

“But Why Me?”

Job 21 :7-16; II Thessalonians 1:1-5

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

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Many separate books go together to form what we call the Old Testament. These writings fall naturally into four broad categories: The Pentateuch, the first five books we find in the Bible. They trace humanity's development and the growing awareness of the One whose hand put the world in place; the Historical Books, stories that chronicle the Hebrew people over hundreds of years; the Prophetic Writings, which attempt to discern God's will in trying times; and finally, the Wisdom Literature.

The Wisdom Literature. Here we would include the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. It's this last book that is important for us today. Job tells of the suffering of one man but, in some ways, it is the story of us all. We can each find a bit of ourselves in Job, and some Job in all men and women. The book resonates with life experience, both ancient and modern.

In a passage that comes prior to our one for the morning, Job laments his situation. "God has made my own family forsake me; I am a stranger to those who knew me. Those who were guests in my house have forgotten me; my servants treat me like a stranger and don't even answer when I beg for help. My wife can't stand the smell of my breath and my own brothers won't come near me. Even children laugh when they see me. My skin hangs loose on my bones."

Now here's a man who's had a bad day. We've had bad days, too. We know what it's like. Everything's wrong and nothing is right. It may be because every spot in our body seems to hurt and we're emotionally drained. Maybe our workplace is driving us crazy. We think to ourselves, "Just let one more thing happen. Just one. I'm can't take it anymore."

Inevitably, something else will happen but by then we usually don't have enough energy left to get angry. So we often just suffer in silence. Sound familiar? Anybody else ever have bad days like this?

Tell me why my friend, whose husband died three years ago, has now also lost all three of her beloved pets in the last six months. Why did someone break in her house last week and take her most sentimental jewelry?

Suffering is an old problem that's still with us. We can identify with Job. Here's a man who is basically a good person. Job asks, "What have done that's so bad that I deserve this?"

"I have never refused to help the poor; never have I left widows live in despair or let orphans go hungry while ate. When I found someone too poor to buy clothes, I would give him clothing....

"I have never trusted in riches or taken pride in my wealth. I have never been glad when my enemies suffered, or pleased when they met with disaster. Those who work for me know that I

have always welcomed strangers. I invite travelers into my home and never let them sleep in the streets. Will no one listen to what I am saying? I swear that every word is true."

Now the picture that he's presenting is correct. His friends suggest that he must have done something wrong and this is his due. Yet, he is an innocent man. He's a good man; in fact, a very good man. He has always done his best to live a fair and caring life. He's done all this and still he suffers. Where is the justice in all this?

Let's step away from Job for a moment. This book can get to be a bit gloomy. Maybe there's something brighter in Paul, our New Testament reading. It's a letter that might cheer us up, and begins like this: "From Paul, Silas, and Timothy to the people of the church in Thessalonica. May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace. Friends, we must thank God at all times for you, because your faith is growing so much and the love each of you has for the other is becoming greater. That's why we boast of you to the other churches."

See, this is not nearly so glum as Job. It's positive, even optimistic. Maybe we should have started with this reading and just slid over the other one.

To continue Paul's letter then, "We boast about the way you continue to endure and believe through all the persecutions and suffering you are experiencing." [Uh, oh. I think we should have stopped with the last verse.] Going on further Paul says: "All of this proves that God's judgment is just and as a result you will become worthy of his Kingdom, for which you are suffering."

Suffering. We just can't seem to get away from it today in our readings. But then, we're rarely away from suffering any day. It's a reality in our lives. No one is immune and we can hurt in many ways, both large and small.

Job isn't the only one who suffered in Old Testament times, nor were those early Christians singular in their affliction. That old spiritual tells the truth when it laments, "Nobody knows the troubles I've seen." Sometimes it gets you so down you just want to yell out to God, "Why do you let things happen this way?" That's what Job did.

"Look," he said to his friends, "my quarrel is not with mortals; I have good reason to be impatient. Look at me, just look at me. Isn't that enough to shock you. When I think of what has happened to me, I'm stunned. And another thing, why does God let evil people grow old and prosper? They get to watch their children and grandchildren grow up and God doesn't bring disaster on their homes.

"I ask you, is this fair? How is it that the wicked can just tell God to go away and leave them alone and they're not struck down on the spot? Does it pay to be good, to offer our prayers? The evil don't and see nothing worse happens to them than to me. What kind of a way is this to run the world?"

Well, after Job goes on for a while and laments his state of affairs, God gets a chance, too. The Lord has been listening patiently to Job go on and on and now gets a turn in rebuttal.

"Job, just who are you to question my wisdom with your small and ignorant words. Stand up straight and answer some questions for me. Were you there when I made the world? If you know so much, tell me about that? Who decided how large it would be? Who laid its cornerstone?"

"Job, in all your life have you ever commanded a day to dawn? Have you walked on the floor of the ocean? Do you know the secret of light? Can you guide the stars season by season? Can you shout orders to the clouds and make it rain? Does a hawk learn from you how to fly or an eagle wait for your command to build its nest high in the mountains? "Well, Job?"

God continues: "You see, things are just the way they are. Regretfully, you will never get all the answers to the questions you have upon your hearts. Trust me, this is the way it has to be. But let me tell you this, I will not forget you in your suffering. I will hear your prayers and I will give you my strength. And you will get through those hard times with faith in me. Even when it comes time for you to die, I will not leave you but I will embrace you and take you to myself. Have trust. After all, I am God."

This dialogue between God and Job reminds me of a little story. A young woman walking in the woods one day came upon an Emperor moth. It was beating its wings and struggling wildly to force its passage through the narrow neck of its cocoon. Clearly it was having difficulty getting free.

The girl took compassion on this small suffering creature and, with a sharp stick, split the cocoon and the moth emerged at once. She went away feeling she had done a good deed, but in the end the moth's glorious coloring never developed and its soaring wings never expanded. The moth crept aimlessly around for a while on the floor of the forest and then it died.

The girl didn't understand that the furious struggle of the moth with the cocoon was nature's way of developing its wings and sending the vital fluids through its body to bring about its color. Without the suffering, the moth could not survive.

You see, in life there's a big gap between what we want to know and what we're capable of knowing. Even suffering, which seems to make no sense, must have some purpose in life's greater plan. The question is "Can we trust where we cannot understand?"

Being a person of faith guarantees little in avoiding the difficult situations of life. Things happen to all of us and it has nothing to do with God's love for you. That is there all the time.

What God does promise is presence, the gift of being with us in all our good days and in all the bad. God will take those wings you have struggled to get through adversity and teach you to fly. God will reach to you in your troubles and set you back on course. God will hold you tightly when you feel like dropping. God will keep you going when you want to give up.

Difficult as life might be at times, I wonder if when we suffer we also come the closest to God? It just might be that this is the good that comes out of the bad.