WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE
Job 13: 1-12

One day, the story goes, the Satan appears before God to report all the sinful things people were doing on earth. God says to the Satan, "Did you notice Job? There is no one on earth like him, a good man who never sins." The Satan answers, "Of course. You make it worth his while, showering blessings on him. Take them away and see how long he remains faithful." God tells the Satan, “We’ll see. Go ahead, do what you want.” Sometime later, Job's house and cattle are destroyed and his children are killed. And yet, Job did not sin or blame God. So Satan inflicted Job with sores all over his body. His wife said to him, “Are you still holding on your integrity? Curse God and be done with it.” Three friends came to console Job and they gave him various explanations for why that was happening to him.

This morning, we will take a look at various explanations for suffering and seek our own understanding of why bad things happen to good people. But first, listen to Job's response to his friends' explanations for the tragedy in his life in Job 13, 1-12.

SCRIPTURE READING

I am sure that many of you, like I, have had a time in your life when you were experiencing hardship or tragedy or loss and some very well-intentioned friends have offered explanations in an attempt to help you make sense of the situation and, like Job, you just wanted them to stop.

One of the ways in which people have tried to make sense of suffering has been by assuming that we deserve what we get. In fact, we may even ask, "What did I do to deserve this?" Yes, it's tempting to believe that bad things happen to people (especially other people) because God is a righteous judge who gives them exactly what they deserve. By believing this, we keep the world orderly and understandable. Not only that, but we give people the best possible reason for being good while we can maintain an image of God as all-loving, all-powerful, and totally in control.

The idea that our misdeeds cause our misfortune is an attractive solution to the dilemma at several levels, but it has a number of serious limitations. For one thing, it coaxes us to blame ourselves. It creates feelings of guilt even where there may be no basis for guilt. I mean, some very good people find their lives to be more of a punishment than a privilege. And like Job, we are left either angry at ourselves for deserving such a fate, or angry at God for sending it to us when we did not deserve it.

According to this logic, righteous people are those who live long and well, whether or not they are honest and charitable, and a wicked person is anyone who suffers, even if that person's life is commendable. Perhaps if we had lived before the era of mass communications, we could have believed this thesis. But that doesn't work for us in modern times. I mean, how can we agree that the cause of the tornadoes sweeping the Midwest was God punishing all those hundreds of evil-doers? That just doesn't make sense.

And yet, we find comfort in the prospect that there is purpose to our suffering even if it is beyond our capacity to understand. We want to believe that our lives make sense, that life makes sense. During those chaotic times of uncertainty, we so desperately want to go on believing that God is in charge. Because if God isn't, who is? It is hard to live with illness and tragedy, it's
even harder to live with the idea that our lives are spinning out of control and God does not care. We may become frustrated and cry out, "Why me?" Then we may feel guilty about being angry with God.

So, let's consider some of the possible purposes we may have heard through the years. Does God make us suffer to teach us a lesson; maybe to help us understand a deep truth of life or maybe startle us into seeing something that has been right in front of us all along? Does God send us trials and tribulations to make us better people; more compassionate, grateful, patient, or steadfast? We are sometimes told that God treats us the way a wise and caring parent treats a na"ive child; keeping us from hurting ourselves, withholding something we may think we want, punishing us occasionally to make sure we understand that we have done something seriously wrong, and patiently enduring our temper tantrums at God's "unfairness" in the confidence that we will one day understand that it was all for our own good.

One teacher used this image: if a man who knew nothing about medicine was to walk into the operating room of a hospital and see surgery being performed, he might assume that they were a band of criminals torturing their unfortunate victim. He would see them tying the patient down, forcing a cone over his face so that he could make no noise, and sticking knives into him. Only someone who understood surgery would realize that they were doing all this to help the patient, not to torment him. So too, it is suggested, God does painful things to us as God's way of helping us.

The problem with this line of reasoning is that it isn't really meant to help the sufferer or to explain the cause of his suffering. It is meant primarily to defend God, and we hear Job ask, "Will you speak deceitfully for God? Will you plead the case for God?" It may be true that sometimes we allow people we love to face adversity for their own benefit. But, not every painful thing that happens in our lives is beneficial. My friends, it is not an act of faith to deny what is bad by calling it good or attempt to make pain a privilege, in defense of God.

