: Whose suffering does God pay attention to?

The answer is: the suffering of the vulnerable, the outcast, the oppressed, the weak. The answer is: God not only pays attention to our suffering but is present with us in our suffering. Perhaps this prayer from the New Zealand Prayer Book says it all:

God of the present moment, God who in Jesus stills the storm and soothes the frantic heart; bring hope and courage to all who wait or work in uncertainty. Bring hope that you will make them the equal of whatever lies ahead. Bring them courage to endure what cannot be avoided for your will is health and wholeness; you are God, and we need you. Amen.