

Message for October 24, 2021

Job 38:1-7, 42:1-6

A little more than a year and a half ago it seems as if our world was turned inside out and upside down. There had been reports of a mysterious new virus in China but many of us didn't realize the impact that it was going to have on our daily lives.

At the beginning of the pandemic several people asked me why it was happening. Now in a sense this is an easy question to answer. Somehow this new virus, to which we humans have no natural immunity emerged and then spread like wildfire because our world is so inter-connected. When people asked me the question 'why' though, they weren't really asking about how Covid emerged or why it spread so rapidly; rather what they were really asking was if there is a point, meaning or purpose behind what has happened. Is the pandemic for example God's judgement on a sinful world? Or is it perhaps a sign of the 'end-times'? Such questions are perfectly natural because it almost seems to be a part of our human nature to look for an explanation or meaning when tragedy strikes and bad things happen. Indeed it is an age old question; why do bad things happen and especially perhaps when it happens to good people?

There is one book in the Bible that attempts to answer these questions and that is the book of Job. According to the book that bears his name, Job was a very good man who lived a very good life but then he was struck by a series of almost overwhelming tragedies. His crops were ruined, his livestock was wiped out and then all of his children were killed in a natural disaster. Then Job himself was afflicted with a crippling disfiguring illness. To make matters even worse his wife, far from offering him her love and support, rejected him saying, "Curse God and die". Despite all that had happened to him though, Job refused to curse God and die. Rather he still believed and had faith. Even so, he also wondered; why?

As it so happened Job had some friends who, unlike his wife, chose to stand by him and in their presence, he opened up and gave vent to his grief and anger. He bitterly bewailed the tragedies that had befallen him and the unfairness of it all. It may be that his friends should have just sat there and

listened as Job let it all out but they didn't. They were shocked and even horrified by what Job said. They felt a need to defend God and in a series of debates with Job they tried to come up with some explanations for his suffering. They said for example that since Job had experienced all of these tragedies, he was obviously being punished by God for his sins. What, they wondered, had Job done wrong to incur the divine wrath? Job however rejected his friends' logic altogether. To be sure he wasn't perfect but then again, he wasn't that bad either. He had certainly never done anything so wicked as to deserve this sort of punishment. Also, when he looked at the world around him, he saw all sorts of wicked people living perfectly happy lives. The world is not that simple, Job insisted; it is not always the case that the righteous prosper and the wicked are punished.

Job's friends then tried to counter that argument by saying that even if the wicked themselves aren't punished, their descendants are. Maybe Job was being punished because of something one of his ancestors had said or done! Job however didn't agree with that argument either. What did it matter to a wicked person if his great-grandchildren were punished for his sins? Indeed what sort of justice was that anyways, punishing future innocent generations for sins committed here and now?

At this point another one of Job's friends showed up and he suggested that perhaps Job was being tested to see just how genuine his faith and commitment to God really was. Or perhaps, the friend suggested, he was undergoing these trials so that he might emerge from the experience as a stronger, better person. His suggestion is captured by this well-known hymn verse:

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
my grace all sufficient shall be thy supply.
The flames shall not hurt thee; I only design
thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.

One presumes that Job would have rejected this argument as well. After all, experience tells us that not everyone emerges from their 'fiery trial' with a better character or stronger faith. And what about Job's children? What sort of God would permit them to be killed, all so that Job himself might become a better person? Before Job could present these arguments though, God himself entered the debate.

When God intervened in the debate, he said the oddest things. He didn't speak about punishing sinners or about suffering improving a person's faith or character. God in fact didn't even refer to Job's friends' arguments other than to say that they really didn't know what they were talking about. What God did speak about however was himself and how great he is. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?", God asked, and then he went on from there continuing to proclaim his own greatness. God's response to the question 'why' was to simply praise himself, but this explanation doesn't really seem to be an explanation at all. Even so, it was good enough for Job. As he said: "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you". Job did not get an answer to the question 'why' but he got something even better: he got God himself.

This past summer I re-read a book that I first read years ago: it was Carol Luebering's "Job and Julian of Norwich: Trusting that All will be Well". The book is an imaginary conversation between Job and Julian as to why there is so much pain and heartache in the world. Julian of Norwich was an English woman who lived almost 700 years ago. She became deathly ill and on her death bed she experienced several visions. Julian though recovered from her illness and in response to both her near death experience and the visions, she chose to become an anchoress. What this meant is that she lived in a small home attached to a church where she was 'anchored' and never allowed to leave. She spent all day every day for the rest of her life in prayer and contemplation. Julian lived like that for decades and during that time she thought and rethought about what she had seen and experienced in her visions.

Julian became one of the greatest mystics of the Middle Ages and even wrote a book entitled "Revelations of Divine Love". In her book it is clear that even though she lived so long ago, many of her ideas about God sound very modern. Julian for example firmly believed that while hell does exist, God in his love and mercy would never send anyone there. Indeed, influenced by her visions and her study of both John's gospel and his letters, Julian firmly believed that God is love, and that the love of God for everyone and his very creation itself exceeds all of our comprehension and imagination. And so, said Julian, we do not have an answer as to why bad things happen; we don't simply because God doesn't give us one. What God does give us is his love made known to us in and through his son.

In Christ, God joined us in the flesh and experienced life as we do, the joys and the sorrows. The important thing that we must never forget though is that what God did in the flesh two thousand years ago, he still does today. Even now through the Spirit, God in the person of Jesus is with us, sharing our joys and our heartaches. “Lo I am with you always, to the very end of time”, Jesus promised. The presence of God with us in both the good and the not so good times is what communion and baptism, Christmas and Easter, the Church and our own church itself are all about. And so in the end, we are not left with a clear, well thought out explanation for why bad things happen. Rather what we are left with is a promise and a presence. The promise is that we are not alone in our trials and tribulations because God is with us. Our joys are God’s joys. Our disappointments are God’s disappointments. Our tears are God’s tears. Our heartbreaks are his as well. Almighty God, the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, the creator and mighty redeemer, is both with us and for us. God is with us and God is for us; this is far better than any explanation could ever be.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer on this October morning.

This is a time of such beauty as the leaves change their colours, and we give you thanks for the wonder of not only this season but your very creation itself. Grant us the eyes and ears of faith so that we may observe your goodness and creativity in the world around us.

We thank you for your Son who is your greatest revelation of all. Help us we pray to discern your Spirit at work in the world around us, this day and every day.

As you well know from first-hand experience through the life of your Son here on earth, life’s journey is not always an easy one. There are ups and downs, times of joy and times of sorrow. There are times when we may well wonder why bad things happen and if there is there a point, purpose, or a meaning behind it all.

Help us we pray to put our faith, hope, and trust in you in both the good and not so good times. Help us to remember that you are always present, and that you are both with us and for us. Help us to remember that we have nothing to dread or fear with you by our side.

We pray this morning for your comforting, guiding, and healing presence in the lives of all those who are feeling overwhelmed.

We pray for healing for those who are ill, and comfort for those who mourn.

We pray for the safety and well-being of all who have dedicated their lives to spreading the good news of your gospel, and we especially pray for the safety of the missionaries kidnapped in Haiti and are now being held for ransom.

Living where we do, we sometimes forget that there are so many places in the world where it is dangerous to openly practice our Christian faith and so we pray for the well-being of all of our brothers and sisters in Christ, wherever they may be. Indeed, we pray for the safety and well-being of all your children both near and far.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen