

## **If God is Good, Why is There Suffering?**

Job 1:13-22, Proper 9A

Asking for a Friend Summer sermon series

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A little over a week ago, our Kenya mission team entered the home of a woman I will call Mary. As we ducked under the metal doorway and passed by the tattered sheet pulled to one side, we found ourselves in a ten by ten-foot room, home to two small couches, a little coffee table, one skittish cat, and a home for 14 children, and one mama.

Mary graciously invited us to sit, expressing her deep gratitude at welcoming us into her humble home. She then shared her story. Three of her children were biological, eight were the children of two sisters who had died, and three were the children of a cousin who could not care for them. While many would say not my children, not my problem, Mary opened her heart and made a home for all of them in a room smaller than some of our bathrooms. Mary confessed with a gentle laugh that she often had to rely on the children to figure out where everyone would sleep.

Some neighbors have compassionately given her work, tending small garden plots nearby. Our partner organization, Oasis for Orphans, has welcomed her five youngest children into their school and program, providing education and three meals daily.

One of her biological daughters, who I will call Mercy, is in high school and spoke to our team about how Oasis changed her life. Before attending the Well, there were days when the children did not attend school because they could not pay the school fees. There were days when they did not eat because they couldn't afford food. Mercy confessed through tears that there were times when she questioned if God had forgotten her and if God loved her. But when she came to the Well, the staff reminded her God indeed loves her and is always with her even though her suffering made her believe otherwise. After a few years at the Well, Mercy's test scores more than doubled; she is one of their brightest students and dreams of becoming a doctor in Kenya. During our time there last week, I often saw Mercy sitting on the bleachers, working on her homework over the midterm break, while everyone else was cheering on the soccer match, braiding hair, and playing games in the dirt.

As customary, we presented a small gift of sugar and oil before we left Mary's home. Although this was suggested, I felt embarrassed about not bringing more. Our hearts wanted to buy out

the nearest market for her, although there would be no room for such well-intended yet unwise extravagance. Mary was deeply touched and grateful for our gift and, more importantly, our presence. All she asked for was prayer. Prayer for their health. Prayer for God to provide a plot of their own that she could farm and call home for this family created from sacrificial love. We prayed with her. We blessed. We gave thanks. And then, we left, wrestling with the why of it all as we walked the dirt road back to the Well. If God is good, why has Mary suffered so much? If God is good, why did Mercy and these innocent children go to bed for years with nothing but the gnawing ache of hunger?

There are millions of Mercys around the world at this very moment. Individuals who, in their suffering, wonder if God loves them and if God has forgotten them. In this very room, there are Mercys among us wondering the same, and there are those whose hearts break for the suffering of others.

Children who go to bed hungry or abused with little hope that the next day will be different. Fourth of July gatherings with gunshots and weeping drowned out by fireworks and cheering. Hollywood films exposing the horror of child trafficking and modern-day slavery around the world and in our backyard. Another cancer diagnosis, another round of chemo. An unexpected death, an estranged relationship, another unanswered prayer.

It is said that "the sun never sets on what some heart doth break." Suffering is all around us.

For most, nothing I say this morning will give you an emotionally satisfying answer to the problem of pain and suffering. No answer makes pain okay because the image of God in each of us will never allow us to be happy or satisfied with the existence of pain. The phrase "stuff happens" is pretty accurate. Stuff happens. Things break. People hurt. The natural world experiences chaos and disorder. It rains on the just and unjust alike. We are imperfect people living in an imperfect world on an imperfect planet.

On May 31, 1889, the South Fork Dam failed after several days of heavy rainfall, violently exposing the dam's poor construction, design, and management. Twenty million tons of water burst through the structure and swept through the rural town of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, resulting in more than 2,200 deaths. It was one of the deadliest disasters in US History, and for weeks after, preachers across the US heralded the old, old theme of punishment from on high. The story of Noah was read from thousands of pulpits. This was the Great American Flood, the great American judgment. It had been a sign unto all men about the grievous sin of the city.

While many were quick to accept this popular line of reasoning, not all agreed, for some of the more notorious parts of town not only survived but were thriving after the flood, leading one survivor to remark, "If punishment was God's purpose, he sure had bad aim." There was never much mystery in anyone's mind in Johnstown about the cause of the flood. George Swank, the editor of the local newspaper, spoke for just about everyone when he wrote, "We think we know what struck us, and it was not the hand of Providence. Our misery is the work of man."<sup>i</sup>

The question "If God is so good, why is there suffering in the world?" is one of the most frequent questions expressed by believers and non-believers alike. If God is so good, why is there so much suffering in the world? If God were all-powerful, couldn't God eliminate suffering? If God were loving and merciful, wouldn't God stop suffering? So, is God unable or unwilling? This question has plagued humanity for thousands of years and clearly still exists today, and if there were an easy answer, we wouldn't still be asking the question.

The Book of Job is often where people are told to go when encountering suffering. Job is a man who suffers profound loss and grief, and he deserves none of it.

The first chapter of Job describes him as "honest inside and out, a man of his word, who was devoted to God and hated evil with a passion." It tells us he was a dad who got up each morning to offer a sacrifice for his sons and daughters just in case they had sinned the night before in their partying. This man above reproach, this husband devoted to God, this daddy who loved his children sacrificially ... this man has the worst day ever.

No one loved God more than Job. But then along comes the Adversary, the accuser, ha-Satan, who whispers in God's ear that Job only loves God because God has given him so much. Take it all away, the accuser says, and Job's love for God will go away too. God disagrees and accepts ha-Satan's bet, letting the Adversary have his way with Job. As a result, Job endures wave after wave of heart-crushing news.

