**Sunday, November 1st, 2020**

**Job 1:1-5**

Imagine you are sitting in a hospital room, where the faint smell of antiseptic lingers and the sound of lowered voices rustles all around you.

The medical prognosis of your friend is bleak.

You have listened to your friend's anger, fear, doubt, and despair.

Now it is your turn to reply.

Your friend is quiet waiting for your response.

But what can you say to a person who is suffering?

When we are hurting, when our world has been turned upside down,

          we often wonder: What did I do to deserve this?

Or: Why would a loving God let this happen?

Bad things happen to good people, as well as to people who do harm.

We know events like blizzards, accidents, hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires,

          germs, and viruses, can harm all people, the good and the bad,

          the faithful and the unbelieving.

And, yet we often wonder why God doesn't protect us.

The book of Job offers us some understanding about why

          bad things happen to good people.

Job had everything he ever wanted.

And then he didn't.

All at once the world came crashing down on a single innocent man,

          a man named Job.

In the span of a few days Job experienced more tragedy

          than most people encounter in a lifetime.

First, raiders stole his belongings, and slaughtered his servants,

          then fire from the sky burned up his sheep,

          his camel were stolen,

          a mighty wind destroyed his son's house,

          and killed all Job's children.

          Finally, Job was afflicted with painful sores over his whole body.

And Job wrestled with the question:

          What did I do to deserve such suffering?

He endured his wife's taunts, and his friends' ramblings.

But through it all, Job steadfastly refused to turn his back on God.

When his three friends first saw Job,

          they wept aloud and sat with him on the ground, silent,

          for seven days and nights, overcome with grief for their friend.

None of them spoke a word to him, for they saw his suffering was very great.

Compassionate silence was the most profound help they imparted to Job.

After Job finally broke the silence,

          each friend delivered a flowery speech on Job's dilemma.

They filled the air with high-sounding advice.

But unfortunately, they offered models of what not to say to someone

          who is hurting, confused, and suffering greatly.

Job's friends only made it worse.

Each of his friends believed:

          God would not allow an innocent person to suffer so much.

Most of their comments boil down to one simple theory:

     Job must have committed some great sin for which God was punishing him.

All three believed that good people prosper, and bad people suffer;

          therefore, suffering must betray some hidden sin.

Job also believed in a loving God, but he knew he was innocent.

Even though Job could not understand God's lack of help at the moment,

          he never belittled the blessings he had already received.

Throughout his life, Job had developed the habit of trusting and obeying God.

But where was God now?

The feeling of God's absence in this time of his greatest need

          was the most painful to accept.

Yet with all support gone, he still turned to God for strength,

          even when God remained silent.

Actually, God is never totally silent.

Elihu made that point convincingly, reminding Job

          of dreams, visions, past blessings, even the daily works of God in nature. Although he may seem silent, some evidence of him can always be found.

In the darkest of times, we can find help, reassurance, and strength,

          from what we learned in better times.

God does not condemn doubt and despair.

God did not condemn Job's anguished responses.

Job did not take his pain meekly; he cried out in anguish to God.

His strong remarks scandalized his friends.

But eventually, all of them learned they had been viewing the situation

          from the wrong perspective.

God asks for faith and trust.

God refocused the central issue from the cause of Job's suffering,

          to his response.

The real issue at stake was Job's faith.

Would he continue to trust God, even while his life was falling apart?

Job endured his terrible sufferings in the darkest of times.

When he needed God most, God seemed silent and distant.

Yet, in spite of everything which happened, Job did not curse God.

He clung to his belief in a just and loving God

          even when everything in his experience seemed to contradict it.

He had only one request.

He wanted to hear from God in person.

He wanted an explanation straight from the Source.

At last Job got his wish.

God answered Job with a speech full of majesty and beauty, reassurance and love.

Thousands of years later, Job's questions have not gone away.

Why me? Almost everyone asks this question when terrible suffering strikes.

A serious automobile accident, a diagnosis of cancer, financial disaster,

          all raise intense questions about why God allows pain.

We all know of sinful people who seem to be prosperous,

          and faithful people for which things go terribly wrong.

As we read through the Bible, we discover so many faithful people

          who faced suffering and hardship in their lives,

          and in the lives of their family and friends.

All of Jesus' disciples suffered greatly as they faithfully

          spread the Good News throughout the world.

Paul told others often about his struggles and pain

          as he continued to carry out God's work.

Christians throughout the centuries often suffered, or died,

          as they tried to do what was good and what was right.

People who suffer still find themselves borrowing Job's own words,

          as they cry out against God's seeming lack of concern.

But Job affirms that God is not deaf to our cries.

He is still in control of this world no matter how it looks.

God did not answer all Job's questions,

          but his very appearance caused Job's doubt to melt away.

It is easy to follow God when things are going well.

Satan challenged: Remove those good things,

          and Job's faith would melt away along with his riches and health.

But Satan was wrong.

Job struggled to do what seemed impossible.

He kept on believing in a loving, fair God,

          even though all the evidence pointed against such a God.

We are left, in the end, with the mystery of suffering,

          counterbalanced by the greater mystery of the God

          who is with us in life's most trying moments.

Just because bad things happen does not mean we are being punished.

Life simply does not always turn out the way we hoped it would.

Jesus was willing to leave heaven, take on human form,

          and spend time on this earth teaching us about God's great love.

He endured terrible suffering, and death, for our sake.

Jesus' disciples proved faithful to him, and yet most of them

          lived through poverty and persecution and died martyrs' deaths.

For them full rewards had to wait until heaven.

It is important to remember, even in the darkest of times:

           God loves us, God forgives us, and God is with us,

                                        always.

AMEN