

“The Good, The Bad, and The Faithful”

They say preaching from the pulpit, behind the altar, is a humbling experience. One that requires honesty and vulnerability, because believe it or not, at the altar, where the cross stands, is a holy place. It is a place of death, a space where real sacrifices are made. It is a place where we come to deny ourselves, take up the cross and sacrifice our lives to our Almighty Creator. So, let me begin by being honest with you,

I will admit I procrastinated on this week’s lectionary. Not because I was too busy, but because I knew exactly what today’s text was about and I deliberately wanted to avoid diving into the pain and suffering that is required in talking about the subject of loss and grief found in Job.

It has been 8 months, 23 days, 9 hours, and counting since my father, James Lewis Rogers, died in an automobile accident where he hit two trees head-on. It has been 8 months, 23 days, 9 hours, and counting since my mother became a widow. It has been 8 months, 23 days, 9 hours, and counting since my sister, Liz, and I have become fatherless. And I have missed out on sharing and having the friendship sons want from their fathers, and fathers want with their sons. Since then, my father has missed seeing me graduate, has missed picking out the engagement ring I proposed to Kendall with, and the start of my ministry career. All very big important things I wish he would’ve been here for.

I tell you all this because in loss we jump, as I did, to questioning God’s benevolence. We say, “If God is so good, how can he allow something like this to happen to me?” My goal today is to help those of you who are hurting to turn back to God and say that he is good. My personal goal too today is to lay my counting the

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days of loss on the altar as well. For my own sake. For my relationship with God's sake.

The Rev. Dr. Amy Butler, Senior Minister of the Riverside Church in New York City, says this in her sermons series on Job, “It is ridiculous for any preacher, myself included, to stand in a pulpit and claim to have found a solution or even an adequate explanation for why it is our world is full of people whose lives are punctuated by pain and suffering.” The question of why there is so much pain and suffering in the world is a question that nags at all of us. On our best days we can try to avoid it, but when we're the ones suffering from the pain we try to do our best at finding out who has caused this pain, who is responsible for all this hurt. In seminary I learned a ten dollar word that defines this question, its called “theodicy” meaning simply, an attempt to answer the question of why a good God permits the manifestation of evil, thus resolving the issue of the problem of evil in the world. This question is what drove Fred Rogers to go to seminary school to become a Presbyterian minister and to create a television show for children that dealt with these hard questions in a relatable way through puppets and creativity. Still, he as well as all others who try to find a solution to this problem cannot find one. How can God be good and permit evil?

The author of Job, however anonymous, is obviously a person who has seen their share of pain and suffering. So much so that they too are trying to get to the bottom of this question of theodicy. How can God be good and still allow this?

The author begins by telling a story that begins like this... once upon a time there was a man in the land of UZ, whose name was Job.

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The premise behind the writer's thinking in Job is that if you suffer, there must be something you did to deserve it. This is what a good friend of my mom had told her after my father passed. She said, maybe there was something that my mother had done against God, that caused God to punish my mom which is why this terrible thing had happened which resulted in my father's passing. Let me say now that this idea is absolutely 100% wrong! There is nothing you can do that can make God love you more or any less. You are loved plain and simple.

This is true as found at the beginning of Job. Job is loved by God. Before things were taken from Job, it must be said that things were given to him. Obviously, Job had much. He had much land, livestock, many friends, was blessed with children, and a wife who loved him. However, unknown to Job a wager was struck between God and Satan or the Accuser. And one thing after another is taken from Job. His livestock gets a deadly disease and die, his property literally goes up in flames, his wife denounces God, and worst of all his children die. This is enough for anyone to blame the omnipotent, benevolent God for what is happening, but Job keeps his faith saying, how can we accept the good without accepting the bad.

What is possibly the most striking from this story is that behind the scenes, unknown to Job, is that the benevolent God allows Satan to bring evil onto Job. This would be enough for anyone to question their faith in a good God who allows evil to happen. And looking ahead to the end of Job, Job has lost everything, and is sitting in a pile of ashes with painful boils covering him from his head to his toes and through all this he never sinned with his lips against God. But now, as everything

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has been taken from him he is left with the only question that has plagued his and everyone else's mind.... Why God? Why have you allowed this evil on me?

And at the end of Job in Chapter 37 there is this scene where Job demands an answer from God. And rightfully so he deserves one, but God doesn't answer Job the way we want. Chapter 38, God speaks to Job from out of the storm and answers Job's question with a question, "were you there when I put the stars in the sky? Were you there when I created the foundation of the world?". This is not what we are expecting from God. We were expecting God to explain why God allowed for all this to happen, not for us to stop and consider all of God's wonders.

But it is precisely in contemplating God's wonders that Job falls to his knees in total admiration and awe and says, "Woe is me! I am unworthy – how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth." You see, Job recognizes that through his pain and suffering God is still good in all things. God has not allowed the pain and suffering onto Job because of something Job had done. God has allowed it because God has complete faith that Job will have faith in God from the very beginning. This is the main point of the story of Job. God has more faith in us, than we have in God. God allows bad things to happen not because we are to be punished, but because God believes in us to make it through the pain and suffering and come out the other side stronger in our faith. God's toleration of evil in fact allows us a chance at bridging the dividing gap that was once caused by sin. Therefore, making our faith and relationship with God stronger than ever before.

So in actuality, we can say that God IS good to allow pain and suffering, trials and temptations because in the end it is our faith in God that is strengthened. And

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not matter what happens in our lives, good or bad, it is the faithful, through it all, who are righteous and are saved. This is precisely why we share communion together. We remember what Christ went through in order to strengthen our relationship with God.

Let us pray: