DIFFICULT LIFE LESSONS –PART FOUR
Scripture: Mark 10:46-52 and Job 42:1-17

FOCUS: God does not promise all the answers to our difficult life issue, god does call us to faithful living and to loving service.

Today we come to the conclusion of our journey through that odd little book, Job. We have followed our protagonist from having been incredibly blessed down to the very depths of despair. We have looked in horror upon his scab covered body as he sat in the ashes and scraped festering sores with a piece of broken pottery. We have heard the voice of his wife as she advises him, disgust in her voice, to simply curse God and die. Then she apparently disappeared.

Left alone on a pile of ashes Job was visited by a trio of caring friends. We were impressed as they sat in silence for a full seven days simply offering the gift of presence to one who desperately needed it. Finally Job broke the silence and expressed his despair, lamenting the fact that he had ever been born, proclaiming his faithfulness and questioning the suffering he had endured. He asked the questions we all want to ask when we encounter apparently undeserved suffering. Why? Who? How? Though Job was never made aware of it, we readers know that the suffering was actually at the hands of the satanic accuser. God **allowed** Job to be tested, but the tester was the one called the accuser, the adversary.

We know what Job, his wife and his friends didn’t, that he was absolutely correct in claiming his suffering was not of his own making. It didn’t seem to matter to his wife, she was just disgusted and had no use for him in his current condition. The friends, on the other hand, were compassionate but misguided. They just couldn’t look beyond what they had always been taught by the elders and by tradition, that if something bad happened to you it was the direct result of something bad you had done, tit for tat was the name of the game. So began a lengthy back and forth between Job and his friends.

The friends began gently enough, asking Job to just think back and to try to uncover the source of his demise. But Job wasn’t buying what they were selling. Eventually the disagreement escalated as the friends continued to insist there had to be a clear cause and effect while Job refused to budge from his assertion that he had done nothing worthy of his calamity.

In an oh so human reaction the friends finally gave up on Job. They refused to argue any longer and self-righteously proclaimed that they were in the right and that Job was being self-righteous. Ouch! I don’t know about you, but that scenario makes me more than a little uncomfortable. Self-righteousness is epidemic these days. And few if any of us have been inoculated! We are pretty skilled at seeing those proverbial specks in our brothers and sisters eyes as we look out upon them with eyes sporting logs. And we can be pretty arrogant when we are convinced we are right, whether facts bear us out or not. The three fiends had their answer and they were not going to be confused by the facts. Aren’t we all in danger of falling into the same trap?

Your see Job was speaking the truth, he was expressing his anger, defending his character and questioning the prevailing logic of the day. But what Job said didn’t fit in the neat little box in which Eliphaz, Zophar and Bildad carried around their prepackaged version of truth. They were a bit like many folks today who form often strong opinions based on information coming from a single political or theological perspective with which they agree. We have becoming a people who don’t really think critically. We just cut, past and post things which don’t challenge our “in the box” notions. We watch only one cable news network, we get newsfeeds from either left leaning or right leaning outlets and scoff at anything that is reported from the other side. We don’t think, we don’t ponder we just repeat. After all isn’t that so much easier than having to honestly confront thorny questions.

But Job had to move beyond accepted wisdom, for he knew that it was not wisdom at all. He knew because he was the one face to face with the stark reality that, for whatever reason, he was afflicted without cause. We met a fourth friend last week, Elihu. I really like this guy. He didn’t take sides, he pointed out flaws in the logic of both Job and the other friends. We have already identified the flaw which afflicted the friends, their refusal to consider any facts which were inconvenient. But what about Job, where was he at fault. We will focus on that among other things today. The bottom line comes down to the fact that Job was looking at his situation and making assumptions about God and how God works based on his very human perspective. Job, like us, looks at suffering and would prefer not to have to deal with it. He, like us, wants an explanation and if at all possible, someone to blame.

Elihu really offer Job an answer, rather he points him to the awesome power and wonder of God and to the incomprehensible vastness of the created order. He encourages Job to put aside the need to have answers and leads him to ponder that which he can understand, that which he can see. He challenges Job to look at things from God’s perspective and to stop expecting God to see things from Job’s perspective. That is a radical recommendation which forces those who will embrace it to rethink this whole thing of living as God’s people. It calls for us to be far more cautious about telling God what we want out of God and to be far more intentional about simply standing in awe of God and allowing God to do to us what God will, to lead where God seeks to lead us, as we remain faithful as did Job.

As New Testament folk such thinking ought to be second nature. I have said, probably more times than you wanted to hear it, that Jesus came to show us what God is like and to show us what we are called to be like. And what we see there is radical. Jesus doesn’t answer all our questions. He doesn’t explain suffering, he just tells us to pick up our crosses and to follow him. He doesn’t promise us lots of stuff, he tells us to give what we have to the poor. He doesn’t tell us to focus our attention on the sins of others, he warns us that only those who are sinless ought to be casting stones at others. He doesn’t tell us to read up on all the latest self help gimmicks, he tells us that the first will be last and that rather than climbing ladders of success we should be serving the least, the last and the lost, folks like Bartimaeus.

Let’s look for a moment at the Gospel text we have read this morning. Jesus and the disciples were leaving Jericho on their way to Jerusalem for what would become Holy Week. They had gathered a rather large crowd of hangers on. As they passed by Bartimaeus called out. ***“Mercy, have mercy on me.”*** Many in the crowd were disgusted by the audacity of the pitiful blind beggar. They were accustomed to ignoring him, for he was an unwelcomed distractions and not good for property values as he sat there by the side of the road. The crowd was certain he would be a bother to Jesus. It had been rumored that Jesus was about to do something dramatic in Jerusalem, perhaps even overthrow the roman occupiers. Surely he had no time for this foolish fellow. The people wanted to protect Jesus form the inconvenience

They wanted to protect Jesus. What irony! Those who needed redemption wanted to protect the one who came to rescue them! I’m reminded of a quote I saw this week which really struck a chord with me. As we approach the holiday season I have already begun to hear comments and to see social media posts urging us to keep Christ in Christmas. I wholeheartedly agree with that sentiment. But I think our priorities are often a bit misplaced as we proclaim our desire so loudly. I fear we are making that Job mistake, seeing things from our perspective. I think we may be a bit like that crowd on the road which wanted to protect Jesus. You see that really isn’t our job. Jesus doesn’t need protection, but Jesus does long for changed lives. So I applaud the one who wrote, **“Want to keep Christ in Christmas? Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, forgive the guilty, welcome the unwanted, care for the ill, love your enemies, and do unto others as you would have done unto you.”** You see I don’t think Jesus is nearly as bothered by store clerks who wish us happy holidays as he is bothered by the way we practice unbridled excess while celebrating his birth, all the while ignoring what he taught us after the left the manger.

Those in the crowd were painting the Son of God with their very human brush. Most likely they not only wanted to help Jesus avoid an unpleasant encounter, they were hoping that Jesus would perhaps acknowledge their thoughtfulness, maybe even offer an autograph. But Jesus wasn’t signing any autographs and he wasn’t looking for any favors. Jesus heard the cry of one who was suffering and Jesus responded to the need. We can learn much from the suffering of folks like Job and Bartimaeus.

We are not told how Bartimaeus came to be blind, whether it was something with which he was born, the result of an accident or the product of some disease. We do know that as a result of his condition he was forced to beg for his daily sustenance. What a humiliating existence. Not only must he deal with blindness, he had to endure the smug comments and snooty attitudes of many who passed by each day. He probably never said anything in response to insults, though he certainly wanted to, but he depended on the meager coins that accompanied the remarks. So he remained silent. Like Job he was relegated to sitting quietly surrounded by his unresolved suffering.

Then one day, as he sat in his usual spot, he could hear that a crowd was passing by. He began to hear murmuring but knew better than to ask what the commotion was about, he knew that at best he would get some sarcastic remark meant to keep him firmly in his societal place. So he listened quietly and discerned that Jesus was passing through on his way to Jerusalem. He had heard of Jesus, even knew that they called him Son of David and Bartimaeus had faith that Jesus cared about people like him. So, throwing caution to the wind, he cried out. As he anticipated, the crowd tried to embarrass and silence him. But he was not to be deterred and kept calling out, ***“Son of David, have mercy on me.”***

Then it happened, Jesus stopped in his tracks and sent for Bartimaeus. So someone told him, I suspect with a bit of sarcasm in his voice, ***“Hey it is your lucky day, Jesus is calling you to go to him.”*** Notice the no one offered to help the blind man get there. The crowd just didn’t get it, they didn’t understand who Jesus was or where his priorities lay. Oh, they thought they did, that is why they ignored the beggar and fawned over the one passing through town. Like Job’s three friends they were convinced they knew, but they were wrong.

So bartimaeus comes to Jesus who immediately asks, ***“What do you want me to do for you?”***  Last week we talked about the matter of questions and demands and we faced the difficult truth that we are pretty good at using prayer to ask questions and make demands, we prefer to call them requests, but really they are often more like demands. And we confessed that we are not very good at letting God ask the questions and make demands. Bartimaeus didn’t make demands, he waited for Jesus to ask him the questions. Then, because he was asked, Bartimaeus told Jesus what he desired. And he was granted sight. Why? Because of his faith. Jesus says to him, ***“Go, your faith has made you well.”***  Then we come to the real message here. It is found in the blind beggar’s response to being made whole. Having come face to face with Jesus, he became a follower, we read, ***“he followed Jesus on the way”***. When we meet Jesus we are called to follow and to serve.

What about Job, how does his story end? Having been subjected to a lengthy dissertation by the voice of God which overwhelmed Job with the vastness of God’s power and work, Job gets it. Hear again his response to God. **“I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted.You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge? ‘Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. “You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”**

There is an interesting twist to that last sentence. There are quite a number of different ways that one of the words can be translated. Here we read ***“I repent in dust and ashes.”*** But another possible translation would be, ***“I repent of dust and ashes.”*** I like that, for it implies that Job decided to get up out of the dirt, put aside his anger move forward with his life despite all his burdens. Now that he had put aside the theology and teachings he had been fed, once he truly encountered God, Job, like Bartimaeus, was ready to do God’s work. Here ends the story of Job.

But wait, you say, we never got to the best part, the part where Job got all his stuff back and once again experienced the good life. I really wish that was not there. It was not there to begin with. It is almost universally accepted by biblical scholars that the happy ending was a later addition. That says volumes about our human nature, we just can’t seem to get past the need to have everything turn out the way **we** think it should. But as we have all experienced, God doesn’t take away all our suffering. God doesn’t reverse all our setbacks. God doesn’t fix all our problems. And God doesn’t answer all our questions. But we can rest upon the assurance that if we will keep the faith and trust in the God who is more than we can fully comprehend, God will be with us and will see us through even the darkest valleys.

Will we still have questions, sure we will. It is still OK to ask them. We will still have trial, everybody does. But like Job, if we will stop and consider who God is, if we will make time to listen to God in prayer, we will encounter God one on one and we will discover that God is always with us and does care, and we will no longer need all the answers. That my friend is faith.

For your sake, for the sake of a world which seems to be asking all the wrong questions and for the sake of the kingdom of the one who seeks to ask us a few, let it be so. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN