

GREAT MOMENTS IN SCRIPTURE: (3) “The Problem of Evil” – a sermon by Gary Hindman, FPCUC. Scripture: Job 28:20-28.

*Text: ‘Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.’
--Job 28:28*

This is the third in a sermon series entitled, “Great Moments in Scripture.” They are inspired by the exciting Christian writer and Presbyterian minister, John Ortberg of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Northern California. I am using some of John’s thoughts as jumping off points for these messages and am grateful for his books; *Everybody is Normal Till You Get to Know Them* and *God is Closer Than You Think*.

In the first sermon we looked at the story of a woman caught in adultery and at the way Jesus handled those accusers who were threatening to kill her. He said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin cast the first stone.” We saw in Jesus a man who did not condone what she had done but neither did he condemn her. Instead he told her to go her way and sin no more and we can believe the gracious way he in which he dealt with her brought hope, healing and new life.

Last week we looked at the story of Mary and Martha, two sisters with two very different temperaments. Some people think Jesus preferred the quiet and reflective Mary over the busy, over-achieving Martha but their temperaments were not the issue. The issue was discipleship and Mary had chosen the better path, to follow Jesus, to be at his feet, and, to use an old Hebrew expression, to be covered in the dust of her rabbi, Jesus. The challenge for us is to follow him also, and not just part-way but to give him our all and make him Lord of our life.

This morning we look at the Book of Job and we ask ourselves the question John Ortberg raised in chapter 9 of *God Is Closer than You Think*. The question is: what do we do and where do we go when God seems absent? Another way of putting it is that what do you do when winter comes to your soul?

What do I mean by “winter”? It can come when we lose a job or fail in our vocation. It can come when we feel a deep sense of sadness or shame in something we have done. Winter comes when the doctor phones your house and gives you the bad news, the test came back positive. There is a chance you may not grow old with your spouse and die in your own good time; you are not going to grow old and see your grandchildren graduate from high school.

I went through a winter of the soul right here in Upland. The year was 1989, I was the new kid on the block and my leukemia started to kick up. I handled that okay and went through the usually precautionary treatments, but when I reacted to the chemo therapy my whole body started to break out into an allergic reaction. I looked like a teenager with the worse case of acne around and the worse part was that what was visible on the outside might be happening all throughout my body. I had endured months and months of treatments and had

been subjected to a whole new world, the world of those who suffer from cancer and are bounced around from line to line, clinic to clinic, doctor to doctor. Finally, I had had it, and I let God have it with both barrels. I was fed up. Why was I, God's faithful servant, having to have such suffering and hardship when all I wanted to do was keep on being his servant? So I told God "what for" and I did not mince my words! I am not saying what I said was good theology, but it was honest and real, and, looking back, it was a very important part of my walk of faith.

I am so glad that the Bible is an adult book and it is not afraid to "tell it like it is." Listen to David lamenting: "I cry to you for help, O Lord; in the morning my prayer comes before you. Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?" Have you ever felt that way? I would bet you have!

Certain books of the Bible are "wintery" books. Among them are Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, many of the Psalms, many of the laments of the Prophets, and the Book of Job. And of all these books of the Bible, Job has more "winter" than any! It did not start that way though, for here was a man who had it all—wife, kids, money, prestige, power, wealth—the good life in spades! And he was a righteous man, to boot!

Suddenly very bad things started to happen to this very good man. He loses his livestock, then his wealth, his servants, and his children. But in all his trouble Job does not curse the Lord.

One gets the impression Job is like a play with an upper and a lower stage. On the upper stage there is a dialogue between God and Satan; on the lower stage are dialogues between Job and his wife and friends. We are privy to both stages but Job and the earthlings are privilege to just their own.

On the upper deck Satan has been asking God (and also the audience) a provocative question: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" In other words, is the only reason Job is devoted to God because it is in his self-interest to be so? Underneath this question is a deeper one we need to ask ourselves: can we continue to love God even when things in our lives are not going well? That is a very important question and it gets to the depth of our faith because if we only love God when things are going well, we will never know the riches of faith that come when God blesses us in our time of severe need.

Meanwhile, back in his hometown of Uz, Job gets sick with sores and grieves over at the town dump. There he is joined by his wife who says, "Curse God and die." Mrs. Job is not exactly a comforting woman to have around the house! Then Job's friends come and sympathize with him and when they saw his misery, it took away their speech and all they could do was sit with him in agony, saying nothing for seven days and nights. But when the seven days were over, the damn broke and they spoke and spoke and spoke! It would have been better if they had kept still but no, they had to tell Job all kinds of unhelpful advice. But then, Job speaks and he says simply, that he curses the day he was

born and for the next 28 chapters he pours out a stream of bitterness, confusion, sorrow and anger toward God that is absolutely staggering. In a nutshell, Job is teed off and wants to know why God has forsaken him.

