



“When Bad Things Happen”

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***Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Job 1:1, 2:1-10 (NRSV)***

The international news this past week provides quite a backdrop for today’s scripture reading. Since last weekend, 293 have died in the Philippines, 107 have died in Vietnam, 150 have died in Samoa and Tonga, and at least 1100 have died in Sumatra—all were victims of typhoon Ketsana, or earthquakes and resulting mudslides and tsunamis. And now, today, two new typhoons are headed toward Taiwan and the Marianna Islands—so much suffering in so little time. It’s not fair. It’s not just. “Why does this happen? Why do the innocent suffer?” we ask.

The answers are rarely clear or easily forthcoming, whether we’re talking about the suffering of innocents on the other side of the Pacific who are largely unknown to us, or the suffering of innocents who are near and dear to us, or we are talking about our own experiences of unjust suffering.

What is clearer is that suffering happens, and it happens in greater and lesser degrees to everyone, including the innocent.

That suffering happens to everyone—including the innocent—is a forgone conclusion in Rabbi Harold Kushner’s bestselling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. As one friend pointed out to me this past week, Kusher’s book is not titled *If Bad Things Happen to Good People*. It’s titled ***When Bad Things Happen to Good People***.

There is no question about whether the innocent or good will suffer. The only question is when will they suffer? None of the earthquake and tsunami or typhoon victims did anything to provoke these disasters. They just happened. Stuff happens. Bad stuff happens. Bad stuff happens to good and bad people. Jesus knew that. It was he who observed that the rain falls on the just and the unjust (Mt. 5:45).

So we object. We protest. We rant and rave at God when bad stuff happens—especially when bad stuff happens to innocent people. We rant and rave, and

that's good. God can hear it. In fact, the good news for us today is that God can hear the bad news. God can hear and hold and handle our grief, regardless of what form it takes, e.g., denial, anger, bargaining, depression, or acceptance.¹

II

The Old Testament reading for today, and the entire book of Job, grappled mightily with suffering, including the causes of it and the sense of injustice felt by the author and the community out of which the book emerged. In studying the book of Job, it's helpful to know that some scholars believe that this book grew out of Israel's experience of exile in Babylon, and that Job symbolizes the exiles who did nothing to deserve their fate. They see the book as a communal exploration of the problem of suffering and a grappling with the irreconcilable nature of innocents' suffering with their belief in a loving and just God.

One of the ways of expressing this irony for the exiles and for people of faith in every time is to protest—and protest they did. We hear Job's wife protesting in today's scripture. She protests Job's suffering. She protests God's lack of intervention, and she protests Job's initial acceptance of his fate.

Next we hear Job protesting his friends' well-intentioned but unhelpful practice of blaming him for his suffering. And eventually we hear Job protesting his own suffering, and God's lack of response in the wake of it.

Perhaps the most important thing that we can learn from the book of Job and its characters is the value and place of protest in the midst of suffering.

The book of Job is a canonical validation—not simply of the fact that innocent people suffer, but that none of us is expected to accept suffering as God's will or as in any way good.

Many people have erroneously been taught that Job was patient and accepted his suffering, and that they (or we) should, too. Many believe this false interpretation, either because they haven't read the whole book, or because they have been lead to believe that there is virtue in suffering for its own sake. I don't believe this. I don't believe that suffering is inherently virtuous.

If you listen closely to the words to the invitation to communion, you will hear me say, "We come to this table not because we must, but because we may. We come not to make a statement, but to receive a presence. And we come not to avoid the cross, but to seek a victory that is beyond suffering and death."

Suffering is not our purpose. Death is not our end. We worship a resurrected Christ, who declared a victory over suffering and death. Therefore, when we or others suffer—particularly when we or they suffer for no reason and without

¹ See Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying*.

cause and effect—we become impatient, as Job eventually did, and we protest, as Job’s wife protested, and as Job eventually protested.

To understand the role of protest in the midst of suffering, it’s helpful to recall the entire story of Job. A summary of the book follows.

III

There once was a man from Uz, whose name was Job. He was a good man by any standard. He lived in awe of God, and he did what was right.

According to the author, Job was greatly rewarded for his righteousness. He was the most prosperous man in the East. Job was blessed with a healthy family. He possessed large animal herds, and he had plenty of money.

Life was good. That was, until the heavenly beings started to meddle. The way the author imagines the scenario, one day God asked Satan what he’d been up to. Satan replied, “I’ve been wandering the earth.”

“Really,” exclaimed God, “have you noticed my servant, Job? He’s a really good guy. I’m very proud of him.”

