

“No Easy Answers” Job 23: 1-9, 16-17 Rev. Janet Chapman 10/14/18

I believe I have shared this story with you before but I love it for its summation of going through rough times. It is about Chippie the parakeet who was peacefully singing to his heart's content one moment and the next, he was sucked in, washed up, and blown over. His problems began when his owner decided to clean his cage with a vacuum. She stuck the nozzle in to suck up the seeds and feathers in the bottom of the cage. Then the phone rang. Instinctively, she turned to pick it up, barely said hello when ssswwppp! Chippie got sucked in. She gasped, let the phone drop, and snapped off the vacuum. With her heart in her mouth, she unzipped the bag. There was Chippie – alive but stunned – covered with heavy black dust. She grabbed him and rushed to the tub, turned on the faucet full blast, and held Chippie under a torrent of ice-cold water, power-washing him clean. Next she did what any compassionate pet owner would do – she snatched up the hair dryer and blasted the wet, shivering little bird with hot air. Now it seems that poor Chippie doesn't sing much anymore. I wonder if those in Mexico Beach and Panama City, those in Keswick, Old Shasta, and outer Redding identify all too well with Chippie, having been sucked in, washed up, and blown over by natural disasters.

Last week, we were privileged to have native Californian Dr. Bruce Epperly with us. Bruce remembers how California old-timers used to respond to earthquakes by saying “Shift Happens.” Apparently, some natives enjoy comforting, or teasing, frightened newcomers by chalking it up to “Shift Happens.” It totally makes sense as a commentary on life. Everything seems stable until the tectonic plates shift and life is turned upside down. With every disaster as well as injustice, abuse, or tragedy experienced in our world, there comes those painful questions about God's activity and absence in the midst of tragedy and why the innocent

suffer? These questions are at the heart of the legendary story of Job, a man who knows all too well that “shift happens.”

Job’s story is ancient wisdom literature about the richest man in the world who, in a single day, is wiped out. Not only do foreigners take his livestock and kill off his hired hands, but lightning strikes his sheep barn killing the flock and shepherds, then a hurricane, like Michael, hits the house where all his children are having a party leaving nothing in the wreckage to identify. His fortune and family are gone except for a wife who tells him to curse God and go hang himself. But he was a very religious man and he knew it, so he begins to question why would God let such things happen? Enter 4 so-called friends who join him in the ashes to grieve – a worthy venture until they go from silence into theologians in residence bent on providing Job with all sorts of easy explanations. They remind him that since God is a just God, God makes bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to the good. You don’t need a Harvard diploma to figure that one out. In chapter 13, Job wisely responds, “Worthless physicians are you all... Oh that you would keep silent, and that would be your wisdom.” Frederick Buechner says these friends are a bunch of theological quacks and the smartest thing they could do was shut up, a difficult thing to do when you are too busy explaining stuff to listen.

Last week’s guest wrote a book on Job that I wish we had had more time to explore, but with 45 books on Bruce’s authorship list, how does one choose? He reminds us that versions of Job’s story can be found among the Babylonians and Assyrians as well as the Israelites because it is every person’s story who has come home with a situation that shakes them to the core. As touted in Buddhism, suffering is universal and none of us is immune. It is not just the question

of why bad things happen to good people, but it is the reality that shift happens, that no one gets out alive, that grief abounds, and that we live in relative peace and security while 70 million refugees live in poverty and uncertainty. How is it that we happen to be the few lucky ones born in the United States, born into opportunities for advancement, born into environments that foster learning and thriving rather than just surviving?

