

## *“The ambiguity of suffering”*

October 4, 2009]

Text: *Genesis 45:1-8, Job 1:1, 2:1-10*

### I.

There’s a strange phenomenon in this world ... a reality that is both perplexing and ambiguous. It’s related to human suffering.

On the one hand, bad things happen to good people ... every day, all the time. This is certainly the experience of JOB. A totally upright and righteous man; and yet, he suffers a seemingly endless series of afflictions and losses.

In the *just* universe of the Old Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures), this could only mean, and this is what Job’s friends asserted over and over, that Job had somehow sinned. How else to explain his dreadful earthly plight? This is reflective of the operative theology of the Old Testament; that if bad things happen to you, you must have sinned in some way. And yet, throughout, Job proclaims his innocence.

Bad things happen to good people ... through no outside intent; they just happen. Good, righteous, God-fearing people suffer all the time; and through no necessary fault of their own. We see this all the time in life ... and of course, we’ve seen it plenty here in our own church—personal losses through disease (usually cancer) or random accidents.

And every time, we’re left with an utter sense of powerlessness, wondering: *where’s the justice?*

### II.

And so, on the one hand, people suffer. As we saw in the reading from Genesis, Joseph is sold into slavery and for a time is in prison in a foreign land.

But, of course, there is more to the story because, as Genesis relates, *God is with Joseph*. And as we see in Joseph’s story, our human suffering and deprivation create in us new possibilities for understanding and compassion that enable us to love and nurture in ways that we perhaps couldn’t before.

It’s almost like our suffering becomes, for us, a gift ... a gift of personal growth and deepening, on the other side of the suffering, that creates in us a deeper understanding and compassion for our human situation. Thru our own suffering, our own valley experience, we can relate more to the hurt of others.

That’s why self-help groups, at their best, are so effective. The participants truly *know* the pain and the struggle that each of them is caught up in.

### *The ambiguity of suffering.*

In the story of Joseph, when he was sold to the Ishmaelites into slavery by his jealous brothers, it was their intent to bring him down and diminish him in some way.

When we imagine the negative and tragic things that *could have happened* to him, the list is endless. The Ishmaelites, it turns out, were on their way to Egypt where they soon sold Joseph to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials and the captain of the guard. Later, through intrigue and false accusations against him, Joseph ends up in prison.

However, as noted earlier, *God was with Joseph*; and over time, through his ability to interpret Pharaoh's troubled dreams, Joseph rises up in Pharaoh's sight to where he's appointed Prime Minister over all of Egypt. It's an amazing success story.

### III.

With both Job and Joseph, we can't help but ask, *why the suffering?* Even though Joseph seems to suggest that his suffering (which was prompted by the sinful deed of his brothers) was part of God's plan, was it? Or is this an *after-the-fact* interpretation that seeks to reconcile the sins of the past with the positive realities of the present?

Almost like, *well, things have turned out well so let's not make too much of the past sins*; a sort of *all is well that ends well* reconciliation.

Still, do we really think Joseph's brothers did a good thing by maliciously selling him into slavery? Hardly!

What's happened is that Joseph is cutting them some slack. He survived danger and hardship; but now things have turned wondrously in his favor and—simply put—he's trying to be BIG and, through a forgiving spirit, he's seeking an easy reconciliation with his brothers?

Job, for his part, is relentless in his protestations and in his claims of innocence. So, again: *Why the suffering?* As the book of Job attests and as our life-experience affirms, ultimately, there is no satisfying answer.

Is this because God is in some way powerless to stop or curtail the suffering? No! God is NOT powerless. But, friends, God works through the created order—through us and through the unfolding of the universe.

The universe, and us along with it, are created in freedom. And as the universe unfolds (as it self-creates), and as we evolve and our lives unfold, every minute, we're making choices. Again, we're not perfect. Indeed, there is no perfection, only approximations to excellence.

#### IV.

And as you've heard me say all the time: stuff happens. Our creations (automobiles, airplanes, the arms we create and on and on ...) are not perfect. And we who operate them and use them are even less perfect still. And things happen: a poor decision here, a lapse in judgment there.

Moreover, there's the evolution of our bodies as well. In most instances, we don't know why we come down with the diseases we come down with. Beyond the obvious, we don't know why we get cancer and other serious afflictions. Of course, always, there are predispositions to illness, like heart disease, which tends to be hereditary.

But then, my older brother and his wife, both very healthy individuals with no apparent trace of heart disease on either side, had two daughters, each born with half a heart. As infants, they've had open heart surgeries to repair their hearts. My nieces are 40 and 38 today and seemingly doing well; but, again, what happened?

With all the advancements in modern science, still, much of life is riddled with mystery and wonder. And so much of what happens—with the unfolding of the universe and natural disasters ... and even with disease—is random. Stuff happens that we can't necessarily predict or control. Sometimes, it's as simple as wrong place, wrong time.

And so, when bad things happen to good people, as they do everyday, what we're left with is the awful grace of God—which rises up in the heartbeat of our pain and ache and—everyday—shouts out YES to life.

The ultimate justice of God sounds out in the indomitable biblical claims of **Romans 8**, which many of you no doubt know by heart:

*What are we to say about these things, asks Paul? If God is for us, who is against us? ...Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution ...or danger or sword?*

*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced (GET THIS!) that neither death nor life, neither angels or other heavenly rulers or powers ...*

*...neither the present or the future ...neither the world above or the world below, **there is nothing in all or creation that can ever separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus, our Lord.***

#### V.

The New Testament proclamation is that Christ lives—beyond the injustice, beyond the suffering and deprivation. Christ lives; and **love is more powerful than death.**

What the Bible claims and our faith teaches is that God uses suffering for good—suffering which is never God’s will; but which God, still, through God’s infinite grace and love, uses for good.

This is precisely *The ambiguity of suffering*. That no matter what befalls us, no matter what comes our way in life, it is God’s purpose to use our lives for good.

Many of you here this morning have suffered much: the personal losses, the misfortunes at work or with finances, the failures and rejections that we’ve all dealt with; we’ve all had our sufferings.

And in many ways (again, this is the ambiguous part—the strange phenomenon I referred to earlier), the ones who have suffered the most are the ones with the greatest capacity to love, and to do good, and to nurture the lives of people who have similar deprivations and sufferings.

And so, if we’ve been nicked up a bit in life, know that God needs us—our compassion, our love, our life experience—to reach out and touch others in need ... because, you’ve been there.

It’s in this way that we’re Christ’s hands, feet and caring heart in the nurture and support of others. And it’s this way—through all the pain and ache—that we are a blessing for God’s healing and redemptive purposes.

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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