

What We Do With What We Are Given
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Job 1:1, 2:1-10
Heb 1:1-4, 2:5-12
Mark 10:2-16

It is the question that has plagued Christians for years which no one has yet been able to answer fully. How do we understand evil in the world?

That question is made much more difficult to understand with the book of Job. It would be much easier to argue that God intends for “bad” things to happen to “bad” people – except that we know that is not true. We know it from our own experience and we know it from the story of Job.

You have probably heard the arguments countless times already. Either God can’t prevent the evil that happens or God could prevent it but doesn’t. Neither one of the choices is particularly appealing. We’re not going to solve that debate today.

Instead I’d rather look at the exchange between Job and his wife.

“Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.”

“Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?”

Neither one of them doubted that God was behind what happened to them. The only question is how they will respond. Will Job curse God or won’t he? That is really the only drama of the story. We know what happened to Job, we know that it was because of a conversation between God and the Adversary. There is no mystery to what happened, only to the response. How will Job respond to what happened to him? What will Job do with what he was given?

The question put before Job is the question put before us as well. That is the crucial response to the question of why do bad things happen to good people – how will we respond? What will we do with what we have been given? Will we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?

It’s a difficult question. Well, it sounds like an easy one. “Of course we’ll take the good with the bad.” It sounds easy – and when we have challenges I think that most of us most of the time, find ourselves turning closer to God. We recognize that we need to draw on God’s strength and power. There are times when the struggles are so difficult that we can question God, wondering why things happen to us and cry out to God. But notice that we still are talking to God at that time.... even crying out to God in anguish or in anger is communication with God.

As strange as it may sound, our times of trial may NOT be the times when our dependence on God is called into question. It can be much more difficult to remember our reliance on God when things are going well. Think of the Israelites in the desert – even if they had days of struggle, they knew that they needed God to get through it all. When they reached the land of milk and honey it was much easier to forget about God.

When things are rough, we can call on God to help us. When things are going well, we can be satisfied with our own efforts. Think of the Sabbath day. Deuteronomy chapter 5 gives the

commandment to rest on the Sabbath day, and then gives these words:

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

Remember where you were when God set you free. Remember that God brought you out of slavery with His own hand, and now God wants you to take time out each week and rest and remember what God has done for you that you could not do for yourself.

Now we have to wonder about ourselves. Not just to call on God when times get tough, but will we recognize the mighty hand of God and His outstretched arm when we have success? Will we take the time to pause and remember all of what God has done for us – or will we believe that we are responsible for all the good that happens to us?

I truly believe the challenge for us today is to recognize that our efforts are blessed by God, and that we are to thank God for (what we call) “our” successes. Job asked the question, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” Perhaps another question to ask today would be, “Shall we question God for the bad in our lives and ignore His hand in the good that we receive?”

How will we respond to what has happened to us? What will we do with what we have been given to us? Of course we have participated in whatever success we have had in life. God gave us minds and wills to use while we are on this planet, and expects more of us than sitting around waiting for manna to descend from the skies.

But can any of us deny the hand of God underneath our feet? Would any of us argue that God has blessed the work of our hands and minds in the major achievements of our lives? How many of us in this place can think of times in our own lives when we have persevered against adversity, found heights higher than we might have hoped? Can we ignore the arm of the Lord in our lives? How will we respond?

I joked with the New Members a few weeks ago that anytime the church asks you a question, the answer is always “I do” or “I will” – whether you are getting married or becoming a member of the church or being ordained for service in the church. It is fitting that the reply is the same, because the church has been characterized as the bride of Christ – when we seek to be members of Christ’s community we make the promise to be faithful in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. That is what Job was saying, that we need to be faithful in our response to God in success and adversity, in blessing and struggle.

Part of that commitment is being fulfilled here this morning – we gather together to begin a new week remembering the Sabbath in worship. Your commitment to worship in good times and bad mirrors any other committed relationship, it grows and is strengthened over time and becomes in itself a source of strength and support.

Part of that commitment is fulfilled during the week in the many ministries that go on in and through our congregation: Presbyterian Women, Logos, Interfaith Hospitality Network.... Christian

Education, Choirs, Youth Connection... the many Committees of the Session and the wonderful work they do.... the circles of friendship and fellowship that exist throughout the congregation.

Part of that commitment will be fulfilled in the next few weeks. You have been asked to consider your pledge for the upcoming year. It is one way that we signal our response to what we have received. It is part of your committed relationship to the church. Like any other relationship, it can be done out of a sense of drudging obligation or out of joyful response and hope.

To some it may seem unnecessary, that you might come each week and give as you feel led that particular Sunday. But it is also a goal that you set for yourself. An Olympic runner does not simply set out to go out and see if she feels she can run on any given day. Instead she sets a goal that she strives for each day, each week. Your pledge is your promise, but it is a hopeful promise. Like any promise it is made with the expectation of keeping it, but everyone here can point to a time in our own lives where we unable to keep a promise we made. We all understand that can happen, and certainly God understands that can happen.

A pledge is part of our response to God. It is important not to over- or under-emphasize its significance. It is a vital part of our planning for the ministry and mission that we hope to undertake for the next year to continue to excellence in our programmatic offerings – and to keep the lights and air conditioning systems running so that everything else can take place.

How will we respond to what we have been given? How will we respond in times of adversity? In times of great achievement? In times of need? You won't need to answer the question to me or anyone else. It is a question that you will answer to God and to yourself. It is vital that you let your prayerful response come from your heart and mind, not out of any sense of guilt.

Job is remembered for his faithfulness to God through difficult times, not for his perfection, but for his perseverance. This congregation will be remembered for our hope in remaining in downtown Gainesville, and our efforts have been blessed by these new facilities. I can't count how many people have said to me, "If you had told me 4 years ago that we could have raised all the funds necessary for this building, I'm not sure I would have believed it." But you did believe that it could happen, you responded out of that faith and hope and love, and those efforts have been blessed by God just as Job was blessed.

If you have not read Job lately, make time to do so. It seems like a long book but the writing style makes it pass very quickly. See the struggle that Job faced where even family and friends doubted him. See how Job refused to give up on God and remember that God refuses to give up on us. Read about the blessings that Job received after his terrible trials.

Job's wife asked why he persisted in his integrity. Job responded that he would take the bad with the good. He responded with faith and hope. May our lives be encouraged and our faith strengthened by his witness and faithfulness.

Amen.