

The Mystery of Suffering: Trust in the Darkness

From the sermon series on the Book of Job

Text: Job 13:15, in four translations

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Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

*"He may kill me, but I won't stop;
I will speak the truth to his face,"* Translation by Stephen Mitchell

*"He may slay me, I'll not quaver.
I will defend my conduct to his face."* Translation by Marvin Pope

*"If he would slay me, I should not hesitate;
I should still argue my cause to his face."* New English Bible

*"Though he slay me, yet will I trust him:
But I will maintain my own ways before him."* King James

I find it is not so easy to bring Job to a conclusion. I struggled in the last service and am very thankful I don't have such a long struggle this time. I have four manuscripts in various stages of completion, and had to finally quit and say, "So, what's the bottom line?" The last word of Job must be this, I believe, "There is a Mystery of Suffering, in the midst of which we must dare to trust God, even in suffering's darkest days."

In his poem, the author of Job makes it eloquently clear that the innocent suffer, that the kind of world that we live in is a world where cancer strikes "willy-nilly," blood clots form, loved ones are ripped from our lives, and sometimes the wicked prosper and the innocent suffer. The word last week, the voice from the whirlwind, was God's defense against Job's accusation, which comes to expression in the text of the morning, "He may kill me, but I'll not quaver." Job was absolutely convinced that the conventional wisdom was wrong. He was so convinced that the religious establishment didn't have it right, that he was willing to stand with his fist raised to heaven. There were moments of deep pathos when we felt Job reaching out. "Oh that I knew where I might find him," says Job, because he was convinced that he had a case to make. Ironically, Job in some ways still shared the erroneous conventional wisdom of his friends. Job still felt that somehow or other God sent that suffering. And if God sent that suffering, God was unjust, for in his case, God was in the wrong. Job cried out to heaven

and said, "If it takes my life, I'm going to state my case." Well, God showed up, as we noted last week, and out of the whirlwind Job was given a panoramic view of cosmic reality and it literally blew him away. He said, "Well, I knew God is big. I never denied that. I knew if I ever did get my opportunity to state my case I'd probably have no chance against God so now I will be silent." But he was still thinking the same way. Once again the voice sounds and God says, "Job, come on and take my place. What would you do if you were God for a day? Because you see, Job, the issue is not whether or not I have absolute power. The issue is: What does one with absolute power do in a world where there are other values as well, values that I have woven into the fabric of creation—freedom of choice, moral choice, spontaneously offered worship, virtue done for its own sake? How does one guard those values in a cosmos like this as one seeks to manage the world, even if one be God?" God is saying, it seems to me, "The world is not perfect, it is a world where cancer strikes, a world where people die, it is a world where darkness can be oh, so dark, but I, God, given the values to which I am committed and the created order I am weaving together – I, God, am doing the best I can do."

Well, where does that leave us? Is that a God in which you can find comfort and security? It certainly isn't the traditional view of God that we have been nurtured on, is it? The traditional view of God that we've been nurtured on is a God of the omni's: omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, knowing all, present everywhere, all powerful, able to do all. Some of us, at least, who have come out of the Reformed tradition have had that large word "predestination" hovering over us throughout all of our days; that is, that all things ultimately are predetermined, that there is a predestinating will of God that determines all that happens.

I heard a delightful story the other evening. It was a family story about a young man courting a young lady whose father was a sturdy Christian, of strong persuasion that predestination is indeed the rule, and that God indeed determines all that happens. As they were walking the back 40 acres, a donkey happened to bray and the young man, the interlocutor, said, "You mean at 3:00 in the afternoon on this given date, God determined that that donkey should bray?" The old man said, "Absolutely. My God is a God that makes it so that whatever is going to happen is going to happen, whether it happens or not." (Laughter) Now, Yogi Berra would have been proud to have said that, wouldn't he? If you think about it, "whatever is going to happen is going to happen whether it happens or not," now that's a muscular God, that's a macho God, that's a no nonsense God, that's a God in control. If we want anything, we want God in control, and understandably so. We don't want to be orphans in a pathless wilderness leading nowhere. We don't want to feel abandoned and alone on this spinning mud-heap. But if I hear the voice from the whirlwind correctly, then that old classic idea of God of the omni's is flawed. In the light of what we know about cosmic reality, if we know anything about our world, the cosmos, we know there is a kind of randomness about it. There is an unpredictability, there is the Huizenberg second law of thermo dynamics (which of course, you all

understand), a law that on the one hand was able to open a cause and effect universe that had no room for miracle or eruption of the new, but on the other hand shows us that this cosmos is so much more mysterious than we ever dreamed of. Perhaps the people today, who stand in the greatest awe, are the physicists who study the mystery of the universe and are continually mystified at ever deepening reality.

