

JOB'S TROUBLES, GOD'S MINDFULNESS- Part I

Rev Dan Stern October 8, 2006 P17B

Job 1:1, 2:1-10, Hebrews 1:1-3a, 2:6-8, 10, 12

Hymn # 488, verses 1 & 2- Be Still, My Soul

"Though thorny ways lead to a joyful end, all now mysterious will be clear at last. Therefore be still, my soul, in the cross of grief and of pain."

Sam and I like to listen to the band, REM. One of their best songs, we'll play part of it for you as an offertory, repeats the phrase, Everybody hurts sometimes. It's true. Everybody does hurt sometimes. Even wealthy corporate executives. One such wealthy corporate executive was, I'm told, driving down the California coast late one night, having had too much to drink at a party. Suddenly, he lost control of his expensive sports car. The car spun out of control and headed for the edge of a gigantic seaside cliff. At the last minute the man leapt from his car, but in doing so, his arm got caught and severed from his body. A concerned truck driver saw what had happened, and ran to the wealthy man's side. He found him looking blankly out over the cliff, tears in his eyes, mumbling in agony, 'My BMW, my BMW!' 'Forget about your car', said the truck driver, 'We should look for your arm, maybe the doctors can sew it back on.' At that moment, the unfortunate man of wealth realized he had indeed lost his arm and started to wail, 'My Rolex, my Rolex!'

Eugene Peterson I think rightly says that it is not suffering per se that troubles us so. We can at least begrudgingly accept a certain share of punishing pain if we know our priorities have been askew, as in the case of the overly materialistic, likely drunk man just described, or when we've done some wrong or stupid thing that makes us feel we deserve it. But it is the undeserved kind, the suffering of the innocent that really throws us. And the awful, ironic thing is that as we get older, we come to see that there is no real correlation between the amount of wrong we commit and the amount of pain we experience. An even larger surprise is that very often there is something quite the opposite: We do right, and get knocked down. We do the best we are capable of doing, and just as we are reaching out to receive our reward we are hit from the blind side and sent reeling.

This week, when I heard about the brutal killings of those Amish schoolgirls, I found myself feeling overwhelmed with moral outrage. How ironic that their unlocked, unbarricaded one room country school house had a colorful, inviting handmade sign below the chalkboard that read, "Visitors Brighten People's Days". THIS particular visitor did not. And when we ask Why, why, why? We are ever so much like the Old Testament sage, Job.

There was once a man in the land of Uz. So begins the important, challenging, no-easy-answers Bible story of Job. Job: THE archetypal example of a good person who endures undeserved suffering. For thousands of years, few have been inclined to name their child Job (the only one I know is the Job of TV's Arrested Development) for the name itself is synonymous with undeserved suffering. Yet in the face of it all, the Job of the Old Testament repeatedly, passionately, eloquently continues to ask God, 'Why?' and refuses to take silence for an answer. Later in the book, we learn that Job also refuses to take clichés for an answer. He does not take his sufferings quietly nor piously. He protests mightily. Though none of us desire his fate, he is exemplary, both in faithfulness and in protest. In more ways than one, Job is a good man. So why, why, why does he, do we, do innocent Amish school children suffer so undeservedly?

We're speaking here of the kind of suffering that at first bewilders and then outrages most of us. Job was not immune to such bewilderment and outrage; Job was, after all, doing

everything right when suddenly everything went wrong. To THIS kind of suffering, Job gives voice when he protests to God.

"Job gives voice to his sufferings so well, so accurately and honestly. Job says boldly what some of us are too timid to say. He makes poetry out of what in many of us is only a tangle of confused whimpers. He shouts out to God what a lot of us mutter behind our sleeves. He refuses to accept the role of a defeated victim."

We too cannot simply accept whatever sufferings come- nor, I suppose, can even the nonviolent, ever-so forgiving Amish, though they are much quicker than most to try to bring their focus back to God's love and forgiveness. One related Amish Grandmother, talking to a reporter, put it this way: "You think about them (meaning both the innocent children, and the sick ones who attack them), you cry about them, you pray for them, and then you have to let go of things you can't explain." Or as another once quipped, "Grief and disappointments have to be buried, not embalmed."

So it's important to note what Job does NOT do too. For one thing, (Peterson): "Job does not curse God, getting rid of the problem by getting rid of God. But neither does Job EXPLAIN suffering (no more than did that Amish grandmother who said you have to let go of what you can't explain). (We're not instructed in the Book of Job as to) how to live so that we can avoid suffering either. (Rather, we're taught that) suffering is ultimately a mystery, and (we learn how) Job came to respect that mystery. In the course of facing, questioning, and (yes) respecting suffering, Job found himself in an even larger mystery- the mystery of God. Perhaps the greatest mystery in suffering is how it, like joy, can actually bring a person into the presence of God, (filling us with) wonder, love, and praise. Suffering certainly does not inevitably do this (neither does happiness), but it does it far more often than we would expect. In the end, it did that for Job. (Suffering did not steer him away from God, but rather filled him with yet more wonder, love, and praise.) Even in his answer to his wife's suggestion (that he curse God and get it over with), he speaks the language of an uncharted irony, a dark and difficult kind of truth: 'We take the good days from God- why not also the bad?'

As Helen Keller put it, "Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of overcoming suffering." We'll never stop questioning some things, nor should we, but when it comes to the kinds of pain and suffering that we don't deserve, when it comes to those terrible random acts of senseless violence that occur in our world, our 'why' questions can only help a little. Since there are no easy answers as to why, we learn in time to change the nature of our questions. Which is to say, in the end, that the greater mystery, the more important question, is not why is there any suffering, but why is there any life at all, any love and joy and kindness? The greater mystery is not WHY bad things happen to good people, but WHEN bad things happen, how is it that good people find ways to respond, to overcome, even to spiritually thrive in midst of suffering? How do they DO it? Amazing! The greater mystery, the more important question is not how could God allow suffering, but how could God's own self actually enter into the very heart of that suffering, sharing in it with us at its very harshest? How could we be so blessed as to have a God that lovingly present and compassionate?

There at last, I think, is the place today's text from Hebrews comes to bear, which lifts high the cross of Christ as it celebrates God's ever-attentive and affirming mindfulness. 'And what are human beings that God is mindful of them, mortals, that God cares for them? God has made them but a little lower than the angels, crowning them with glory and honor.' God's very own self is able and willing to suffer. Jesus is not ashamed to call suffering human beings his brothers and sisters. We are One in our suffering, we are One in

our joys. Our God is mindful of us. Attentive. Compassionate. We can be that too for one another. We can make it through no matter what it is. Thanks be to our God. Amen.