

God Sustains Us
Calvary Episcopal Church
October 3, 2021

In the name of God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

The Old Testament lessons for today and the next three Sundays are taken from the Book of Job, which is often referred to as one of the finest pieces of literature of any genre ever written in the world. Though portions of it make me cringe, I am fascinated by the writer's audacity to grapple with the biggest religious and spiritual issue of all ages: the question of theodicy, how an almighty and all loving God can allow the existence of evil. Lofty, yes. But to bring it closer to home, we are more likely to ask the question this way: why bad things happen to good people—particularly to good people like us.

If you haven't read Job in a while or ever, read it. Most scholars view it as a fable, an ancient work of fiction. It is a captivating, poetic read, which is not to say that it gives us a definitive answer to the big question—at least not a satisfactory one for me. A quick spoiler alert: to set the stage, I am going to give you a one-minute summary of the whole book. If you don't want to hear how it ends, cover your ears, or play with your phone. Quietly.

- ❖ Job is an exceptionally good man, blessed with 10 children, 500 oxen, 500 donkeys, 7000 sheep and no doubt a partridge in a pear tree!
- ❖ Satan, *hassatan* in Hebrew, which really means accuser or adversary, approaches God at a gathering of heavenly beings (maybe a quarterly meeting: remember it is a fable). As the story goes, God asks Satan about Job, “what do you think about my servant Job?” Satan responds that Job is only righteous because God has blessed him with such a bubble of good fortune. After a while, God gives permission for Satan to mess up Job's life to test the premise, to see how he does when life crumbles around him. (This may not sound like God to you; frankly I hope it doesn't.)
- ❖ Satan gets to work. Job loses all his possessions, and his ten children die. He becomes covered in disgusting and painful boils at which he picks with a piece of ceramic and is visited by three thoroughly worthless friends.
- ❖ Despite all this, he does not curse God, worshipping and praying instead, claiming that the “lord gives, and the lord takes away.”
- ❖ Finally, though, pushed beyond measure, he curses the day he was born.
- ❖ Then God smacks him around verbally, reminding him that he, a mere mortal, is nothing compared to God— “where were you, Job, when I formed the world.”
- ❖ And finally at the end of the book, God restores everything Job had, indeed increasing his wealth and giving him new children.

Had I written Job, I would have composed a different ending—no doubt concluding forever its run on the list of the “best books ever written.” I would have ended it with Job still bereft, still living in the reality of a lost fortune and a largely lost family—but living as a man who now understood that he was not alone amid this misfortune but held in the loving arms of God, made whole simply by the presence and love of God. In my story there would be no claim that God caused such calamities to test Job. I don't think that God tests us, and I certainly don't think that God deputizes

some devilish creature to do so. Life tests us, and God gets blamed for it. But God sustains us. Like the original Job, the Job of my novel would not be a Pollyanna; far from it, he would weep and wail with each new disastrous event, but he would cease asking why because he has found not God's will in the events themselves but God's presence in his life, a presence so sustaining to him that nothing could ever separate him from God, a presence that even engenders joy in the midst of the pain.

It was Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote the seminal book of the modern age on this issue, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. You may recall that he knew in a deeply personal way great loss. One of his children died at the age of 13 after an arduous illness. Many years after the publishing of his blockbuster book, the rabbi reported that a faithful person said to him, "Don't you think it is possible that you went through the loss of your son so that you might write this book which has brought comfort to millions of people?" Rabbi Kushner said, "No, not at all. If that was God's plan, it was a bad bargain; and I wouldn't want to deal with a God like that."

Nor would I; and, yet, in the shambles of the broken moment, even theologically sophisticated people find themselves wondering, "Why, why is this happening to me?" Most of the times we catch ourselves before saying the remainder of what we are feeling but we feel it nonetheless: "I am a faithful person, I give, I love my neighbor, I go to church, I seek to know and follow Christ. I try to do it all right. Why, O Lord, is this happening to me?" I've been there, and I bet you have; and if you haven't, I can almost guarantee that you will be at some point. We struggle this way because we have, or more correctly religion has, given God a bad rap, the notion that God has caused whatever is occurring or even worse that everything happens for reason. That is not true. Forcing that kind of believe rather than making us faithful has caused many of us to turn from God, sometimes forever.

Suffering happens. Christians—people of any faith—are not exempt from the natural give and take of life; and I have never seen a scrap of evidence that either grace or punishment is retributive. Retribution in either direction—reward or punishment—is a human concept, not the creation or desire of God. The question is not why; it is not why God let this happen to me; it is not what is God trying to teach me. The only authentic question is "why not me?" I'm human, and the human experience is one of suffering *and* joy and all stops in between. This is the crux of my theology, and I believe it with all my heart; but it is hard, really, hard. There's a little boy inside me that still wants to believe that God has a magic wand, poised and ready. But nothing about life, as I know it, supports that proposition, and for the church to maintain an authentic voice in this world, we must get honest about what we are offering or more correctly get honest about what God is offering.

One might ask, what good is God to us. If God is not in the business of delivering us from our troubles, what kind of God is God? Many people do not agree; they claim that God is utterly and traditionally powerful, that God chooses to intervene in some circumstances and not in others, curing some and not others, spreading riches here and not there, and that what looks like capriciousness is not but wisdom much beyond ours. If that works for you, I shall not argue. I do, however, passionately argue for another kind of Almighty power, a power that can transform the most impossible situation, not by removing it, but by walking with us through it. I've seen it: so many witnesses to this incredible power, people who have suffered unspeakable sadness and loss, who after a long time of grief and the emotions that go with it have not only survived but have known joy again. I cling to it; in fact, my faith rests upon it.

Grace and goodness depend upon a good God, not on a good outcome. Suffering happens, and my faith is that the presence of God is enough—*always* enough to sustain us. It will not fail us.

In the name of God: AMEN.