So, the God of the whirlwind is a God who suggests that, while this is not a perfect world, God is nonetheless engaged in moving it in that direction, and invites us who are created in the image of God to grow up and to become mature and to join our shoulders to the task as well. It is not so much that I look at God in my pain and say, "Why are you doing this to me?" But rather, I sense the presence of God *with* me in the midst of the darkness, moving toward the Light. What I really need to know, I think, is what Job needed to know. He longed not to receive a logical and rational answer to the mystery of suffering, but to know that there was someone who would show up, that there *was* a Voice, that there was Someone engaged and involved. When Job saw that, Job said, "I didn't know. I didn't understand. I didn't realize."

If we're honest, I think we would all have to own the fact that we would love to have God simply a littler larger than our parents, a divine parent, someone who could make it all right, someone who could fix it all, soothe it all, salve the wounds. Friends, it isn't so. You know it isn't so. If in that old classic idea of God where God is throwing all the switches and pulling all the strings, there is an awful lot of darkness and pain and horror in this world that then has to be attributed to God. It won't do simply to say that all the darkness and the pain and the horror of the world is the consequence of human sin and rebellion. There is a grand residue of darkness for which there is no explanation, and for which there seems to be no meaning and no purpose.

There is a contemporary school of theology that has been very helpful to me. It's called "Process Theology," which does not deny God's ultimate power and purpose, rather sees God neither aloof nor pulling the strings, but rather a God who is in there with us, a fellow traveler, a fellow struggler, a fellow sufferer, One who has invited us to join in the creative purposes that would move reality toward the realization of love and mercy and justice. The vision of Shalom, that beautiful word, which we translate as "peace," is more than peace. It is a vision of the total harmony of things. If I understand the God who speaks through the whirlwind, if I understand the message of the poet-Job, there is a picture there of a God, who, in the midst of this cosmic reality, is far beyond our ability even to conceive. It is a vision of a God who is engaged in the movement toward wholeness and toward Shalom, and invites us to become one with God and the establishment of justice, and the doing of mercy, and the building of community for the purpose of Shalom. A God like that I can trust in the darkness, a God who is for us.

This was Paul's conviction. "What can separate us from the love of Christ, famine or nakedness or peril or sword? Know in all things that we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that there is no angel or principality or power or thing in the heights or the depths, nothing in all creation that can ever separate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord." That God I can trust in the darkness, believing that God is for us, that God's purposes of love are for wholeness and health and Shalom, and that God is doing all God can do. Given not only God's absolute power, but also God's absolute commitment to our human freedom and our moral choice, and the universe in which there is elbowroom for the reality and authenticity of a human creature living in the image of God. A God like that I can trust.

Ironically, the religious always try to protect God and to blunt human responsibility. So that as you read the citation of William Safire in the bulletin states, the translation of Job 13:15, is not as we read it this morning as it is accurately translated, "Though he killed me, yet I will not quaver," but rather the mistranslation of, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him." This translation plays down the darkness and blunts the edge of Job's charge. But ironically the mistranslation may actually better articulate the bottom line in the book of Job.

It is said, perhaps even better, in Psalm 23, by the Psalmist who had also struggled with the prosperity of the wicked and yet says, "Whom have I in heaven but Thee, there is none on earth that I desire beside thee." I like it better in the words of Habakkuk who struggled with the place of God in human events, who finally said, "Though there be no olive crop, though there be no cattle in the stall, though all be lost, yet I will rejoice in God, my Savior." There is that witness in our tradition. There is that Biblical witness that is able to say, "Nevertheless... Let it all be stripped away, nevertheless ... I will trust." That's where Job came to rest. And that's finally where Job would invite us to rest.

As I said last week, the evidence is divided, the circumstances full of ambiguity. There is no simple and easy unraveling of the knot of the Mystery of human suffering. But, finally, the alternatives are embittered cynicism and cursing the darkness, or trust in God that will sustain one through hell itself—

"Though he slay me, yet will I trust Him."