Job is so relentless, so scathing, that his friends cannot bare to hear it. Meanwhile, Job is plagued with a theology prevalent in his time and one that is still with us today, "the doctrine of retribution." It argues that if something good has happened to you it must be because you deserve it and if something bad has happened to you it must be because you obviously did something bad.

The idea that you must have done something bad to deserve your misfortune, is a false and it is a bankrupt idea. Do not misunderstand what I am saying. There is a correlation between sinful behavior and suffering and between godly behavior and blessing, but the truth is, bad things do happen to good people, or, as Jesus put it, "The rain falls on the just and the unjust." But we also know, in faith, that someday God will wipe away every tear from every eye.

The truth is, evil is a highly complex subject and there is no one answer that will satisfy every situation. Moreover, God hates pain and is in no way the author of our suffering and the best news is that God can redeem pain and bless us through our pain and suffering but that is getting ahead of the story.

In all other religions of the world that I am familiar with, people pray and praise, make their petitions, and curse their enemies, but of God, they never complain. Only in our Judeo-Christian tradition do we find people complaining to God. But do not get stuck on the complaining as if it is something rude. The point is that complaining comes about because people of faith believe God cares. God is listening and God wants to do something about our plight. It is because God is so personal and God is so intimate that the Hebrew people cared enough to complain to God in the form of laments. It is a genuine opening up to God that makes God genuine to us. It was when I finally got mad at God that I realized how foolish my anger was because God, of all beings, was unconditionally on the side of my recovery. But I had to get real to know that!

Job has flashes of inspiration and the Book of Job reveals the majesty of God. Our passage for a this morning makes it clear that the wisdom of God is not easy to understand but that the fear of the Lord, being in touch with God's awesomeness, is the beginning of wisdom.

Job is convinced God has deserted him and says, "If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments." Job gets his wish. Toward the end of the story the Lord answers Job out of the storm.

Now if Job were a play and we were seeing it for the first time, we might project in our minds what God would say. Perhaps God will refute Job point for point like a great lawyer making his case. Maybe God will put Job in his place and ask him just who Job thinks he is. But this does not happen, not at all.

God comes to Job and merely asks him a long series of questions to which Job cannot supply an answer—questions like, “Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain...to water a land where no man lives, a desert with no one in it, to satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with water?” The point of God’s reasoning in all his questions is found in this typical one: viz., God is overflowingly generous. God makes it rain in the desert, even where no one lives, just because God is so generous and loves to give. God sends streams of living water in the desert for the sheer joy of generosity. God delights in animals that are of no apparent use. God decorates the California desert with billions of poppies every spring just for the fun of it. “I made the behemoth,” says God (a probable reference to the hippopotamus) just because they are so comical to look at! God made the wild oxen that will never plow, and the wild donkey that will never be tamed, and mountain goats that give birth in secret places people will never see, and the leviathan (whale) that no one can catch. Nature is truly marvelous and a sign of God’s overflowing, abundant, generous goodness.

What God seems to be saying to Job is that life is wonderful, life is worth every beating moment, and do not give up on the gift of life I gave to you. God is speaking to Job these things and the subliminal message is, “Job, I have heard you, I who am author of life and all things good, and I am with you and I understand your plight; I know and I care” and frankly, that should suffice.

When God came to earth he came in the winter—a time of sorrow and hardship. And he himself was a “man of sorrows” and acquainted with grief and he lived among us full of grace and truth and then he suffered and he died a very harsh death. He knows all about suffering, yours and mine, because he has been there. He knows about the absence of God for through his Son he could pray, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” The cross is that great paradox—the ultimate winter of God with God’s self so that we could look forward to the eternal spring that is on the other side of this earthly plain.

Job is like a play with two stages. But we, as Christians, can see beyond what was seen by those reading the story at the time of its writing. We can see what God has planned for all who believe on his name—that in him we have life, life here and now, life abundant, and life that is ever-lasting. Job could not see the upper stage and know that his faithfulness was more than virtue, that it has meaning beyond our wildest dreams. He could not know this from his vantage point in history, but we know. We know that God does not leave or forsake us, even in winter, and that, like all earthly winters, it is but the stage that is set for a coming season, a season of life and hope through Christ.