

After Suffering, What Next?

A sermon taken from Job 42:1-9

Kenneth H. Carter, Jr.

Sometimes it doesn't add up. "Life is good," the bumper sticker says, but sometimes life is not good. I probably don't need to give you chapter and verse. You can think globally—Tsunamis in southeast Asia, suicide bombings in Iraq, HIV/AIDS in Africa, global warming in the Arctic; or you can think locally—a coworker or someone in your neighborhood, or even closer to home, perhaps, someone in your family or something you are struggling with.

You could almost write this part of the sermon. You could stand in this very place and bear witness to the unfairness, the senselessness of it all; you could stand in this very place and shake your fist at someone, anyone, maybe even at God, and you could ask—even in a demanding tone of voice—WHY?

WHY? You would not be alone. Job, for one, would stand with you, alongside you (not to mention Jesus, who in his own way also asked the question: Why have you forsaken me?) Job would be there with you. We hear the phrase, "the patience of Job," but one of my divinity school professors, Dr. Efrid, reminded us that Job was patient for about two chapters. The book that bears his name has to do with this question: WHY?

Theologians have a name for this question: *theodicy*. The root word has to do with God and justice, God and righteousness. Theodicy names the problem, that in fact sometimes it just doesn't add up, whether it is an Amber alert or a Holocaust a generation ago or genocide today or the man born blind in John 9. How can we hold together our faith in a loving and powerful God while also living in a world where there is so much pain, suffering, torture, inhumanity?

Even asking the question, I know, makes us a little uncomfortable.

The church has never been very good at this; we have never given a privileged place to the book of Job. We want to be the church that swims with the cultural stream, a church "where never is heard a discouraging word." But there it is, Job, it is there in the Bible, go to the Psalms and look right before. Forty-two chapters, digging deep into the exploration of one question.

Job does everything right, and then he is nailed. Everything he loves is taken away from him. Sometimes someone will come into my office, and they are bewildered. They have done everything right, but they have been nailed

in some way: an unforeseen event, a health crisis, a disappointment.

Deeply faithful. Deeply troubled.

Wanting to love and believe in God, trying to make it all add up. Job knows where you are; he will stand with you. His friends come alongside Job. They try to make it all add up in some way. Do you know these friends?

A child dies, and a friend comes along and says,
"God needed an angel."

A spouse dies, and a friend comes along and says,
"You would not wish her more suffering."

A terrible thing happens, and people respond in compassionate ways, and a friend comes along and says,
"It brings out the good in people."

A layoff comes, someone is downsized, and a friend comes along and says,

"Something will turn up . . . It will make you stronger."

The friends of Job are the ancestors of these friends. Job's friends tell him that he should have a stronger faith, that he should not question ("It is not ours to ask why." Have you ever heard that?), that he must be at fault in some way. ("God has a plan," they say. Embrace it. Get over it. Get on with it. "Where's the Job we used to know?" they wonder.)

There is one problem: the friends of Job are of no help to Job. They want closure, they want answers, they are as unsettled by the questions as we are. Oh, there is one other problem: they speak for God, but in the final analysis they are not truthful to God, at least not the God of the Bible.

For thirty-five chapters or so, the friends of Job have their say, but then, mercifully, God intervenes, God speaks "out of the whirlwind." The NIV translates the beginning of chapter 38 in this way: "Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm."

We have close friends who have lived through the storm. Dale and Kelly Clem were classmates with Pam and me in Divinity School. They were from Alabama, I was from Georgia, and so we shared a kinship. After graduation they returned to their home conference, he as a campus minister, she as a pastor.

On Palm Sunday in 1994, the congregation was worshipping at the eleven o'clock hour. In the midst of the service a

tornado swept through Goshen, Alabama, and devastated the Goshen United Methodist Church. Twenty members of the church were killed, including Dale and Kelly's four-year-old daughter, Hannah.

