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Job 23:

If you struggled with what to say about evil, you're not alone. People often struggle with the relationship between a loving God and the existence of evil. The church has often said that God is all-powerful and all loving, but at the same time, we're vexed by the presence of evil in the natural world and human life. And so we begin asking questions:

1. What is the origin of evil? Where does it come from?
2. Why do evil things happen?
3. What's the relationship of God to evil?
4. What's our role in evil?
5. And most of all, why do innocent people suffer? Why does that happen?

We ask these questions on a large scale every time innocent people are the victims of natural disasters, such as the flood in South Carolina, or when they're victims of a shooting like the one in Oregon or the Colorado movie theater or Kirkwood city hall, or Newtown or the Amish school or . . .well, the list goes on and on and, unfortunately, is growing. But we ask it on a personal level when a loved one dies unexpectedly or there's a terrible accident or a painful divorce or a troubled child or marriage or bouts with depression. So it's more than just a philosophical question, this God question. It's very personal, too.

Theologians have a name for it. It's called the theodicy question. How do we reconcile a good and powerful God with tragedy, injustice, and evil in the world?
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I shared with you a couple weeks ago when we talked about God in the first sermon of this series that I no longer try to reconcile all 3. I no longer believe God is all-powerful – a belief I struggle with. In my mind, if God is all-loving and all-powerful, then God would eliminate evil. But seeing as there is still evil in the world, then God – in my mind – must not have the power to eliminate it.

Now, what I believe isn't for everyone. You need to reach your own conclusions about God and evil.

But I will say that whatever you believe about the existence of evil, or why "innocent" people suffer, it should square with your beliefs about God. In other words, your statements of faith should be logically coherent. So if you believe God is all-loving and all powerful you need to formulate a coherent, logical answer about the existence of evil in the world. Some of what I say today may help you with that.

As Presbyterians, we go searching for answers to the God question in the scriptures to hear those ancient stories that tell about the relationship between people and God. Today, our reading comes from Job who asked the age-old question, "Why am I suffering? And where is God?", and has a few different answers for us. But the Bible is full of many answers to the God question, as is the Christian tradition and contemporary teachings; today, I'm only sharing with you what the Book of Job has to say.

So, you know the story of Job. Job was blameless and upright, feared God and turned away from evil, and for no known reason became the victim in the Lord and Satan's ploy to see just how much someone can suffer before they lose all faith and give up on God.

The Lord, for no apparent reason, allows Satan to push Job to the edge of a mental cliff in order to see just how faithful someone is. It's a horrible thing to do. This is God, we ask? Why would God do that? Well, we don't know why. So immediately we're left scratching our heads, wondering why God would let someone as innocent as Job suffer needlessly.

Which is a challenge for us, right? Because whether we want to or not, most of us equate being faithful with being blessed. Granted, we don't do it in the same way as some prosperity Gospel preachers who love to say if you're faithful and pray hard enough, riches will be yours. But we still have a certain baseline understanding that if we're good, upright, honest, faithful, and loving people, things will be ok.

Even though we know this isn't always the case! Conscientiously healthy people get terminally ill. I know a woman who died at 33 of lung cancer and never

smoked a day in her life! People who worked and saved for a lifetime lose everything to corporate malfeasance. In a world of abundance, tens of thousands of people still starve to death.

Why?

Job's friends argue with him that he must have done something to deserve his suffering, otherwise – why would he suffer. Job's friends can't come to grips with the fact that sometimes, there is no answer. That sometimes, perfectly good people suffer. That sometimes, things are not as simple as we want them to be.

In his book Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation, Jonathon Kozol stares unflinchingly into the deep pain and suffering of impoverished children living in the South Bronx of NYC. Kozol wrestles with his own despair as he reflects on these bitter realities which have no easy solutions. Attending a worship service one evening in which the pastor spoke words of hope of God's future to mothers whose sons were in prison, Kozol wrote on the back of the bulletin, "Then where is God? What is He waiting for? Come on, Jehovah! Let's get moving!"

But the book of Job offers no easy answers. In fact, it was likely written to challenge easy answers.

This leads some people to ask, "Then why believe at all? What good is faith? If persons of faith suffer as much as any other, then what's the use? Why not follow the counsel of Job's wife and curse God and die?"

But Job doesn't curse God. In fact, Job argues with God and demands that God show God's self and give Job an answer. That's where we meet up with him today. It will take another 15 chapters for God to appear, but when God does, it's a side of God we'd rather not see.

Who are you to ask such questions of me? God demands. Where were you when I created the world? Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

God takes Job to task.

Some Christians today make God a kind of buddy, as if we think that somehow we can inoculate ourselves against evil by doing things God likes. But the hard truth of Job is that sometimes bad things do happen to good people.

That's one of the answers the book of Job gives. That sometimes, God being God, these things happen. John Calvin in his sermons on Job used to say that there are some things we will never understand, and the best thing we can do is humbly recognize this, consent to this truth, and glorify God anyways.

When William Sloane Coffin was a student at Yale, three of his friends were killed in a car accident when the driver fell asleep at the wheel. At the funeral, Coffin was sickened by the piety of the priest as he spoke the words from Job: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." Coffin was so outraged that he even considered tripping the priest as he processed up the aisle of the church. But even as he was preparing to do so, a small voice inside him asked, "What part of the phrase, Coffin, are you objecting to?" The young Coffin thought at first that it was the second part he objected to: "The Lord hath taken away." "Then suddenly it dawned on me," he says, "that I was protesting the first: 'The Lord gave.' It hit me hard that it was not my world; that at best we were all guests. And 'The Lord gave' was a statement against which all the spears of human pride have to be hurled and shattered."

God makes it clear to Job that this isn't Job's world, it's God's, and God is in the one in charge. God is sovereign, while our perspective is limited. So there are somethings we will never understand. (If you want to believe that God is all loving and all-powerful, you might consider this answer as to why evil exists.)

But this doesn't mean we can't protest it, which leads me to today's readings. Where are you, God? Job demands to know. My complaint is bitter; my mouth filled with arguments.

Sometimes, friends, even though there may be no explanation for evil in the world, one of the most faithful things we can do is protest it and lay our concerns at God's feet. Sometimes, the most daring and faithful thing we can do is argue with God.

Too often people give in, resigning themselves to misfortune. “It must be God’s will; I guess we’ll just have to accept it,” we say. But Job offers a third way; he’s unwilling to accept suffering passively, but he also refuses to abandon his faith.

You know, people are often surprised when I tell them that it is perfectly OK to rail at God. They’re shocked to learn that 1/3 psalms are full of people raging at God, demanding – like Job -- to know why things are like they are when they know darn well that things can and should be better. When I’ve told people diagnosed with cancer or going through a really bad period of life, “You know, it’s perfectly OK to yell at God in your prayers.” That, indeed, it may be the healthiest thing you can do, people are pretty shocked. Really, they ask? I can do that? That’s not unfaithful or anything? No, I say, it’s not. Sometimes it’s the most faithful and daring thing you can do.

Job is seething with exasperation and is at the depths of despair. This isn’t someone trying to make nice with God. Job isn’t covering up his real feelings. And, as an aside, there is no hiding from God or covering up your true feelings from God, at least I don’t believe that there is. If you’re mad at God, chances are good God knows it. So you might as well be honest with God. God can take it.

Plus, it frees you up. And there’s a lot of freedom in being honest; in not beating around the bush. In telling it like it is. There is a lot to be said for being utterly open with God, because that is a sign of a deep, strong faith. If you learn nothing else today, please remember that God is big enough to handle your doubts, questions, pain and anger. And that is not a sign of being unfaithful, it is a sign of someone who takes God very seriously. If you don’t take God seriously, you’re not going to waste time arguing with God. But if you do take God seriously, you are going to take God to the mat, just like Job does.

Job takes his doubts, questions, pain and fears directly to God.

And that, my friends, is instructive for us. Granted, it doesn’t give us a pat answer to why there’s evil in the world, or what God’s role is in it, but it does tell us that one of the things we can do is to get angry. It’s OK to get angry when there’s a mass shooting; it’s OK to be angry when innocent people suffer for no reason; because sometimes anger is the emotion we need to get us moving.

Jason Meyer was nice enough to respond to my post on Facebook asking for people's opinions about why evil happens, and he reminded me of the Jewish principle, or philosophy, known as "tikkun olam." It means "to heal (or repair) the world." The idea, roughly speaking, is that God's work in creation is unfinished business. We are not the products of God's creation; we are God's partners in creation. God created an unfinished world, and our job - our purpose, if you like - is to help in the business of moving that creation closer to perfection.

This might take the form of bringing a meal to someone after the death of a loved one, praying for someone, sending supplies to flood victims, or advocating for stricter gun laws. It could take other forms, too – but the point is to keep moving forward, to keep healing the world. To use a Christian term, to do the work of building God's kingdom here on earth.

When the book of Job comes to an end, Job has been restored to his former self. Gone are the illnesses, he has a new family and new fortune. But don't let the happy ending fool you. He's not the same Job as chapter 1. He's been transformed by his experience, and he refuses to acquiesce to a simple theology because sometimes there are no simple answers.

When the book closes, there's a simple line that says: "Job prayed for his friends." I like to think that in his transformation, Job learned that the best response to evil isn't an explanation, but a witness. That ultimately, our job is not to make evil rational or understandable, but instead work with God to heal the world.

Amen.