

## **The Crossroads of Love and Suffering**

**Sermon preached by the Reverend Jessica Schaap, Missioner for Christian Formation, Anglican Diocese of New Westminster at Christ Church Cathedral  
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27)**

***Job 1:1, 2:1-10***

Oh, Job. Oh, dear. Bringing us into the deep end. In the diocese we run a course called Transforming Questions which is a course for newcomers and longtimers in the church to ask and explore the big questions of faith. And the question that grabs most people's attention. The question that burns after this long triathlon of pandemic is – Why is there suffering?

Why is there suffering? The grinding wheel of suffering that we see in our own lives and in the lives of others is maybe the biggest and best reason people have for rejecting a notion of God. And the book of Job delves more deeply and unrelentingly into the problem of pain and suffering than perhaps any other in Scripture.

When faced with suffering, many of us look for explanations, for meaning, for some sense of it all. And people throughout the thousands of years that the Scriptures were formed and then interpreted have offered their thoughts, experiences, and wisdom. I'm going to go over, briefly, about four of those explanations. Is there one here that speaks to you? Or maybe it's a combination?

- 1) The first I'm going to call – the Free Will, Bad choices explanation
  - a. We have been given free will; we have made bad decisions; we suffer. From hangovers to car accidents that weren't quite accidents we do suffer from the consequences of our actions. And others suffer because of them too. I know I've had that realization more than once that a choice I made led to some real suffering. But taking responsibility for those bad choices can also lead to some real goodness, healing and new life.
  - b. This explanation though can and has done damage. There are people with MS who think they are being punished, laid off workers in a downsized company who think they've failed. But it's one thing when you come to the perhaps faulty conclusion that it's something you've done. What's worse is when someone tells you that's why you're suffering. This is the response of Job's comforters – they keep telling him he must've done something wrong, and they only add to his great misery. What's ironic is Job's "comforters" are relying on bits of the Bible that seem to line up with this kind of thinking. A verse from Proverbs says, "No harm happens to the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble." And

Isaiah says, “woe to the guilty how unfortunate they are, for what their hands have done shall be done to them. Suffering – what goes around, comes around.

- 2) The second explanation is suffering is a teacher. It teaches us and others important lessons.
  - a. Again, there’s some merit to this. I’ve experienced some of the greatest gentleness and compassion from people who have experienced profound suffering. Saint Irenaeus, an early saint of the church, sometimes called suffering “soulmaking” and drew on images of the refining fire from the Bible. This model can give suffering redeeming value.
  - b. But, suffering as teacher also has some inadequacies. It can shoehorn pain into always serving a higher and good purpose. Many of us cling to this one, and can have a hard time just naming something as plain awful. It can also let those who cause suffering off the hook – I’m just teaching them a lesson.
- 3) The third explanation is suffering is caused by the oppressiveness of an evil system. And the scriptures are alive with the cries of people suffering under oppression – from the slaves in Exodus, to the forced exiles in Babylon, to the hunted boys in Bethlehem. This explanation has huge power to expose the corrupt systems and ideologies of this world which continue to crush and destroy people and land. The drawbacks are there though when people who have been oppressed and victimized fall into patterns of oppressing and victimising others. Or in an attempt to relieve oppression as they see it, some swoop in, trying to be a saviour.
- 4) The fourth explanation is that suffering is just not comprehensible by us. It is, in the end, an unfathomable mystery, but God is sovereign. This understanding of suffering is like the old maps with the lines that just waver out on the page with the words “Unknown Territory.” This can match a lot of our experiences with pain and loss. We don’t know where the land ends, we don’t have a path. Suffering is an unresolvable thing and part of life. God’s answer to Job in the end of the book seems close to this one. God, the creator of a trillion stars burning with more nuclear energy than we can imagine. God, the creator of microbes in dirt whose numbers and purpose we can’t begin to comprehend. In essence, God says to Job you don’t really know what’s going on in the world, and I’m speaking to you out of this whirlwind.

