

We have come to love the desert. Crystal clear translucent sky, heat that warms your bones, centuries old mountains whose crags and crevices change mood, in reflection of the world around us. Yet, as much as this has become home, we cannot escape the metaphor throughout Scripture, that the desert is a wilderness, a place of temptation, searching for the PROMISED LAND, REDEMPTION. We have just endured the first International Pandemic in 100 years, a plague killing 4,782,758 persons, infecting 233,780,073, more even than the Spanish Flu, feels as if a punishment. The last several years have felt like a time of atonement, as we as a Church were told to cutback and did without. The word of God became more and more difficult to hear as systems stopped working, one by one the lights burned out, the Choir and the Congregation were told to stop singing, everyone made masks to wear and isolated. Over and over again, I have heard leaders of our Church describe, I was with the Pastor the very day, or just days before he died, if only he had shared, I would have listened, maybe I could have helped... Where was God? Our child took her life, "Children are not supposed to die before their parents!" WHY?

Chaplain Stephen Webster served with the American Forces in Europe during WWII, who had an article published in the NY Times called "Who Gets A Break in Prayer?" Webster told his readers he was fed up with all the stories of miraculous rescues at sea/divine deliverance from rafts in storms in the N Atlantic; people being saved by God in response to their great faith. He identified, such incidents foster the idea that if we are among the good and say our prayers, God will never let us down. Like our own personal Genie, God will always do exactly what we want God to do, when the right people pray, using the right words, or are part of the right religion. Chaplain Webster wanted to tell of the really good men and women he knew, who were not rescued in time of need. They prayed, they had faith, but they were not miraculously plucked from danger. They died, full of faith and trust.

In 1981, Rabbi Harold Kushner published a little book: When Bad Things Happen to Good People; which was regularly misquoted by people as "Why Bad Things Happen" but the Rabbi never addressed "Why!" Kushner's 3 year old had been born with a genetic disorder and died. Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths do not answer Why. To demand answers to Why, seems to make sense to our desires; but would mean that our faith is not in the Biblical God, but in a "Health & Wealth Gospel" which assumes we know better than God, and if only we were in charge of the world, life would be different. Following the Rabbit trail of WHY takes us on the path described in Job by Satan. All his life Job has been blessed and all of his life Job has been faithful... so if the blessings are removed, will Job still be faithful to God? What if more than removal of blessings, if suffering becomes personal for us?

Instead of our following Satan, the book of Job addresses 3 points:

- While some suffering is brought upon ourselves by arrogance, foolishness and sin, a lot, perhaps most suffering in life is undeserved.
- To argue differently, misconstrues who God is and who we are in relationship to God.
- How God can be affirmed as Good, Just and Righteous in light of innocent suffering is a mystery beyond human explanation.

Much like our reading of the Book of Esther last week, The Book of Job is a melodrama, where circumstances are taken to extremes.

How good was Job?

Blameless; Upright in all things; fearing God, he made all offerings, turning away from all evil.

Who is the one causing suffering: Satan;

not that God caused the suffering of Job, but God does allow Satan to test like a Prosecutor.
How much suffering took place?

Arab Nomads attacked killing all but one of Job's servants, stealing his Oxen and Donkeys.

Then fire came from heaven burning up all of Job's Sheep and shepherds, save one.

3 companies of Chaldeans raided all Job's Camels.

All of the sons & daughters of Job were eating and drinking wine at the eldest brother's house when a wind blew from all four corners, the roof collapsed killing all of Job's sons and daughters.

Finally, Job's own body was afflicted with lesions and sores.

First things first, Can all of the dead servants of Job be returned? No they were killed. Can the Sheep be returned? No they were consumed by fire. Can the Camels, Oxen and Donkeys be returned? No they were taken. Can the Sons and Daughters of Job be returned? No, these too were all killed. As much as we desire, we are unable to go back to life before COVID. UNABLE to have these RETURNED to him, what does JOB DO? He rends his clothes, shaves his head, bows to the earth, covering himself in ashes and sackcloth. Job scratches at his sores with a broken earthen vessel to relieve the pressure and scar the skin. RETURN is not possible, instead, Job REPENTS by acts of humility to lower himself before God.

But JOB is not left alone in his suffering, JOB's WIFE AND FRIENDS Help him Suffer

Job's Wife says: Why not Curse God and die? More than a few believers have gotten angry during this time. We have been separated from those we love who were hurting, dying, we could not comfort them, embrace them, even touch them. Some have cursed out Government. Some have cursed those making us wear masks. Some have cursed those not vaccinated. Blaming others binds our anxiety as being THEIR fault, but does not resolve OUR problems.

JOB has a curious reply "Shall we receive blessings, we did not earn at the hand of God, and shall we not also receive suffering when it comes?" Job in this early portion is dealing with the same Question as Satan: If we receive Blessings from God and we worship God; what are we to do without blessings?

Then Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar made an appointment to see Job together. Here the Bible uses a strange phrase: "They condoled with Job." At first glance I thought the word was CONSOLED, but no, CONDOLE is the root of our word "CONDOLENCES" and it means to Grieve. Different from BLAMING, the first 2 friends argue that God is so far above Job, God is concerned with Divine Justice for all Times for all Creation. What are your concerns compared to God's Justice of the World?

Zophar the 3rd friend, pushes Job that he must have done something wrong, whether you know it or not: confess! CONFESS the wrong, of being a Creature in the presence of The Creator. All of which speaks to our being separate and isolated from God, behind our human masks.

The Letter to the Hebrews is different. This is not Gospel, or a letter like Paul's; not TORAH or History, Psalm or Proverbs. The Letter to the Hebrews is written like a SERMON, or like the SACRAMENT OF COMMUNION. As a sermon, the Letter to the Hebrews is not a Melodrama of extremes, not Job's Wife's BLAMING GOD; not Job's FRIENDS demanding that as sinners we accept how distant we are from GOD... INSTEAD, fitting with the beginning of the Gospel of John, we hear and recognize that The Word of God has become flesh! We recall from Genesis, that in the beginning God created everything by a WORD. This week I have been thinking about all of our images of God: Footsteps walking through the Garden, the Mighty hand of God, the shadow of God's grace. God's Word is a creative thing, a blessing. In Hebrews, the Messiah as flesh and blood, one with us, is for us to hear and to know, GOD CARES about You. That simple description from John 3:16, that GOD LOVES THE WORLD SO MUCH, GOD GAVE GOD'S ONLY BEGOTTEN SON. The Divine Creator of all Time and Space is NOT distant, God loves us, weeps for

us, and cares so much as to become an integral part of our lives, of Creation, One with us in flesh and blood and mortality, in order to provide for us: Salvation.

Miraculous divine intervention being saved on a raft in the N. Atlantic during a storm, rarely happens.

The point of worship, of prayer, of Faith is not to Direct God what we want God to do, when.

The people who have died, the businesses destroyed, the circumstance of life: CANNOT BE RETURNED.

But God cares, calling us to care for one another. God cares so much as to enter into our lives anew, that not even death could separate us from God's love. That is REDEMPTION.