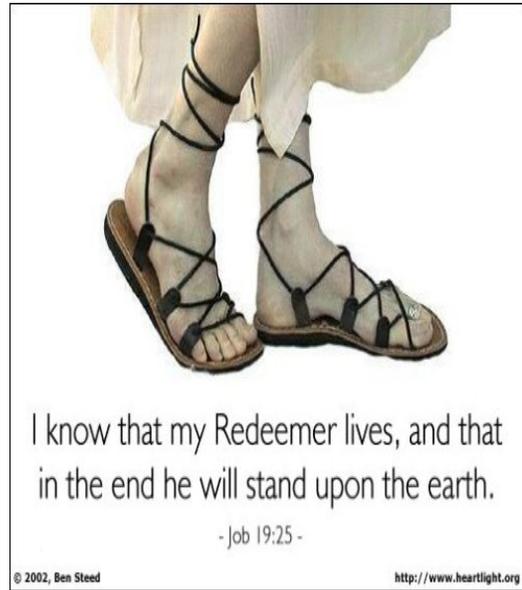


If you have ever been to a funeral in The Episcopal Church, you are already familiar with part of the Book of Job. We begin the burial of the dead with these words:

I am Resurrection and I am Life, says the Lord.
Whoever has faith in me shall have life
Even though he die.
And everyone who has life,
and has committed himself to me in faith
Shall not die forever.

As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives
And that at the last he will stand upon the
earth.
After my awakening, he will raise me up;
And in my body I shall see God.
I myself shall see, and my eyes behold him
Who is my friend and not a stranger. (Job 19: 25-27; BCP 491)



When Bad Things Happen to Good People¹ was written by Rabbi Harold Kushner following the death of his young son. It was Rabbi Kushner's effort to find a way to understand the tragedy of the death of his son and to find some peace in his relationship with a God that seems to permit such tragedy. It is a classic book that gives us, some 35+ years later, a way to frame our questions and to consider how we view God when something terribly tragic happens. When our question is "Why, God?" or "Why me?" This is the question of theodicy- or why if God is good, there is tragedy and evil in the world.

We have only to think about the deaths this week of two IU students, or the killings at Umpqua Community College in Oregon, or the Syrian and other refugees seeking a place of safety, to realize that there is much in our current world that is tragic and apparently pointless evil.

Where is God in the things we read about or experience? How do we define God when it seems evil and tragedy are all around us? For some, the answer is that God does not exist. For others, their conclusion is that God is a capricious being who enjoys seeing us twist in the wind. If you have experienced the death of a loved one and been met with platitudes such as "It was his time" or "God needed him more than you did" – you know how unsatisfying and hollow those platitudes are. They do not even touch the depth of our despair or of our anger at God that our loved one has died.

The Book of Job can help us navigate those truly tough, soul-deep, wrenching times of sadness, bitterness and despair. Although we will read from Job for the next three weeks, the Lectionary does not include most of the Book of Job, so we are left with bits and pieces that do not necessarily convey the lessons we can learn from this part of our Scriptures.

¹ Rabbi Harold Kushner. When Bad Things Happen to Good People (Random House, 1981)

As we begin reading from the Book of Job this Sunday, there are some overarching themes or points for us to consider:

- The main character, other than God is Job. He is not an Israelite. Job is not one of God's chosen people. Even so, this book was selected to be part of our canon- or recognized scripture- because it offers us an important view of God and of our relationship to and with God.
 - Job offers us the chance to learn from those who we may not consider to be one of us. Where have we refused knowledge or learning because we distrusted or discounted the source or because the source was not familiar to us?
- The Book of Job offers us a chance to engage with some of the most difficult questions we encounter as human beings.
 - If God is good, then why do bad things happen to good people?
 - How do we – and how should we - respond when things happen in our life that we cannot control and we cannot change?
 - Does our relationship with God change because our circumstances change?
- Job offers us a chance to consider how we understand God.
 - Is God omnipotent- all powerful?
 - Is God omnipresent- available anywhere and anytime?
 - Is God omniscient- all knowing. Some people believe that God knows in advance everything that is going to happen to us during our lifetime- and if that view of God is correct, then what is the point of the Book of Job?
- The Book of Job offers us some of the most beautiful language and theological reflections in the Bible.
 - I've already reminded us of the words in our burial service "I know that my Redeemer lives".
 - Although the internet says that Warren Buffett invented the phrase "skin in the game", the phrase "skin for skin" actually comes from Job, chapter 2 verse 3. They both mean the same: when someone has a vested interest in the outcome, they are more likely to care about the outcome.
 - "Naked came I from my Mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

We begin our study of Job at the beginning of chapter 1 but you will note we then skip most of the first chapter. To fill in:

Job is the perfect example of someone who was honest and upright and in right relationship with God. According to the common understanding of the time, because he was such a "good" person, God had blessed Job with a large family and with many flocks and herds and great wealth. Life is good- indeed, life for Job and his family is very good. And then something really odd happens, or at least it is odd in our traditional thinking about God. This encounter sets the stage for all that follows:

"One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. The Lord said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?' Satan answered the Lord, 'From going to and fro on the earth and from walking up and down on it.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like

him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.’ Then Satan answered the Lord, ‘Does Job fear God for nothing?... But stretch out your hand now and touch all that he has and he will curse you to your face.’ The Lord said to Satan, ‘Very well, all that he has is in your power....’” (Job 1:6-12).

