

Suffering: Is There a Reason for It?

From the Midweek Lenten series:
Job and Jesus: The Mystery of Human Suffering

Job 3:1-26; Psalm 88:1-18

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

This evening we will begin a study of Job in a series of messages under the theme *Job and Jesus: The Mystery of Human Suffering*. For these Lenten meditations I want to raise certain questions, the questions that I think arise rather naturally in our minds when we enter into the darkness.

I want us to deal with human suffering, recognizing that there is some suffering that comes upon us because of our own wrong choices. Someone said to me on my return, "Did you read the newspapers while you were gone?" And I said, "Yes." "Did you read about bald men that they are more prone to cancer?" I said, "Yes." And then I said to him, "I eat too much. I drink too much. I smoke too much. The least of my worries is my bald head." There is that which comes upon us, which we bring upon ourselves. And in those cases perhaps we can find some connection between what we are experiencing and what had been our patterns earlier. Of course, sometimes we suffer because of the wrong choices of others. But that's not the real human darkness that I want to speak of in these weeks. The real human darkness, the mystery of suffering, is that which comes upon us for which there seems to be simply no explanation, and which affords us not a modicum of human understanding. It is simply the mystery of suffering.

I want to say in this series of messages that that is a reality that is a part of our human experience. I want to deal with it, not out of some morbid desire to probe in the darkness, but rather in order that we might, if we are in the darkness, find a way to cope and survive. And if, pray God, at the moment we are not personally in the darkness, we know not what tomorrow brings. There are few of us who go through life unscathed, that do not come into those deep, dark valleys where the shadow of death is cast over us. So I hope that it might be a sense of preventative therapy simply to acknowledge the fact together that a very real part of our human experience involves the mystery of human suffering. And to do that, I want to focus on the stories of Job and Jesus. We will begin with Job. We will move toward Jesus. And perhaps they will interface at some point. But in both cases we have stories of persons who experienced the intensity of the darkness,

and didn't simply passively capitulate, but rather were so bold as to question God. Jesus said, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" And Job railed against heaven, maintaining his innocence and claiming God to be unjust. Yet in both cases there was a movement, a movement from the sense of utter desolation to a kind of waiting on God in the darkness. For the one on the cross who said, "My God, my God, why...?", he breathed his last saying, "Father, into Thy hands I commend my Spirit." And Job, in the experience of the revelation of God, didn't simply, passively submit, but he did surrender himself to Almighty God. Both of them going through the experience found a place to rest and wait for the darkness to clear and for the light of God to break upon them.

If I were to set concisely the goal that I have for these messages, it would be that we might be enabled when we enter into the darkness to find God as our friend and not as our enemy. It is ironic, but it is so characteristic of our human response to suffering that, at that point at which we more desperately than any other time need to sense the presence of a gracious God, we tend to see God rather as the adversary, and experience God as the enemy. That seems so characteristically human. I think it is particularly the response of good religious people. We who have been nurtured in the faith are most vulnerable to experiencing God as the enemy in the darkness.

We are all vulnerable people, fragile. Who of us always does it right? Who of us has not made wrong choices? And who knows our weaknesses and the ambiguity of our being more than we do? Who knows the complications of our own persons more than we do ourselves? And who is harder on us than we are ourselves? I think it is precisely that that sets us up. We who are particularly religious people are somehow set up to experience God in the darkness as the accusing enemy rather than as our friend. What is operating here? What is operating when I move to the darkness and begin to accuse myself and feel the foundations shake underneath me and begin to condemn myself? What is operating? Is it not a movement from the good and gracious God modeled out in Jesus Christ to an understanding of God as the stern judge who rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked? If you scratch us, I dare say that even you at Christ Community, who for these twenty-two years have been brainwashed with grace – if you scratch, underneath is too often that fearful vision of God as the one who is the stern judge, the one who punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. We can talk about faith until we are blue in the face, but when push comes to shove and when our life moves into the deep, dark shadow we become the accusers of ourselves. And we see God as joining us in that accusation against us rather than, as the whole Christian Gospel tells us, God being for us.

So, I believe it is important for us to think a bit about human suffering in order to better understand who God is for us, there in that place, and to look at who God is for us in that place in the light of the stories of Job and Jesus. Perhaps in so doing we might find some place to rest, come what may - be it light or shadow.