The scripture in today's passage says three times, "while he was still speaking...." The first round of news from the messenger about the oxen, donkeys, and servants being killed wasn't enough that while the messenger was still speaking, another wave came, and the fire of God consumed sheep and servants. While this messenger was still talking, the Chaldeans raided his camels, took them, and killed his servants. And while that messenger was still speaking, and the room was filled with wailing and disbelief, another one came with the final blow, the word that a great wind blew in and stole the lives of all seven of Job's children. These children that he prayed for each morning. These sons and daughters for whom he offered the best sacrifices

each dawn are now gone. Then, when Job stills does not curse God, the Adversary comes for Job's health, covering his body in boils and sores.

The unrelenting waves of suffering pounded Job repeatedly. Drowning in a sea of pain, Job could barely catch his breath.

If you read just the first two chapters of Job and stop, you'll get one answer to the question of suffering. God can do what God wants to do. In Job 1:21, Job declares, "The LORD gives, and the LORD takes away." And in Job 2:10, he declares, "Should we accept the good without also receiving the bad?" Ah, the patience of Job.

If I'm honest this morning, when you're knee-deep in suffering, this sounds like the cliches that only worsen things. Cliches like "God must have needed another angel," "God won't give you more than you can handle," or "Everything happens for a reason." In case you didn't know, those aren't helpful or theologically accurate.

But thankfully, the story of Job doesn't end in chapter two, and Job's real gift to those suffering comes from the rest of the story. Like us, Job's patience in suffering is strong at the beginning. We try to be strong at first, but the suffering persists, and our patience fades. The same is true for Job.

Beginning in chapter three, Job explodes in grief and anger, his emotions as raw as the wounds on his skin. He curses the day he was born. He is honest with his feelings, stops pretending, and goes off on God for twenty-eight long chapters about the injustice he is suffering and God's complete failure to do what Job believes God is supposed to do.

Now THIS Job we can relate to. His world has been shattered and doesn't make sense anymore. If you lived a good life, God blessed you with health and wealth. If you suffer loss and pain, God punished you for your sinful behavior. That was how it was supposed to work, but everything was turned upside down now because Job was innocent, and he knew it. The old formula didn't work any longer. This wasn't just. So, Job's patience gives way to Job's anger as he gives God an earful, yet God has nothing to say, which is perhaps the most tremendous loss of all. The silence of God.

I imagine the silence of God is what Mercy felt in those early years of her life. Father dead. Aunties dead. More mouths to feed. No fees for school. No food to eat. Where are you, God? Have you forgotten me?

And then God speaks. For four chapters, Job gets to listen to God's voice in a whirlwind, reminding Job of God's God-ness, not Job's sufferings. When I mentioned on our Kenya trip that my sermon was about the question of if God is good, why is there suffering, one of the team members replied, "So, are you going to answer it?" I smiled and said yes and no. The Book of Job is not an explanation for suffering. Only God knows. Job doesn't get an answer. Job gets a revelation, and Job gets God.

As the book of Job concludes, God eventually restores what Job lost twice over. God restores it all – family, fortune – **restores it all except for one loss**, the loss of Job's assumptions of God and God's ways. That is lost forever. Job and the culture had placed God in a box, and God blew apart the box. God's greatness, God's God-ness, is on full display and enough for Job. Job had pleaded for answers about his trials and hardships, but now, face-to-face with the greatness of God, Job's eyes see God rather than his sufferings.

"I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.... Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me that I did not know.... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." (4:2,3b, 5-6)

In the end, God was not angry at Job's anger toward God. Instead, God scolds Job's friends, who said Job's suffering was God's punishment for Job's sin. They would have said the Johnston Flood was God's punishment. They would say Mary's struggles are God's punishment. God says to them, "You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has." (42:8b). According to God, Job's friends and their easy religious answers were wrong. And Job, with his vocal protest and honest anger, was right.

God met Job, not with answers but with God's Divine Presence, which Job needed most. For those of you suffering this morning, this may not be enough for you yet. That's okay. Remember, Job raged for twenty-eight chapters. Maybe you still have a few more to go before you're ready to hear what God has to say. I hope this faith community has learned something from Job's friends about what not to do and what not to say. Instead, we will sit with you when you're tired and walk with you when you're ready to take a step.

For the rest of us, perhaps the better question is this: "If we are God's, how will we respond to suffering?" George Swank said of the devastation of the flood, "Our misery is the work of man." Perhaps the same can be said of our healing. Maybe our healing can be the work of man, the work of God's people empowered by God's Spirit.

Maybe it looks like a woman taking in 11 children, not her own. Perhaps it looks like small bags of rice and sugar or partnering with a group like Oasis for Orphans in Kenya, providing food, education, and love. Maybe it is helping a community rebuild after a flood, serving a meal, and sharing a table in your home. Perhaps it is writing elected officials or casting a vote to overhaul broken and harmful systems. Maybe it is considering how our consumption of resources impacts neighbors near and far. Perhaps it is learning how to listen with curiosity and compassion when someone's story differs from ours. And maybe it is as simple as returning our shopping cart.

Overcome with emotion, Mercy paused in her story as our team sat in that small concrete classroom with chipped paint and faded drawings. The next words out of her mouth were not about the misery she had endured. They were about the love she had received and the hope that was now hers because of the kindness and compassion of the Oasis for Orphans staff, who responded to the suffering they saw not with "Why, God?" but rather "How, God, can we respond."

Like Job, God met Mercy in her suffering, not with answers or an indictment for her suffering, but with God's Presence and God's people, and it was what Mercy needed most. You may not get satisfactory answers for the suffering you experience or the suffering you witness in this world, but like Job, may you get a new revelation about the presence and God-ness of God, a revelation far more comforting than easy answers and cliches. May we be moved as God's people to respond to suffering and see what Love can do for the glory of God and the good of the world.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://erenow.net/modern/thejohnstownflood/10.php>