

JOB



Job 1:1 "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."

We all know the story of Job, or at least we think we do; few of us I suspect have actually read the book carefully from beginning to end. Still, we know the general scope of the story of Job, and we usually identify with Job in the story, with his undeserved sufferings and plight, because we all have experienced difficulty in our lives. Life is hard, as I noted in my sermon two weeks ago. --- However, in fact, we really act much more like Job's friends do than Job does in the story. Indeed, in many ways, we usually react in life just the opposite of Job.

Job, you will remember, was a righteous man whom Satan, a heavenly advocate, suggested only feared God and turned away from evil because his life was blessed. We, on the other hand, are much more likely to fear God and turn away from evil only when our lives are wretched. It has been my experience in life that most of us do not act like Job, that we do not fear God and turn away from evil when our life is going well. When one of us succeeds in life, when we prosper, when we make money, or secure recognition or fame or respect from our peers, that when things are going agreeably and we are blessed, that we usually pat ourselves on our backs; we usually affirm our wise decisions, note our cleverness, our hard work, our determination and our personal integrity and good fortune. In other words, that when we do well, we usually credit ourselves with the success, not God. Indeed, often when things are really going well in our lives is when we least think about God, when we least feel a need for God, when we are the least likely to be drawn to God. At a minimum, we might in our success simply affirm our own personal goodness, and then perhaps declare that God obviously rewards the good and punishes evil.

In the story of Job, as you remember, God allowed Satan to remove most of those blessings to test Job's faith. Thus Satan took away Job's wealth, then his children, and then his physical health, inflicting him with loathsome sores all over his body,

and thereby tempting Job to curse God for his troubles. Yet in the midst of his desolation, Job does not curse God, but instead he shaves his head, he rents his clothes, and he cries out in a loud voice, "Naked I came out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return: the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord." So that despite all Job's sufferings, his response to the tragedies of life was still to give thanks to God. Despite his wretchedness, Job does not curse God or accuse God of injustice, but rather seeks some other explanation or some other account for his downfall. In the end, Job raises the very real and serious theological question about whether bad things can happen to good people, or not? It is a question that haunts us still.

However, in my experience, when we fail, when things don't turn out like we planned, when we fall upon hard times like Job, when we lose a job, get sick, when we get discredited or embarrassed, then we usually blame someone or something else for our shortcomings. It's not our fault; we will instead cry out how unfair life is. Something else is usually said to take blame for our suffering --- our parents perhaps, or our foolish boss, or the economy, or just bad luck. Oftentimes we might even raise a clinched fist to the heavens and curse God for our misfortune, unlike Job, declaring that we don't deserve this, declaring that life isn't fair. Declaring that bad things do happen to good

people, and that God does not always reward the good and punish the evil.

Far too often, it seems to me, we assume that God is **not** the cause of our successes, but that God **is** the cause of our suffering, and then as I mentioned two weeks ago, then we usually struggle to understand why God would want us to suffer so. Is it for our own good, or is it a punishment we deserve, or could it be that God does not care what happens to us? Some of the religious answers that we so often give in response to the questions of life's sufferings, like those of Job's friends, lead us to blame ourselves or our loved ones for our misfortune, in order to spare God's reputation, or else we are asked to deny a reality we know to be true and to repress our real feelings. We are often left either hating ourselves for deserving such a fate, or hating God for sending us a fate which we do not deserve. Job does none of this.

In the story, Job's friends came to console him with **their** theological explanations for his sufferings. His friends argue that good fortune is always a divine reward, thus Job must have done something, must have sinned in some way or other to deserve this punishment. As their speeches progress, Job's friends increasingly berate him for refusing to admit his sins, although they themselves are at a loss as to what sin he has committed. The friends continue to argue that Job must have sinned, and

therefore he must deserve his misfortune. For they assume, as we too often assume, that God always rewards the good and punishes evil; that God is tied to our good fortune and to our sufferings. Bad things do not happen to good people, we so often think. Job, however, confident of his own innocence, maintains that his suffering is simply unjustified, that he has not sinned, and that there is no reason to think that God is punishing him. So, while Job does not curse God's name or accuse God of injustice, he does engage in a great dialogue with God about the nature of suffering; he questions God about why good people sometimes suffer so, or why bad people sometimes get away without suffering.

And God answers Job with a divine voice out of the "whirlwind," in the reading in two weeks time, a voice that describes in evocative and lyrical language what the experience of being the creator of the world is like; and asks if Job then has ever had such experiences. Where were you, God asks, when I laid the foundation of the earth? How could he comprehend God's motives or judge God's actions? Just who did Job think he was? -- In other words, God doesn't really provide a real response to Job's query. God is God, and we are not. And the question of suffering really remains unanswered in the story.

However, in the epilogue, which we will read in three weeks time, God does condemn Job's friends for their ignorance and

their lack of understanding. They haven't got it right, God says. While God also commends Job for his righteous words, commanding Job's friends to prepare burnt offerings for their sins and reassuring them that Job will pray for their forgiveness. Job himself is restored to health, gaining double the riches he possessed before and having 7 new sons and 3 new daughters (for his wife survived his ordeal with him). And his new daughters, we are assured, were the most beautiful women in the land, and were given inheritance along with their brothers. Job is blessed once again and lives on another 140 years after the ordeal, living to see his children to the fourth generation and dying peacefully of old age. And everyone lives happily ever after; or do they? The question still lingers; does God reward the good and punish evil? For in the story of Job, bad things do indeed happen to good people, and the question of why is never answered.

And I know that it is embarrassing at the times of tragedy not to have easy and quick answers to the questions about suffering. But I believe that we are meant to be more like Job, and less like his friends with their ready replies, with their neat theological discourses and explanations. I have learned that however well intentioned those grand theological answers are, they are never better received than a sympathetic hand and an understanding heart. Therein lies the true redemptive power

of our God, and there is perhaps no better image of that kind of compassion than that of our Savior suffering upon the Cross for us. Our God indeed reveals his almighty power, not in judgment or condemnation, but chiefly in showing mercy and pity. Let us go and do likewise. AMEN.