

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on March 27, 2022

THE DRAMA OF JOB

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. Job 1:1

Our core story for today is the book of Job. Job is a very unique, difficult and mysterious book of the Old Testament. It is written in a very different style from the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures. In many ways, the book of Job reminds me of an early Greek play.

When the curtain opens we are introduced to the main character Job. He is a man who has found worldly success. We are told that he has lots of livestock that indicates he is wealthy. He has seven sons who make him proud. He is the most important person in the neighborhood who hold feasts and parties with others.

Job is also a very faithful person. He takes his obligations to God very seriously. He gets up early in the morning to make burnt sacrifices on behalf of his family. We would call him an honest, pious man.

The second scene moves to the heaven. We find the court gathered around God. God points out how faithful Job is. Satan responds that of course Job is faithful. God has blessed Job with everything a human being could desire. He has a family, wealth and good health – of course he is thankful. Satan tells God, he is faithful now, but if you take away the goodies, Job will curse God.

God agrees to Satan putting Job to the test. He tells Satan he has power over Job to see how he might react to adversity. God allows Satan to do almost anything to Job except to attack physically.

The third scene moves back to earth. Satan begins his attack on Job. In this scene one calamity follows another. First one group and then another steal all his livestock. Then he hears that all of his children were at a party and the roof fell and all were lost. Job shaved his head and mourned his loss, but he did not sin or blame God.

In the fourth scene we return to heaven and God tells Satan that Job is still an upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. Satan wants to go after Job's health. He says if Job's health is affected, he will turn from God. God gives permission to Satan to do what he wants short of taking Job's life. So, Satan afflicted Job with all kinds of sores that made him miserable.

Job's wife even tells him to "Curse God and die." But Job continued to be faithful to God. During his suffering some friends come and sit with him to bring some comfort. But after a while they begin to question him. They all seem to believe that Job must be at fault. One friend suggests that he must have sinned. He must confess how he has

failed God. Another tells him he must repent. The third says Job's guilt deserves punishment.

Job rejects the words of his friends. He cannot believe that his suffering is the result of his own failures. He goes on to question how God could allow this to happen. He does not understand why. God does not give Job any easy answers. God basically says that Job cannot comprehend the ways of the Lord.

⁴“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. ⁵Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? ⁶On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone ⁷when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

God's answer may not be enough for us, but the greatness and the mystery of God's will, was enough for Job. He repented of his questioning and was reconciled to God. The drama ends with a happy ending as Job's fortunes are restored.

What does the drama of Job teach about a proper way to approach suffering?

First, Job teaches us that there is not a direct causal relationship between sin and suffering. One of the most common human responses to suffering is to believe it is punishment for sin. Many of the contemporaries of Jesus held this understanding of the faith. In our Gospel Lesson for today we read the story of the man born blind who encounters Jesus. Jesus' disciples asked him a simple question, “Who sinned, the man or his parents?” The disciples thought that someone had to be at fault.

In the Gospels Jesus dispels this simplistic understanding when he said, **“For He makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”** Jesus is reminding us that the natural world is not ordered to bless those who are good and punish those who are bad. The good suffer and prosper along with the bad. Jesus teaches the clear truth that Christianity does not promise to save us from all suffering.

To be honest, I should point out that there is a tension found in the Bible. In the Old Testament, the Book of Deuteronomy would seem to promise that if you are good, God will protect you from all evil and if you are bad you will be punished. This simple formula led many to think that wealth was an indication of goodness, and poverty meant that you were bad.

My friends, that is not the message of Job or Jesus. We do not suffer because we do not have enough faith. We do not get cancer because we are bad people. We do not mourn the loss of a child because we lack faith. The men and women who have died from Covid in nursing homes were not all bad people and the ones who were able to escape are not all saints. The rain falls on the just and the unjust equally. We should not play a blame game with ourselves or others.

The second truth we learn from Job is that our response to suffering begins with lament. Our first response should not be to seek an explanation for it all. Writing in Time magazine during the first Covid Lent, Anglican theologian N.T. Wright wrote: **Instead of seeking explanations for our present disaster, we should "recover the biblical tradition of lament," an expression of solidarity with our fellow humans and with God himself, who in the Old Testament grieves for his people's infidelity and in the person of Jesus weeps for Lazarus. The Christian tradition doesn't require us to "explain what's happening and why. In fact, it is part of the Christian vocation not to be able to explain — and to lament instead."**

Wright is telling us that our first task as Christians is to weep with those who suffer and even complain to God about all that has happened. After losing his family, possessions and health Job lamented in these words:

³ **"Let the day perish in which I was born,
and the night that said,
'A man-child is conceived.'**

⁴ **Let that day be darkness!
May God above not seek it,
or light shine on it.**

⁵ **Let gloom and deep darkness claim it.
Let clouds settle upon it;
let the blackness of the day terrify it.**

So, the first reaction of a Christian to suffering is lament and a cry for help. Following lament and the passage of time we begin to ask questions of meaning.

