

## **“Deepen our Faith by Trust”**

Salado UMC—7 October 2018: 20<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost

Preaching Text: Job 1:1; 2:1-10—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

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**“Seeing much, suffering much, and studying much, are the three pillars of learning”**

— Benjamin Disraeli (1804—1881).

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May we remember in silent prayer 13-year-old Marian Fisher, 7-year-old Naomi Rose Ebersol, sisters Mary Liz Miller, 8, Lena Miller, 7, and 12-year-old Anna Mae Stoltzfus.

Twelve years ago, in 2006 I was in Lancaster, PA, for a UM clergy meeting called “The Gathering.” Fatefully, I arrived on Sunday after Charles Roberts shot eight young Amish girls, killing five. It was enough to make one lose hope. Yet, two incidents offered some hope. One was a photo of a victim’s parents walking to the shooter’s home to speak forgiveness to his family. The other “Hope moment” was an Amish man’s observation: “We can deal with this because we are prepared for death at any time. How much worse if it happens among those not prepared in faith to die?”

From this horrific situation, I have a greater respect for Amish faith formation. Perhaps some of the faith of the Amish people will anoint our spirits. Perhaps they can point us to trust—and deepen our faith. Our lesson comes from the book of Job:

**[1:1] 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).**

**[2:1] One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. [2] The Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." [3] The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason." [4] Then Satan answered the Lord, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. [5] But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." [6] The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life."**

**[7] So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. [8] Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.**

**[9] Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." [10] But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips (Job 2:1-10).**

The Bible attends our all-too-human questions about why bad things happen to good people. Job is one such example among others. Psalm 13 begins with a series of rhetorical questions. The Psalmist

asked these questions to make a statement. From the Psalmist's view, Yahweh causes the petitioner's quandary. The Psalmist faces perplexity when God is absent. Life appears as pure tribulation. The Psalmist holds Yahweh responsible. We are shocked that a prayer offers such flood of wrath toward God. Yet, if we carefully read the lament Psalms, we see how angry a pious Jew can be. Without relationship there exists no anger. The forceful torrent toward Yahweh suggests that the pray-er is serious about his relationship with the Almighty.

**[13:1] How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?**

**How long will you hide your face from me?**

**[2] How long must I bear pain in my soul,**

**and have sorrow in my heart all day long?**

**How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?**

**[3] Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!**

**Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,**

**[4] and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed;"**

**my foes will rejoice because I am shaken (Psalm 13:1-4).**

Sometimes we too feel this way. We are angry, disappointed, and frustrated about the situations of evil. The circumstances in Lancaster, PA is one of many we might cite—Sandy Hook elementary school is another. Too often we are stunned by the thought of innocent children plucked from life for no particularly reason. Most of us are wary of God's wrath. Yet, deep within us a subtle but insistent voice cries out: "Why?" In essence, this is Psalmist cry!

A good illustration of passionate outpouring toward God comes from the 1994 Academy Award film *Forrest Gump*. Gump, as you remember, met his hero Lieutenant Dan Taylor in Vietnam. Forrest said about the lieutenant: "He was from a long great military tradition—somebody in his family had fought—and DIED—in every-single American war. I guess you could say he had a lot to LIVE up to." In due course, Forrest saves the lieutenant in battle, but the lieutenant loses both his legs. After years of dying through alcoholism, Lieutenant Dan reconnects with Forrest and his shrimp boat. When a gulf hurricane hits, Lieutenant Dan lashes himself to the mast. He dares God to destroy him, yet God spares the Lieutenant. Who can forget when the Lieutenant shakes his fist at God for his predicament? Sounds like Psalm 13.

"Theodicy" is a fancy theological word. It pertains to "the justice of God in an unjust world." You might be surprised that "theodicy" describes more average run-of-the-mill daily theology asked by citizens than all other questions about God put together. Questions about theodicy usually sound like: What did I do to deserve this? Or why did this happen to me or us? Why now? Why? Why? Why?

Theodicy rationalizes God's justice where evil really exists. We ask these kinds of questions to and about God in funeral homes and hospitals. I've spent the last forty years thinking about such questions. Openly, there are few fit answers. Preachers face such questions daily. Why did our friend get cancer? Why couldn't my children stay married? Why do children go to bed hungry? Why is there war? —and the like.

I am guilty of asking these kinds of questions about things. We want to know why the good suffer and why bad things happen to good people. Worse yet, why do good things happen to bad people. The psalmist speaks for us all:

**But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped.**

**For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked (Ps 73:2-3).**

In the 21st century and in Jesus' time people ask such questions. Notice the people's questions seem to connect suffering and sin. Listen to Luke's Jesus:

[13:1] At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did" (Luke 13:1-5).

Forgive me, but I don't get it. Some people listen to Jesus teach. They ask him legitimate questions about human suffering. First, about some Galileans at worship when evidently caught in a Roman subduing a civil riot. When Jesus says, "whose blood was mingled with their sacrifices," Jesus implies that all the Galileans were doing was worshipping God. The question is a good one. Why did those who were at worship die over something they had nothing do? Jesus' answer seems almost callous: "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

Then Jesus addresses a situation as the tower of Siloam fell on eighteen people, killing them instantly. Perhaps workers, perhaps not; whatever they were doing at the tower a tragedy befell, killing them all. Did Jesus wring his hands, saying it was a shame? No, he asked whether those who died were worse sinners than others in Jerusalem. "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

In these examples, Jesus covers the waterfront of human suffering. The first unfair suffering is at the hands of a foreign military. The second example illustrates a natural disaster. To human suffering, Jesus answers both direct and brutal: "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." They want to know the "why" of this tragedy, but Jesus makes them examine their own lives. They want to know about other's suffering and Jesus forces them to examine their own lives—even what they will do with their second chance. Neither Pilate's soldiers nor a tower falling on them, killed the ones that ask, but they *could have died* in this way. So now, Jesus' parable of the fig tree implies: "What are you going to do with your second chance?"

This is a good question for us today. Certainly, we can ask why did this happen to these children in Pennsylvania. We can shake our fist at God with the Psalmist and do so on good biblical grounds. We can fall into the despair created by grief. Yet, through the questions and beyond all our doubts, Jesus ask us to take a good look at our life. Jesus tells us to get right with our family and with God. Jesus wants us to push through the pain and get on with the task of living. Today I think Jesus would tell us that the "why" question will always be with human beings. Yet Jesus also wants us to ask a larger question: "What do I do with my life today and tomorrow?" Ultimately this is the real faith question because it is the only question that we can help answer to our satisfaction. It is a question that can help us begin to trust in God's providence and goodness again. Amen.