

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 10/25/2018, Job 42:1-6, 10-7 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

The news the past few days has been horrifying, with hatred and violence, including at a house of worship in Pittsburgh. Sometimes we seek answers from Scripture for why these horrible things happen, but answers aren't easy to find.

When trying to understand suffering, Job is a great book to read. Today, our four-Sunday sprint through the forty-two chapters of the book of Job concludes with a happy ending. The Lord restores the fortunes of Job: he gets ten children, just like the ten that died in the first chapter, except his daughters are even more beautiful this time, and he has more sheep, camels, oxen and donkeys than ever. A happy ending.

Except it doesn't erase the fact that Job went through so much and previously lost everything; and it's not a *simple* ending, because the question this book sought to address— "Why do bad things happen to good people"—that question does *not* receive a simple, satisfying answer. In fact, according to the story, all that terrible stuff happened to Job because God and Satan made a bet.

Today's Job snippet in our bulletin inserts skips some verses. So what'd we skip this time? Well it just so happens that I have the skipped verses right here, verses 7 through 9:

After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. ⁸ Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept *his* prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for *you* have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done." ⁹ So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the LORD had told them; and the LORD accepted Job's prayer.

Much of the book of Job that we skipped Sunday after Sunday contained Job's interactions with his friends, who came to Job after he lost everything and was scraping at his sores on an ash heap. Initially, his friends sat with him in silence; but then they opened their mouths and tried to explain to Job that what happened to him must somehow be his fault, because bad things don't happen to good people. If bad things are happening to Job, then Job must not be following the rules.

In this part we skipped today, God rebukes those friends and their philosophies. "My wrath is kindled against you, because you have not spoken of me what is right," God said. In fact, God is so annoyed by their platitudes that God says they need to get Job to pray for them, because God will listen to Job's prayers, not theirs.

Where do you see yourself in Job's story?

When I was first called to work with St. David's, the search committee told me that they wanted to understand how the Bible connects to daily life. One way to try to make such a connection is to try to see yourself in different characters in these stories. Looking at one story through the eyes of different characters can be especially illuminating; and when you figure out with whom you identify, you might get some insight into what you need to be working on spiritually.

My father experienced a great deal of pain and suffering in the last decade of his life. He and my mom were both averse to complaining. If something difficult happened in my life, I had to be careful how I told them about it, because if I presented the situation as too dire, my dad would say, "Well, that sounds like you're complaining!" Complaining was forbidden. (I'm sure this led to my love of biblical lament.)

My father tried hard not to complain about what happened to him. It started as routine prostate cancer, but because of his age, the best way to treat it was not clear. Surgery, radiation, seeds, wait and see? They said if he had been ten years younger, they would recommend surgery; and if he were ten years older, they would have tried wait-and-see. My father and his doctors finally decided on treating the cancer with radioactive seeds, and they opted not to try to shrink the prostate first. But because it was so enlarged, the doctor decided to try something experimental: that is, giving my father about ten times the normal dosage of radioactive seeds.

So the seeds blasted the cancer, but they also destroyed not only my father's prostate, but parts of his colon and bladder, leading to something like eight surgeries over a five-year period, and basically destroying his quality of life for his last thirteen and a half years. He was constantly in pain and miserable.

But remember, complaining was not allowed. Dad usually said he was "fine." He'd get quiet if I pressed him. And once, when he admitted that things weren't good at all, he said to me, "I guess I'm not patient like Job."

I asked, "Have you actually *read* Job, Dad? Because Job did actually *complain*. He doesn't curse God, but he complained." Dad said he didn't remember that part. He just remembered people talking about the patience of Job.

My father identified with Job in this story, and found himself lacking. I identify with Job's friends. They did so well at first, just showing up and sitting with Job; but then, they tried to make sense out of a horrible situation that made no sense.

I understand that inclination, and I know that many of you do as well. Many of you have come to me asking what to say to someone who is experiencing suffering. Someone dealing with a terrible diagnosis. Someone whose spouse has died. What can we say? What can we do? Why did this happen to this person?

The book of Job teaches us that there isn't an answer to that question. When someone you love is suffering, *you will not be able to utter magic words to them that will alleviate their suffering.* You do not have that power. No human has that power.

Sometimes, some people might find comfort in certain words or explanations that will make the next person want to tear their hair out with rage; but there isn't a single, perfect explanation for suffering.

The book of Job shows us that there aren't easy answers. God makes this clear. Last Sunday in our reading, God said to Job, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding."

In today's reading, Job responds, "I have uttered what I did not understand."

But God isn't angry with Job. God is angry with Job's *friends*, the ones who didn't just cry out in lament, but *who tried to explain why* God allowed bad things to happen to Job.

I'm sorry that our limited selections from Job spend time on this pat ending instead of the agonizing conversations between Job and his friends, or more time on Job's laments, or more time on God's response from the whirlwind. Please, read this important biblical book in its entirety. And when something bad happens to someone you care about, and when horrible things happen in the world, that seem targeted at specific groups: tread carefully. There are no easy answers. We can refrain from hate speech, from demonizing each other, and as the spiritual leader of this congregation, I call on all of us to do so. Stop the infectious hate. Spread the love of Jesus Christ. And be suspicious of anyone with pat answers about suffering.