Difficult Life Lessons – Part One
Scripture: Job 1:1-2:10

Focus: Like Job, we will all encounter difficult times and hard situations but we must remain faithful for our ultimate reward comes in the next life.

I have mentioned before that Job is, in one way, my favorite book of the Bible. That does not mean that it has the most important of all theological messages, though it is filled with much godly truth. Unlike the gospels, if we took Job out of the Bible we would still have all the important pieces of our theology. I would never advise that someone unfamiliar with scripture who is seeking to understand our Christian faith begin by looking at Job! About the only thing I can think of that would be more effective in confusing and alienating such a soul would be to have them begin their spiritual journey with Leviticus.

That being said, what I really appreciate about the story found within this book is the way it tackles some of the most difficult of human questions in an open and honest way. Ironically, while Job is not one of those books with which people have much experience, we hear it referenced in all sorts of places by folks both in and out of the church. Everyone knows of the patience of Job. Well as we move through the next couple of weeks we will find that the popular notion may not be all that accurate. We will discover that like all of us, Job is capable of losing his patience, with God.

Most, if not all, of us who are gathered here this morning have been wrestling with the meaning of life as children of God for a while. We have read the gospels, we have celebrated the wonder of God’s grace, and we have sought to live a true children of God. We know the basics, the call to be good people, to model our lives after the example of Christ. And we find hope and comfort in the assurance that eternal salvation can be ours.

Yet despite our faith, we all still have questions. I certainly do. And we are all still learning, or at least ought to be. So for the next three weeks we will be spending this time looking at the hard questions we find in Job and dispelling some of the myths about both this story and our faith. Randolph Harris, a Presbyterian pastor in Winston Salem writes, ***“The book of Job is a complex work, exploring the intricate intersection of divine sovereignty, human faith and innocent suffering. It is also a troubling work, troubling for the unsettling questions it poses to a neatly arranged tidy faith. And yet the preacher would do well to grapple with its difficult questions for the sake of questioning the easy, feel-good faith that is too often proclaimed in place of gospel news.”*** So, are you ready to grapple? Let’s do it!

I encourage you to read the whole book sometime this week if possible, but if not at least read the lectionary passage from Job listed in your bulletin for next week. But have no fear if you don’t get around to reading. I will make sure you get the essence of the story in our times together here. As we begin, a word of caution. There are all kinds of things we could find ourselves bogged down in if we allowed ourselves to be. We could discuss whether Job was a historical figure or not. We could join the scholars in a drawn out analysis of the date and place of the story. And like all of them we would not be able to come to a firm conclusion. We could argue over the nature of Satan in the story. By the way we will talk about that this morning. It wouldn’t do much good to try to determine who wrote it, for almost all scholars agree we don’t know. In the end none of those things are what really matters. What does matter is how we wrestle with some hard issues and how we come to see God’s hand at work in them.

The book begins with a bit of exaggeration. We are told that Job was blameless and upright, feared God and turned away from evil. To be sure Job was a good man, a loving family man and faithful to God. But Job was a man, nothing more and nothing less. As such there was at least some sin in his life, and even the most saintly folks I know do, on occasion, turn toward evil and can be blamed. The truth is not that Job was perfect, but that he was very good and that he sought to follow God in all that he did. In the part of the first chapter we didn’t read we find that everything was going Job’s way. He had a great family, seven sons and three daughters. His wealth was massive, his herd numbered in the thousands. He was well respected, known throughout the land as one of the good guys.

His children apparently got along well with each other. We are told that they often would gather at one another’s homes for festive times of celebration. Job must have suspected that the kids were not always as well behaved as he would have liked on such occasions. So after their gatherings were over Job would offer a sacrifice for each child, just in case one or more of them had enjoyed themselves a bit too much during the party. Life was good for Job and for his family. Everything was going just great.

