

Proper 7B; Job 38:1-11
June 24, 2018
The Rev. Devon Anderson

I apologize in advance this morning, as I am going to begin this sermon with a grim tale. For four days of this past week, Michael and I were in NYC celebrating our 20th wedding anniversary. One of the days was predicted to be steaming hot, so we hopped on the LIRR headed for Long Beach – a lovely, public beach bordered by the Atlantic Ocean on one side and an expansive boardwalk on the other. We rented chairs and a big umbrella, read, ate the lunch we bought at Zabar’s, swam, and watched teenagers flirt with each other. We stayed late and as we began to pack up, we noticed a crowd gathering on the rock pier that jet a few hundred feet into the ocean. Within minutes we heard sirens, and then jet skis with first responders aboard appeared out of nowhere. In a few more minutes helicopters circled above, and more sirens could be heard as fire trucks and ambulances from every direction screeched into view. No one knew any details, but it was obvious that someone was hurt, or missing, or both.

Michael and I stayed and watched with the crowd, but then we had to catch the last train back to the city. On the way home and then into the night, and then the next day, we searched the web for information. The victim was a 9 year old boy who had come for a swim with his 11 year old brother, without parents. As they played in the water near the stone pier, the younger boy was caught up in some kind of rip tide current and went under. The older brother was somehow able to swim back and call for help. “My brother is drowning!” he told other kids on the beach, who had the wherewithal to call 911. But it was too late --- for the three hours before dark and many more hours starting at dawn, the search persisted, tenacious and unrelenting. But they found nothing. The boy, presumed dead, was gone and after 24 hours, the search was called off.

The image that haunts me is one from a local newscast. It was the boys’ mother, standing where we had been ourselves, on the beach next to that pier, one of those flimsy silver blanket things around her shoulders – the kind rescue workers give people in shock to keep them warm. She was wearing some sort of work uniform and big hoop earrings. While a rescue worker talked at her, she just stared, blankly, out into the horizon. It was just her, alone, no family around her or spouse or other children. Just her. On that pier. No expression. Just empty. Just lost.

I’ve been thinking about that family since Wednesday, wondering how they are going to get through what they have to go through. I’ve been thinking about what it’s going to be like to have a funeral for the boy but without a body. I’ve been worrying about the surviving brother. What is his life going to be like? How will he bear that incredible burden for the rest of his life – the “what if”s? And the “why”s? And the “if only we hadn’t gone”s. So much suffering borne out of that single moment, the one that changed everything.

In so many ways, this past week was a devastating week for children. So much suffering. Many of you reached out to me to share your grief and concern about the 2300 children separated from their parents at our borders, part of a zero-tolerance policy on illegal entry into the US. On Facebook, in the news, and all over the web we were treated to relentless images of children in cages, sleeping alone on concrete floors in detention centers. Elected officials pointed their fingers at each other and staffers mischaracterized Bible verses. We know the practice is cruel and heartless. We know treating children this way is not us, not American, definitely not Christian (or Muslim or Jewish for that matter).

What are we to do with all this suffering? Both our suffering and the suffering of others? How does God call us to respond to the world's suffering? Maybe it's not by chance that we are given by way of an answer this morning, the story of Job – the patron saint of suffering.

Job was the man who did everything right and was repaid with suffering every kind of wrong. He was blameless and upright, the Bible tells us. He feared God and turned away from evil. He was also “the greatest of all the people of the east,” with a loving wife, ten children, seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred pairs of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and enough servants to look after the whole zoo.

Job's misfortune comes about through no fault of his own. As the story goes, God gives Satan permission to test his premise that Job is a good and righteous man, fearful of God, because God has given Job every blessing. “With all due respect, sir,” Satan says to God, “Job doesn't worship you for nothing. Take all that away from him and he will curse you to your face.” So God takes it away to test Satan's premise and Job's trials begin. In short order, Job loses everything: his oxen, donkeys, and camels – all stolen. His servants are killed defending them. His sheep are struck by lightning. His children die around the supper table when a big wind blows the house down on top of them. And still, Job's response to all of this sets him apart from ordinary human beings. God is right – there is no one like Job on earth. In a formal display of grief, Job tears his robe, shaves his head, and lays face down in the dirt. “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away,” he says. “Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

But Satan is not impressed. “That is because you didn't lay a hand on him,” Satan says to God. “Hurt him – hurt him physically – and he will curse you to your face.” So God gives his permission and Satan makes itching sores erupt all over Job's body, from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. Finally, he erupts. “God damn the day I was born and the night that forced me from the womb,” he cries. And then Job pleads his case on and off for 37 chapters. With nothing left to lose, he sits out on his dung heap covered with boils, yelling at God with both fists in the air. “I have done everything you ever asked me to! Why is this happening to me? Answer me!”