The writer Simone Weil tells us: **The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering, but a supernatural use for it.**

In these words, Weil reminds us that Christ does not promise to save us from all suffering, but rather to use it for a greater good. In the Gospels Jesus affirms this same truth. This is not an easy answer to accept. We crave easy answers, we want to believe that there are obvious reasons why people prosper or suffer. Jesus tells us that this is not the case. One ancient commentator tells us: **The Lord taught the disciples that there are many reasons for all these events and that they are certainly secret and unexplainable. This knowledge will be given to us in the future world, because what is hidden now will be revealed to us.**

The war in Ukraine brings horrible images into our homes every day. One of the searing images from the Vietnam War was a picture of a nine-year old girl. Her name is Kim. She tells us of her experience years later.

You have seen my picture a thousand times. It's a picture that made the world gasp—a picture that defined my life. I am nine years old, running along a puddled roadway in front of an expressionless soldier, arms

outstretched, naked, shrieking in pain and fear, the dark contour of a napalm cloud billowing in the distance. I had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Those bombs have brought me immeasurable pain. Even now, some 40 years later, I am still receiving treatment for burns that cover my arms, back, and neck. The emotional and spiritual pain was even harder to endure.

And yet, looking back at the past five decades, I realize that those same bombs that brought so much suffering also brought great healing. Those bombs led me to Christ.

As a child, I was raised in the religion of Cao Dai (pronounced *cow-die*). For years, I prayed to the gods of Cao Dai for healing and peace. But as one prayer after another went unanswered, it became clear that either they were nonexistent or they did not care to lend a hand.

And so, I continued to bear the crippling weight of anger, bitterness, and resentment toward those who caused my suffering—the searing fire that penetrated my body; the ensuing burn baths; the dry and itchy skin; the inability to sweat, which turned my flesh into an oven in Vietnam’s sweltering heat. I craved relief that never would come. And yet, despite every last external circumstance that threatened to overtake me—mind, body, and soul—the most agonizing pain I suffered during that season of life dwelled in my heart.

In 1982, I found myself crouched inside Saigon’s central library, pulling Vietnamese books of religion off the shelves one by one. The stack in front of me included books on Baha’i, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Cao Dai. It also contained a copy of the New Testament. I thumbed through several books before pulling the New Testament into my lap. An hour later, I had picked my way through the Gospels, and at least two themes had become abundantly clear.

First, despite all that I had learned through Cao Dai—that there were many gods, that there were many paths to holiness, that the burden of “success” in religion rested atop my own weary, slumped shoulders—Jesus presented himself as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). His entire ministry, it seemed, pointed to one straightforward claim: “I am the way you get to God; there is no other way but me.” Second, this Jesus had suffered in defense of his claim. He had been mocked, tortured, and killed. Why would he endure these things, I wondered, if he were not, in fact, God?

I had never been exposed to this side of Jesus—the wounded one, the one who bore scars. I turned over this new information in my mind as a gem in my hand, relishing the light that was cast from all sides. The more I read, the more I came to believe that he really was who he said he was, that he really had done what he said he had done, and that—most important to me—he really would do all that he had promised in his Word. Perhaps he could help me make sense of my pain and at last come to terms with my scars.

My salvation experience happened, fittingly enough, on Christmas Eve. It was 1982, and I was attending a special worship service at a small church in Saigon.

The pastor spoke about how Christmas is not about the gifts we give to each other, so much as it is about one gift in particular: the gift of Jesus Christ. As I listened to this message, I knew that something was shifting inside me.

How desperately I needed peace. How ready I was for love and joy. I had so much hatred in my heart—so much bitterness. I wanted to let go of all my pain. I wanted to pursue life instead of holding fast to fantasies of death. I wanted this Jesus.

So, when the pastor finished speaking, I stood up, stepped out into the aisle, and made my way to the front of the sanctuary to say yes to Jesus Christ.

And there, in a small church in Vietnam, mere miles from the street where my journey had begun amid the chaos of war—on the night before the world would celebrate the birth of the Messiah—I invited Jesus into my heart.

When I woke up that Christmas morning, I experienced the kind of healing that can only come from God. I was finally at peace.

Suffering is not a punishment, but rather a teacher that can become a pathway to Christ. Job, even in the midst of suffering, could defend himself and God for he continued to believe. He provides a model for us when he said:

**For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
²⁶ and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God,**