Another explanation is that God sends tests and affliction only to people God knows are capable of handling them, so that they and others can learn the extent of their spiritual strength. I am pretty sure that you'd agree that the assurance that God has singled you out because God recognized some special strength within you and knew you would be able to handle crisis, would not make you feel "privileged". One mother whose five year-old son had died in a terrible accident was told that, "God never sends you more than you can bare." She remembers thinking, "I wish I was a weaker person, so my son would still be alive."

My friends, all the responses to tragedy that we have considered have at least one thing in common. They all assume that God is the cause of our suffering and they try to defend God from some sort of alleged offense. But this assumption is not consistent with our foundational understanding of God. Let me assure you that God does not play sick jokes. God does not cause our suffering. However, God stands ready to help us cope with our crises. What we need to do is get beyond the feelings of guilt and anger that separate us from God. "How could God do this to me?" is actually the wrong question for us to ask.

You see, God has given us a wonderful and orderly world. One of the things that makes the world livable is the fact that the laws of nature are precise and reliable. There is gravity so we are held onto the earth. Our human bodies are miracles, not because they defy laws of nature, but precisely because they obey them. But the unchanging character of these laws also causes problems. Gravity sometimes causes us to fall down and hurt ourselves. We cannot live without gravity, but that means we have to live with the dangers it poses.
Laws of nature do not make exceptions for nice people. An out-of-control auto has no conscience and neither does a malignant tumor. That is why good people get sick and get hurt as much as anyone else. We may ask, "Since God doesn't cause it, couldn't God stop it?" Yes, I am confident that God can. But I wonder, would this be a better world if God's favorites were immune to laws of nature, while the rest of us are left to fend for ourselves?

Let's suppose that, for the purpose of argument, that I was one of those righteous people to whom God would not let anything bad happen. What would that mean? Could I jump out of high windows unhurt when I am in too much of a hurry to wait for an elevator? You see, a world in which good people suffer from the same natural dangers as others may cause problems. But a world in which good people were immune to those laws would cause even more problems.

Oh, and another point, as far as I'm concerned, referring to tornadoes, hurricanes, and other natural disasters as "acts of God" is almost taking God's name in vain. The tsunami that killed thousands of innocent victims without reason was not an act of God, it was an act of nature. Nature is morally blind and without values. It churns along, following its own laws, not caring who or what gets in the way. But God is not morally blind. God stands for justice with compassion. For me, the act of God is in the courage of people to rebuild their lives after the tsunami and the rush of others to help them in whatever way they could.

What is also an act of God, is that humans have the freedom to make choices. We are not robots that have been fully programmed for the duration of our lives. Our moral freedom means that, if we choose to take something that does not belong to us, God will not reach down and pull our hand away from the cookie jar. God will tell us that it is wrong and warn us that we will be sorry for doing it. But, God will not intervene to take away our freedom, including our freedom to hurt ourselves and others around us.

Why, then, do bad things happen to good people? One reason is that our being human leaves us free to inflict pain. If God would stop us, God would be taking away the freedom that makes us human. We can cheat each other, hurt ourselves, desert the ones we love and God will look down in pity and compassion at how little we have learned over the ages about what it means to be human and created in God's image.

I'll admit that I may not know why one person faces tragedy and another does not, but I can assume that some natural laws which I may not fully understand are at work. Or it might have been caused by a foolish or malicious act or even an accident. And sometimes, in the randomness of the creation, I won't ever know the answer to the question, "Why?" It is beyond my understanding, but I am confident that it is not beyond God. And so for me, the question is not "Why?" The question is "How?" "How, Lord? Show me how I can get through this. How can I find blessing and goodness even in the midst of it all? How can I keep my eyes fixed on Jesus, follow his guidance, and feel his presence, no matter where I find myself."

My friends, I cannot believe that God sends crises to specific people for specific reasons. I don't believe in a God who has a weekly quota of malignant tumors to distribute and consults the divine computer to find out who deserves one or who is strong enough to handle it. "What did I do to deserve this?" is an understandable outcry from one who is suffering, but it is the wrong question. Being sick or being healthy is not a matter of what we deserve or what we need. The better questions is, "since this has happened to me, how will I open myself and draw on the mercy, wisdom, guidance and power of the Lord, who is here with me, and for me?"