Although there are a ton of explanations offered concerning the problem of evil, none of them are entirely helpful or adequate. Job's friends preach "You reap what you sow," karma is a "you know what," which I confess I joke about because it makes me feel better, but it isn't always true, valid or consistent. The statement has far more to do with me than it does with how God operates. Another explanation is that, "God is teaching us a lesson or giving us trials to build character." Similarly, there is "God is refining our spiritual lives, never giving us more than we can handle," to which I respond God must have mistaken me for somebody else. Others hold that "evil is part of the larger picture; the tapestry of life must include light and dark, suffering and joy; you can't have one without the other." Then there is the go-to of many people of faith, "It is God's will." God determines who lives and dies, who gets cancer and who doesn't, which limo's brakes fail and kill 20 people and which do not. I'll never forget a funeral I attended a few years back where the minister told the congregation that God needed that beautiful 4 year old little girl killed by a drunk driver more than we did. What kind of monster is this God? I am reminded in all of these explanations that often how we describe God can create more suffering in the world as opposed to relieving it. Such descriptions are partially to blame for why so many folks are leaving the traditional church. People have grown dissatisfied with the core message, dogma, and practice of the Christian faith as it has been portrayed in

years past. These folks have an intuitive sense that there is more to faith in God than the rigid rules and theological constructs of the past. As philosopher Sam Keen says, “History is littered with the remains of civilizations that chose to die rather than change their organizing (beliefs).”

There are no easy answers in Job, but when we take the time to read thru the lens of Jesus, we find hope. In Luke 13, 2 calamities had just occurred that were the talk of Jerusalem. Pilate had slaughtered a group of Galileans, and a tower near the Pool of Siloam had collapsed, killing 18 people. One was an act of political violence, the other a natural disaster. Jesus is asked “Were those killed at the hands of Pilate worse than other Galileans? Were those who were crushed in the tower worse sinners than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?” Jesus essentially says, “Look, they just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Bad things happen, often without explanation or reason. It doesn’t mean we can’t learn to prevent some disasters or atrocities; it doesn’t mean that God isn’t a part of the healing and going forward but God doesn’t cause such things. This is what Job is struggling to comprehend as he argues his case with God. Hardly the patient Job lauded elsewhere, the Job in our text is angry and frustrated by God’s apparent absence in his time of need. In bitterness upon the ash heap, Job cries out, “Oh, that I knew where I might find God.” That same searching for God is heard in the rock band U2’s singer Bono at the end of the CD “Pop,” as he pleads for God to do something in the midst of the suffering that threatens to undo faith and life, wondering if God is busy or Jesus’ hands are tied? Contrast that with Ivan, one of the brothers in the novel The Brothers Karamazov, who in the face of human suffering is led to deny the existence of God altogether. Job and Bono do not give up the case they are litigating and instead keep up the argument **with God** ...this cannot be understated. Their faith is still intact because the

conversation hasn't ceased with God. Questioning is an act of faith as Jesus proves in the Garden of Gethsemane. Arguing **with God** reflects a deep faith – deeper perhaps than a passive acceptance without question, or a carefully articulated rationalization for why things are the way they are. As seen at the end of Job's story, God vindicates Job and chastises his friends for not speaking truthfully about God. God seeks us out and finds us even in the midst of our suffering.

The martyred Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed for treason by Hitler's henchmen, summarizes our ultimate hope in his "Letters and Papers from Prison." He says that in a world of suffering, "Only the suffering God can help." God understands and has experienced suffering through God's own Son, as well as within all of us as God lives in you. We may not be able to solve the problem of evil. We may not decipher the mystery of pain, but we can reach out in love to those who suffer. Perhaps, as Bruce writes, "the only answer is love, and not intellectual gymnastics – a caring voice, a gentle touch, a willingness to sacrifice for the earth and its people. For when we love, we become God's companions; God's light shines in us, casting out the darkness, and reminding us that we are never alone. In the midst of unexpected, (unthinkable) pain, our willingness to share God's love heals and overcomes, giving us hope to face our own pain and to ease the suffering of others." Therefore, the apostle Paul's words in Romans 8 can become our flagship when we have been sucked in, washed up, and blown over: "I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely *nothing* can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us."

Thanks be to God.