First of all, why is Satan talking with God? Partly because “Satan” as we have come to call him, at this point is better known as the accuser or the adversary. In Hebrew, the text includes the word “the” in front of the word “Satan” – that is, “the Satan” signifying a role and not a proper name. Not the devil. Not Lucifer the fallen angel. Rather, one of the heavenly court who interacts with God and with human beings.

For those who have a hard time saying that evil is real, perhaps we can think about it as temptation- remember the story of the Satan tempting Jesus in the wilderness. The Satan holds up to us as possibility things that we think we want- but really those things are ones that separate us from right relationship with God.

A question to ponder then is “who or what is Satan tempting me with?” What are things or areas in my life that separate me from God? If God and the Satan were talking about you –rather than Job- what would the conversation be like? Would God say about you what God says about Job: there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil”?

Second, this passage challenges our view of God. God seems to be making a bet with the Satan about how Job will respond. If we believe that God is omniscient- that is that God knows all – then there is no need for such a bet. God already knows how Job will respond. If God already knows how Job will respond, then it seems senseless cruelty to let the Satan strip Job of everything just to confirm what God already knows the end result will be.

If we believe that the core attribute of God is love, then the way God responds to the Satan with the horrible consequences to Job of losing all of his family and all of his flock and animals and all of his wealth seems, at best capricious – and definitely not the kind of God I wish to worship! So, who is God and what is God’s role in our daily lives. The Book of Job can help us understand God given a variety of attributes we often attach to God.

Third, we are told at the very beginning that Job was an upright and blameless man. Many of us even today have thought that if we do right, then good things will happen to us. We take our blessings, our prosperity, and our relatively easy life as “proof” that we are favored by God. Good is rewarded and evil is punished.

Deuteronomy chapter 28 says: “Now, if you obey the Lord your God, to observe faithfully all his commandments which I enjoin upon you this day, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. All these blessings shall come upon you and take effect.” This Scripture and others like it form the basis for what has become known as the prosperity gospel. The belief that if we act properly, God will reward us with big houses, big cars, fat bank accounts and the like. Concomitantly, those who do not have worldly goods must have done something wrong- they must have sinned against the Lord. The poor are poor because they don’t honor God.

And this is where the Book of Job comes in. It is clear from what God says that Job has done everything right. Job is blameless. And yet, calamity of the worst kind befalls him. Easy answers are not to be found. Much of the Book of Job is taken up with conversations between Job and three of his friends. Friends that supposedly come to comfort him but end up insisting that Job must have done something wrong- must have sinned- because that's the only explanation for the evil that has befallen Job. Job insists that he has not- not even to save himself will Job admit to sinning when he knows he has not.

We are left, then, to ponder the easy answers to the question of evil. The easy answers don't help. None of them are satisfactory. The responses include²:

- *You deserve it.* Something you did resulted in this calamity coming upon you. We saw this in response to 9/11. At least one pastor said that we deserved that horror because we had fallen away from being a Christian nation.
- *You chose it.* This answer says that we get what we choose. This is the kind of thinking that says a rape victim "asked for it." Similar to this is the view that "we reap what we sow" – there is a direct correlation that cannot be changed.
- *Stuff happens* – with a nod to Ronald Reagan, evil and suffering are simply part of our existence and things over which we have no control, they have no purpose, and there is no response that we can offer to change them. "Suck it up" might be the response if one follows this view on why evil exists.
- *It is God's will* – with the corollary statement "and we aren't meant to understand it." For me, this is one of the hardest or most difficult positions, especially when the situation involves the death of a child. To tell a grieving parent that "it is God's will" is not helpful and often quite hurtful.
- *Testing* – the idea that suffering is given to us to test us is fairly widespread. There's even a joke about it that goes: "God won't give us anything that we can't handle; I wish God didn't trust me so much. The better view is perhaps that when we encounter suffering, God is present beside us." Suffering does not, often, make us better, stronger, more faithful. It wears us out. Suffering is not noble or something to be sought after to demonstrate that we are closer to God than our neighbor simply because we endure suffering.

You may think of other responses or reasons that people have given about why evil and suffering exists- and why sometimes it seems that suffering is especially intense for someone who has previously led an upright and blameless life. It is a question that haunts us all when we encounter suffering or evil.

As we work our way through the Book of Job over the rest of this month, be thinking about the attributes of God and what that says about the God you worship and your relationship to God. Be thinking about the question of innocent suffering and our response to evil. When you experience evil or suffering, does it change how you view God or how you worship God? God is always more ready to hear than we are to pray. God is always present whether

²² Thanks to Bruce Epperly for the list of common and easy answers. *Lectionary Commentary for Proper 22*. <http://processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/bearb/2012-10-07/proper-22> (October 5, 2012).

we feel God's presence or not. When there are no easy answers or when our conscience is afraid, God's love enfolds us anyway.

There is a reason that "job" and "Job" are spelled the same says a friend of mine. Working our way through the Book of Job and searching for meaning in it is a "job" – but well worth our time and effort as we seek to live a life honoring God and reflecting God's commissioning us as blessings to the world.

This week, think about what you would want most of all if you were the parent of one of the IU students or the parent of the three year old Syrian baby washed up on shore or you were the aunt or uncle of someone killed in Oregon. My guess is that the ministry of presence, of someone you know simply sitting with you is likely to be the most comforting and the most healing. Words are, frankly, inadequate.

Job teaches us, in the end, that there are many things in this life that we do not understand and we cannot explain. Bad things do happen to good people. We have a role to play, though, in being with our family, friends and neighbors when those bad things do happen. Our role is to be the embodiment of a God who weeps with us, who sits with us quietly and without judgment. And our ministry of presence is a reminder that we are never alone. Our God is always with us, forever and ever, **Amen.**