



Theodicy is the study of suffering or evil. Why, if we believe in an always present, always powerful, always knowing and loving God, do bad things happen to good people? Rabbi Harold Kushner's book When Bad Things Happen to Good People, says:

Bad things do happen to good people in this world, but it is not God who wills it. God would like people to get what they deserve in life, but He cannot always arrange it. Forced to choose between a good God who is not totally powerful, or a powerful God who is not totally good, the author of the Book of Job chooses to believe in God's goodness.¹

Most of us like a world that is ordered and orderly. Where we know the rules and the responses to "correct" behavior. Where we don't have to struggle everyday with the simple things that make life easier.

And when something happens to knock us out of our regular, ordered and orderly, routine, the questions start coming. Why did this happen? What did I do? Where do I go now? How do I respond? Too often, the response is: That's not fair! – which really means it's not what I expected in response to my behavior and my understanding of the rules of life.

Today is the third in four readings from the Book of Job. A type of scripture classified as "wisdom literature." Writings that can tell us something important about our lives and our relationship with and response to God. Job gives us a chance to really reflect on the characteristics of God – is God all powerful? Is God all loving? Is God always present? Do we have free will and how does that relate to what or who God is?

Because the Lectionary can only offer bits and pieces of the Book of Job, here's where we are:

- Job's whole world has been turned upside down.
- He struggles with the loss of all he held dear – his family, his home, his health.
- He struggles with a God that seems not to hear him or his desire to plead his case and prove that he, Job, is blameless.
- He struggles with his friends who insist that Job must have sinned- because only sinners suffer.
- Job pleads with God to hear his case and then to render judgment that will put Job's life back together again.

¹ Harold Kushner. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (Knopf DoublePrinting, 1994)

- Today's reading is a classic case of "be careful what you wish for".
- God does respond to Job but it's not the answer Job thought he was going to get.
- God does not answer Job's fundamental question of why bad things happen to good people.
- God does not dispute that Job has been good- after all that's the basis of the wager between God and the Satan.
- God knows Job is good. God knows that Job has followed all the rules.

God's response to Job is a bit like a reporter: who, where, when, why, how. The fundamental outline for a reporter when covering a story. "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" God thunders from the whirlwind. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" And on and on God goes with the questions. God successfully puts Job – and us- in our places.

This passage reminds us of the Prayer of Humble Access found in the Eucharistic Prayer in Rite 1 (BCP 337) – "I am not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table."

Like Job, we are mortal, fallible, and sometimes wonder why God has chosen to notice us. But remember also the next sentence: "But thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy." God hears our cries just as God heard Job's cry. God shows us mercy. God shows us kindness and compassion although we may not always recognize mercy for what it is.

Theophany means the appearance or the manifestation of God. They are one way we know – intellectually and emotionally – that our God is with us, even in the darkest of nights. Even when the most horrible things happen to us. God is with us – incarnation, and God appears to us in so many ways.

The Hebrew Scriptures are full of theophanies:

- God breathed on the chaos and the waters calmed and creation of our earth began
- God spoke to Abraham and stayed his hand from killing Isaac
- God was in the burning bush
- God was the pillar of cloud by day and flame by night while the people were in exodus
- God was the still, small voice following the wind and the earthquake when Elijah was on the run.

And God spoke to Job from the whirlwind. God appears in history over and over again. God is with us if only we will shut up and stop, look and listen. If only we will get out of our own way and our own demands that life be as we want it to be. If only we will acknowledge that we do not have control over everything. Some things are simply beyond our control. Some things are beyond our knowledge or understanding. That doesn't mean we should stop asking questions or seeking answers.

An easy response to God's speaking from the whirlwind is to say, "ok, you're God and I'm not so I'll just shrug the questions off and blindly believe." Another is to say "yes, I'm just a worm and not worthy of your notice. Poor me." Neither of those responses is very helpful or theologically responsible.

After all, if God does act in history- if God does appear to humankind – if God does speak from the whirlwind, then perhaps we ought to pay attention and think about what response does make sense. Perhaps we ought to become a bit more comfortable with discomfort. With changes to our routine. With God’s effort to change our life to more fully reflect our understanding of God and God’s call to us to be fully human.

As humans, we have trouble living with ambiguity and uncertainty. And so we ask why even when we know there is no answer. We keep hoping that *this time* there will be an answer that satisfies. An answer we can wrap our heads around, put the question and the answer to bed and move on. Well, don’t expect that from the Book of Job.

We do get some thoughts about the questions, though, that may help us live with the tension and ambiguity.

- Although it may not seem like it at times, God does care about Job- and thus, us.
- We are part of God’s creation and as such we are important to God. Remember at the end of the story of creation that God looked at all God had created and said it was good – and indeed, very good. That is still true.
- We are capable of living with and through situations which make no sense to us when we understand that God loves us and is with us in the most difficult times we face. Knowing God loves us and is with us is sometimes what it takes to keep putting one foot in front of the other rather than curling up into a ball and sucking our thumbs.
- God has appeared time and again to humankind in history. God desires relationship with us even though we are not necessarily the center of God’s universe, so to speak.
- God is God and we are not-meaning that there always will be questions to which the answers we can posit leave us wanting more.

Like Job, do not be afraid to seek – and to be found- by God. Do not be afraid to ask questions about things that puzzle or hurt us. And understand that God may speak to us from the whirlwind. And be prepared.

Kushner writes:

I don’t know why one person gets sick, and another does not, but I can only assume that some natural laws which we don’t understand are at work. I cannot believe that God “sends” illness to a specific person for a specific reason. I don’t believe in a God who has a weekly quota of malignant tumors to distribute, and consults His computer to find out who deserves one most or who could handle it best. “What did I do to deserve this?” is an understandable outcry from a sick and suffering person, but it is really the wrong question. Being sick or being healthy is not a matter of what God decides that we deserve. The better question is “If this has happened to me, what do I do now, and who is there to help me do it?” ... it becomes much easier to take God seriously as the source of moral values if we don’t hold Him responsible for all the unfair things that happen in the world.²

² Id

Job's life will never be the same. Our lives, when we ask questions and struggle for answers about God and the question of innocent suffering, are never the same. One thing we can be sure of, though, is that God is our life preserver.

Maybe not the orange or yellow one that buckles around our middle with the handy, dandy, tube that we blow into once we've left the plane and slid down the ramp. But this life preserver does have a light that automatically turns on when we're in the water and the waves are deep and our life is in peril. And God sees that light- and God reaches out a hand to haul us into the raft. And we are safe when we are with God. Maybe dripping wet and scared to death at what just happened and the future we aren't so sure about. But we are held in God's hands forever and ever. As Kushner asks, and as we can know: God is with us to help us do what needs to be done, even when we don't know why. God is with us. Reach out your hand to take the hand that is reaching for you – and let yourself be pulled into that life raft. Soaking wet and scared, God is with you, now and forever. *Amen.*