Dale and Kelly experienced the fate of Job. Over the next days and weeks and months and years they would begin to put their lives together, to ask questions, to seek healing. Like Job, they would put aside the easy answers that just didn't seem to make sense. But like Job, they would also see God in the storm and know the reality of God in its aftermath.

In his journal, Dale talks about walking through the downed trees in their backyard, in the days after the tornado, and coming upon a little red wheelbarrow. He had left the wheelbarrow next to a storage building outside the house. The tornado had lifted the storage building and shifted it clockwise about two feet. The backyard was fenced in, but there was no longer a fence. A canoe was gone, a bicycle, who knows where it came from, was in the midst of the trees. The tabletop of a metal garden table was missing, although the table was still there. Dale imagined that it had flown away, like a Frisbee.

In the midst of all of this wreckage was a little red wheelbarrow, exactly where Dale had left it. Dale had used it to carry debris in the backyard, but had used it mostly to give Hannah and Sarah rides. Dale writes in *Winds of Fury, Circles of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997):

"To me, that little red wheelbarrow represented endurance. It had survived the winds and chaos and was ready to scoop up and carry. The little red wheelbarrow became a symbol of faith . . . our faith that endured the storm and our faith that will carry us through the dark days to come."

Out of the whirlwind, God speaks, the constant in the midst of change. What does God say? "Look at the world, Job. See the beauty as well as the tragedy. It is a dangerous world, but it is filled with grandeur and freedom and yes, it is filled with the unexplainable." To read chapters 38, 39, 40, 41 is to be given a lesson in the awesome power and diversity of the world we live in. Who could have imagined it? Who can comprehend it?

There are still questions, but now the one asking the question is God, not us. And then chapter 42, the last one of the book, marks a turning point. Job answers the Lord. "I know that you can do all things. I had heard of you, but now I see you. I repent in dust and ashes." Here Job is humble before God's majesty. It is enough, for him, to know that God is real. Like most of us, Job had known that clear answers were probably not going to be coming, but he wanted to know God, to see God.

And then the LORD speaks. Again the friends who gave the easy answers are criticized by God: "My wrath is kindled

against you . . . for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (NRSV 42:7). God then tells them to take offerings, to go to Job, and "Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer" (42:8). And the scripture concludes: "The LORD accepted Job's prayer" (42:9).

But the story is not really over. There is one more truth to be discovered. After the suffering, after the experience of God, what next? Job prays for his friends. They comfort him. God blesses Job. And one of the clearest signs of Job's renewal is that he is willing to have more children. I had read this

book for years and had never really caught this until it was pointed out by Ellen Davis, who teaches Old Testament at Duke (see her *Getting Involved With God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 2001).

Job is given ten children, seven sons and three daughters. He names the first daughter Jemimah, which means, in Hebrew, Dove. And we think of the flood, and its aftermath, and the sign that God gave them, new life.

Some of our very closest friends, Blaine and Beverly, lost both sons in an automobile accident a few years ago now. Our friends have journeyed toward the decision to adopt, and they will receive a daughter next spring, from China. I am sure her life with them will be a symbol, like that little red wheelbarrow, a symbol of faith, that God does renew the world, that God does repair the creation.

Why do bad things happen to good people, like Job, and Dale and Kelly, and Beverly and Blaine? You have asked that question, for which, on this side of the mystery there is no answer. It is simply enough to know that faithful men and women have walked this path before us; they have held their heads in their hands and screamed; they have wandered through the wreckage; they have endured the pious explanations of their friends.

After the suffering, we listen for the voice of God and we look for a sign:

a wheelbarrow,
a dove,
a cross.

The good news is that God always listens to us, God is always patient with us, God always speaks to us out of the whirlwind.

C.S. Lewis had it right: "God whispers in our pleasures but shouts in our pain."

Finally, God does not give us an answer. God gives us himself. "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear," Job says, "but now my eyes see you" (42:5)

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