The first thing I simply want to say is that human suffering is very real. We read about it in our newspapers. Sometimes we encounter those who suffer greatly. And sometimes it is our own personal experience. The Psalmist in Psalm 88 speaks of suffering. I said before I read, it's the one Psalm in the whole Psalter in which there is not a ray of light. Psalm 22, that Jesus quoted on the cross, "My God, my God why hast Thou forsaken me?" is a Psalm of bitter complaint, of intense suffering poured out. But it ends in faith and in praise. Not so, Psalm 88. It is interesting that Psalm 88 made the cut when the canon was put together, when the hymnbook of Israel was collated, because it is just pure darkness. It's not exactly the kind of Psalm you want to wake up in the morning and read for your devotions. But there are those times when no light breaks through and I am glad that that reality is recognized in the scriptures, that in the Old Testament faith there were those who, like Job, addressed God and could bring to speech the awful suffering of his soul, having found no resolution. There are days like that, and sometimes weeks and months like that.

As far as Job is concerned, he curses the day of his birth. He wishes he would have been stillborn. He says, "Why? Why don't you simply let me die and be at rest where I'll no longer know this awful torment of soul, this terrible suffering?"

Job's friends to their credit had come to be with him. And even better than that, we are told that they sat with him and didn't say a word for seven days. For seven days they were simply present to the other, which is so terribly important. But when Job began to make his claim they couldn't keep silent any more. They were good religious sorts, and they felt it imperative upon them to rush to the defense of God. They operated on the basis of the traditional understanding that I mentioned a moment ago: God is the stern judge of all the earth, rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked. Their syllogism went something like this: Suffering comes from God. God is just. Therefore, Job is guilty.

Job's syllogism was: Suffering comes from God. I am innocent. Therefore, God is unjust. His friends couldn't just sit there and take that. They had to defend God. *Of course*, God couldn't be unjust. The only option was that Job must be hiding some deep sin. Their orthodox faith, their little system, was such that they could not get out of their own minds and actually identify with Job in his suffering. The moment Job began to defend himself they rushed to the defense of God. And in the Book of Job, if you go home and you read it between now and next week, you will find there are three cycles of discourses. Job's three friends go on and on, and on and on, defending the honor of God, and Job intersperses his counterclaims. It's interesting that when Job began to say, "I am suffering and I know not the reason why," his friends could not just hear it and be silent with him, but rather had to begin to explain why he must be suffering.

There is a reality of human suffering. "Is there a reason for it?" The message of the Book of Job is, "No." Now that was a challenge to the traditional understanding of things. That was a challenge to the orthodox understanding of

things. “Human Suffering: Is There a Reason For It?” The real mystery of it. In the face of that real, deep human suffering, the Book of Job says there is no reason for it. There is no connection between what I am experiencing and what my life has been. To connect as cause and effect, sin and suffering, is to fly flat in the face of the Book of Job.

Thank God, Job is there, because as I said, there is something about us when we enter into the darkness – we get very hard on ourselves. We accuse ourselves. No one can accuse us better than ourselves, because no one knows those weak spots in our soul like we do. So, we begin to suffer not only that darkness that has come upon us, but then our own sense of unworthiness, our own guiltiness, and it exacerbates and it can become a syndrome that picks up momentum until we are absolutely crushed under it. The Book of Job says, “No, don’t do that. That’s not true.” The whole purpose of that book in the Old Testament canon is to speak a word of God against that inhumane tendency to connect sin and suffering.

The darkness can be very real. There is something in us that so wants to have an explanation. Often there is none. The most brilliant philosophical discourses, the most profound theological reflections down through the centuries have not always been able to give a rational explanation or the reason for suffering. We have it not within ourselves to explain it. Therefore, the best counsel is to wait on the Lord in the darkness.

I can’t go through the whole series for you tonight, but our problem with starting a series here is I would like to give you the resolution at the other end and I can’t do that. I simply have to say to you that we are not left hanging. There will be that resolution which is not a rational explanation, but is simply a trusting in the darkness. But I think that it is good for us simply to come to the recognition that there is some terrible suffering as a part of the human experience. And then to recognize that if it happens to us, we must wait. And if it happens to another, we must be compassionate.