Finally, God does just that, speaking to Job out of the whirlwind – which is the passage from which we read this morning. “Who is this whose ignorant words smear my design with darkness?” asks God. “Stand up now like a man; I will question you: please, instruct me. Where were you when I planned the earth? Tell me, if you are so wise. Do you know who took its dimensions, measuring its length with a cord? What were its pillars built on? Who laid down its cornerstone, while the morning stars burst out singing and the angels shouted for joy?”

God's rebuttal goes on for four whole chapters, but God never does answer Job's question. Job's question is about justice. God's answer is about omnipotence, and as far as I know that is the only answer human beings have ever gotten about why suffering happens. God only knows. And none of us is God.

If there is an answer to the problem of unjustified suffering in Job, then, it is only this: ***that for most of us, the worst thing that can happen is not to suffer without reason – but to suffer without God, without any hope of consolation or rebirth.*** All other pain pales next to the pain of divine abandonment (ask Jesus about that), and what Job wants us to know is that ***God does not finally abandon us.*** When there is nothing left – when all the flocks have been stolen and all the children have been buried – when there is nothing left but a dung heap upon which to scratch our sores, what is still left is the God of all

creation, who laid the foundation of the earth, who has walked in the recesses of the deep, who has made all that breathes. This is the Lord of all life, who never runs out of life, and whom we may always ask for more.

I am just finishing up Parker Palmer's newest book entitled, "On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old." Toward the book's end, Palmer takes on this question about suffering – our own and that of the world's – and explores how we might best respond and use that suffering toward good. *Heartbreak comes with the territory called "being human." When love and trust fail us, or what once brought meaning goes dry, when a dream drifts out of reach, when a devastating disease strikes, or when someone precious to us dies, our hearts break, and we suffer.*

What can we do with our pain? How might we hold it and work with it? How do we turn the power of suffering toward new life? The way we answer those questions is critical because violence is what happens when we don't know what else to do with our suffering. Violence is not limited to inflicting physical harm. We do violence every time we violate the sanctity of the human self, our own or another person's. Sometimes we try to numb the pain of suffering in ways that dishonor our souls. We turn to noise, frenzy, non-stop work, and substance abuse as anesthetics that only deepen our suffering. Sometimes we visit violence upon others as if causing them pain would mitigate our own: racism, sexism, homophobia, a contempt for the poor are among the cruel outcomes of this demented strategy.

Suffering breaks our hearts. But the heart can break in two quite different ways. There's the brittle heart that breaks into shards, shattering the one who suffers as it explodes and sometimes taking others down when it's thrown like a grenade at the ostensible source of its pain. Then there's the supple heart, the one that breaks open, not apart. The one that can grow into greater capacity for the many forms of love. Only the supple heart can hold suffering in a way that opens to new life.

So, in the end, what Job is telling us, what Palmer is telling us, what our lives tell us, is to choose the supple heart. In the face of the pain of the world, choose the supple heart – the heart that sees in the hurt and struggles of others our own hurt and struggles, the heart that cultivates a deep compassion in the connection. Let our own losses, our own heartbreak, our own fear of uncertainty connect with that of other people – through prayer, through intention, and yes – most importantly – through solidarity and action. In a week begins the Episcopal Church's General Convention, and I will lead, once again, the Minnesota deputation to that great gathering. During convention I will join our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, for a prayer service at a detention center near the convention hall in Austin, Texas and will later chair the legislative committee that debates and decides upon the Episcopal Church's position on US policy, including immigration. I have known family division and separation in my own life. I have known tragedy that strikes the young, premature death, and also the kind of parental love that wants to make life better for my own children no matter the cost. As an act of faith I will be building bridges between my own pain and compassion for the pain of other people – especially the poor, the refugee, the desperate. I choose the supple heart over the brittle heart. What do you choose, and how will you put your choice into action? AMEN.

Sources:

The Story of a Man Named Job, by Harold S. Kushner, in "When Bad Things Happen to Good People," pp. 31-45.