“Anyone can be faithful when times are good,” observed Satan, “but take away his prosperity, and see how faithful he is then.”

“Ok,” said God, “it’s a deal.”

According to legend, things went from bad to worse for Job. First, he was stripped of his wealth. Then his children were killed in an earthquake. Finally, his health was ruined. And with each new loss, Job was increasingly subdued. His faith was tested, but not destroyed.

His wife was incensed at the injustice she witnessed, and encouraged Job to abandon his faith and accept his fate.

Job’s friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) added insult to injury by blaming him for his calamity, and trying to force a confession out of him, so that he might repent and be forgiven and relieved of his suffering. But he refused, and explained that he had done nothing to deserve his plight.

When his friends grew silent, Job confronted God directly. Job insisted that his suffering was unfounded and demanded justice. When justice did not come, his lament continued. God remained silent. In fact, God seemed to be MIA (Missing in Action.) So Job begged for an advocate to plead his case in heaven. Still no help was received.

As Job's suffering progressed, he began to loath his own existence. He became the laughingstock of his friends, and his hope was exhausted.

In his despair, Job began to make the connections between his personal suffering and the suffering of others, and he filed a "class-action suit" against God (24). He sued God for breach of covenant.

The argument went something like this, "God, you made a covenant with humanity, and now you have broken it. I kept my part of the deal. You haven't!"

Job gave a great speech, but God did not reply (31:35-40).

Elihu, an onlooker, criticized Job for his self-righteousness, and denounced Job's friends for failing to uncover Job's sins. Finally, the long-awaited response from God is heard.

God says, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (38:4). "Where were you when I shut in the sea with doors?" (38:8). "Have you commanded the morning since your days began?" (38:12)

Job was humbled and grew silent. Then God said to Job, "If you're going to argue with me, you will have to respond to my questions" (40:2).

"OK," Job replied, "Uncle! You are right" (40:4-5).

God pressed Job further. "Will you condemn me, in order to declare yourself just? Put on your royal robes and judge the proud, then I will acknowledge you. Look at the rhino. Can you make him? Can you draw out the devil, and contend with him?"

Job was humbled by God's response, and he relented. Job knew that he was not God, and that he could not do the things that God had done, nor could he comprehend everything that God was up to in the world, including, perhaps, understanding how suffering may be part of God's universe. In short—had the story ended here, we might conclude that the answer to the question, "Why do the innocent suffer?" is this—we don't know. Suffering is a mystery."

But the story doesn't end there. In the epilogue (Job 42:7-9), God not only challenged Job, but God also challenged Job's friends. God told Job's friends to repent. He told them that they were wrong for blaming Job for his suffering, and that they were wrong to associate Job's suffering with divine punishment.

Then God told the friends to make an offering in Job's presence, and to ask Job to pray for them that they might be forgiven for blaming victim for his suffering.

The friends did as God commanded. Job prayed for them, and God forgave Job's friends.

The book concludes with a surprising, almost fairy-tale ending. Job's fortune is restored and doubled, his family is whole and multiplied, and his life span is extended two-fold.

IV

So what are we to make of this story?

Some see God as the cause of suffering, which is the way that God is depicted in Job 2:1-7.

Others, like Job's wife, who speaks in verse 9, sidestep questions about God's involvement in suffering, and simply grow intolerant of people like Job who cling to faith in spite of suffering.

Some others figure that God is too weak to intervene; or that God is silent, even that God is disinterested in our suffering, as is implied in chapter 31.

Still others sense with Job, in 42:1-6, that suffering will always be a mystery to us this side of heaven.

And finally, others have come to view suffering as an inherent part of life in a fallen world, where God is spiritually present to comfort and encourage those who suffer, but whose physical intervention in suffering is expressed largely through the compassionate presence and actions of other human beings.

These same people see the book of Job as biblical permission to explore and express our grief in the wake of suffering—especially unjust suffering—to discount views that blame victims for their plight, to reaffirm God's compassionate interest in the lives of those who suffer, and to encourage all of us to hear, hold, and help those who suffer so that they might experience God's healing—even when a cure is not realized this side of heaven.

V

This is what I believe about suffering and God's relationship to it: I believe that we worship a God who can hear and handle our grief—no matter how extreme it may feel to us, and no matter how uncomfortable our suffering or grief may make others. I believe that the good news is that God can hear and handle our bad news and help us to experience healing and hope on both sides of heaven. Thanks be to God who gives us this victory. Amen.