The thing with many of these explanations is they’re often trying to get God off the hook in the face of the reality of suffering. But, it turns out God seems to have very little interest in getting off the hook. If anything, God has a pattern of getting on the hook. In Job, God doesn’t get defensive, and commends Job for pouring out from the bitterness and agony of his heart. Job speaks the truth, God says. The so-called comforters did not.

The funny thing is that Job and Job’s comforters often say similar things about suffering and evil. The difference seems to be the motivation and direction of their speech. Job

speaks from the flayed to the bone middle of suffering. And as much as he speaks to his friends, he also speaks to God. The “comforters” speak out of a resistance to listen to Job. They insist they know what his problem is and he’s the problem. What’s more they never in the whole book address God, it’s like God actually doesn’t exist as a real person for them. God serves as their wall of denial and avoidance. And, oof, I’ve been there with Job’s comforters, I get it. I sympathize with that strategy.

They try to get God off the hook of suffering, or really get themselves off the hook, but in our holy stories, we have this God who literally, painfully, gets hooked onto nails, and hung on a cross. We have this story of a God taking in the enormity, complexity, and gravity of suffering in flesh just as soft and pierceable as ours. In Jesus’s action on the cross and in resurrection we have a story of God’s approach to suffering. The Anglican theologian N.T. Wright puts it like this:

“Jesus doesn't give an explanation for the pain and sorrow of the world. He comes where the pain is most acute and takes it upon himself. Jesus doesn't explain why there is suffering, illness, and death in the world. He brings healing and hope. He doesn't allow the problem of evil to be the subject of a seminar. He allows evil to do its worst to him. He exhausts it, drains its power, and emerges with new life<sup>1</sup>.”

If we look back at our explanations, we see how the story of this God on the hook of a cross becomes a response to them. Jesus takes that free will and makes a choice. He chooses to die for love of us and all creation. Jesus is a teacher in suffering. But not one who stands apart teaching a lesson, but one who has gone into the fire himself, and continues to return through the Spirit and patiently walk beside us. Jesus on the cross unmask the banal evil of oppression - leaders who pass the buck, all the little compromises of systems, normalized unjust deaths. But returns that evil not with revenge but with a hand stretched out for a transformed relationship. Jesus dies for villain and victim. And, finally, God’s work and suffering is still an unfathomable mystery. How could the cross exhaust evil? How does God yield new life out of it? I don’t know about you, but I think plumbing the depths of those questions is worthy of more than a lifetime’s work. Because Jesus, as the prayer goes – our pattern and our hope.

We might come to an end in explanations. The writer and scholar Kate Bowler, who found herself diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer at age 35, found herself on a long journey where she says, she learned to live with fewer explanations for why things had happened as they did. In her first book she shares that if we can’t adequately explain

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright. *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel is News and What Makes it Good* (New York: HarperOne, 2017).

suffering, how can we respond when we do see it? So I'll leave you with some of her pragmatic guidelines<sup>2</sup>.

The first is to say: "I'd love to bring you a meal this week. Can I email you about it?" But really she says, bring anything: chocolate, a plant, funny Youtube video compilations.

The second is to say: "You are a beautiful person", unless that sounds creepy to you, maybe you say something simple that you admire about them. "I so respect the hard decision you made."

The third is to ask "Can I give you a hug, hold your hand? Insert appropriate touch here. People who are suffering very often feel so lonely and cut-off and need touch beyond the clinical.

The fourth is to say, "Oh my friend, that sounds so hard." Let suffering people talk. Job needed it. Be willing to listen and stare down the ugliness and sadness of it all with them.

The fifth and last is sometimes just not saying anything. Sometimes silence and presence is just the thing. There's no right words. Job's comforters actually started there as they were ritually required. If only they'd maintained it some more.

When people did these things, she sensed God very near. God was somehow in the middle of it all, on the hook. When people have done these things for you, maybe you've known the same. They are not hard and fast rules and when in doubt, I think Jesus models for us drawing close to suffering. He always asks first – "what is it you need from me?"

Then be still and listen. Go to the crossroads of love and suffering. Find, maybe not all the answers, but find Mercy.

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<sup>2</sup> Kate Bowler. *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*. (New York: Random House, 2018)