Having set the earthly scene we are taken by the writer up into the heavenly realm. We are told that there was a gathering of the heavenly beings, the Hebrew actually calls them “sons of God”. The nature and purpose of the gathering is not revealed. We are told that Satan came as well. We need to unpack his appearance a bit. For most of us we hear the name and immediately think, ***“Oh, they are talking about the devil.”*** Now the identity and nature of the devil is a matter we could spend days debating, but we will not go there today. For the most part, when we speak of the devil we are talking about that force of evil which is in constant combat with the forces of good. But that understanding had not been developed at the time Job was written.

Did you notice in the verses we read, in which we find identical language to that in this first chapter, that it appears Satan is a part of the heavenly tribe? God asks where he has been and there is no indication that the others are surprised or upset that he shows up there with them. So what is up here? The key is understanding exactly what the word translated Satan actually means. Missing from many English translations is an important article. We should read “the Satan”, if we are going to use Satan at all. But far more accurate would be to read “the adversary” or “the accuser.” So, ironically, we might say that Satan is, in this story, a sort of heavenly devil’s advocate, one charged with looking at things from a contrarian perspective, one whose purpose to ask hard questions.

In these early chapters we have a back and forth between God and the accuser. God asks what Satan has been doing and he replies that he has been checking things out down on earth. God wonders if he has checked up on Job, then repeats the characterization of Job from the first verse. ***“Job is the best, none like him, a blameless, upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.”*** You have to love Satan’s devilish response. In The Message he says ***“So do you think Job does all that out of the sheer goodness of his heart? Why, no one ever had it so good! You pamper him like a pet, make sure nothing bad ever happens to him or his family or his possessions, bless everything he does – he can’t lose.”***

The advisory implies that Job is only a good guy in response to being blessed. He argues that faithful folks like Job are only that way as long as things are going well. Both in verse one and again as God speaks to the accuser about Job we find mention of Job being a God fearing man. So what does it mean to be a God fearer? John Calvin spoke of two kinds of religious fear, servile, or slave like fear, and what he called proper fear. Servile fear of God is based on dread and focused on self. Like those trapped in slavery, if we are not careful, we might find ourselves doing everything we can to avoid breaking any rules or upsetting our Master out of nothing more than fear of being punished. Sermons filled with hellfire and damnation play to servile fear which is all about self-preservation and which generally makes for a very unhappy life.

But God does not demand that we become slaves, willing servants yes, but not slaves. There is a huge difference. As willing servants we come to know that proper fear of God which Calvin teaches is marked by respect and reverence for God. In response we, like Job, will live lives marked by turning away from evil and doing good, not so that we can escape punishment, but because we seek to live godly lives in response to the love of God, no matter what we face, good or bad in this life.

The adversary is convinced that Job’s fear is that servile kind, in his case based on dread, not of punishment so much as of losing all that he has. Satan is certain that Job’s faithfulness is dependent on his good fortune. So he declares that if Job were to lose all his stuff, and perhaps his family as well, he would certainly curse God to God’s face and prove his real character. So the stage is set and God allows the Satan to take away all of it, wealth, children, livestock, everything. God allows Satan. As we struggle with this issue of pain and suffering, especially undeserved pain and suffering it is important to note that God does allow it. It is also important to recognize that while, for some reason God, has chosen to allow there to be inexplicable hardship, it is not God who is its author, Satan is.

I don’t understand why good people have to suffer. Oh, most of the time there is a fairly simple answer. We bring much of our suffering on ourselves by making foolish choices. But there is still that other kind of suffering, the terminal illness of one who has lived a healthy lifestyle and served Christ all his life, the job lost through no fault of her own, simply the unfortunate fallout of corporate downsizing, the debilitating confusion of a beloved spouse or parent. I don’t understand, but I cling to the notion that God doesn’t like those situations any more than do we, nor do those things come as punishment from an angry God.

I think Job would agree. In chapter one we read of his response to having discovered that at one of the family gatherings a mighty wind blew in from the desert destroying the house and killing all of his children. Not only did he receive this horrible news, he had already lost all of his livestock to various marauding tribes. He was basically bankrupt and his family, save for his wife, were gone. But when Job received the news of the tragic storm we are told that he tore his robe and shaved his head, the appropriate rituals of mourning. But that was not all, he fell on the ground and worshipped. We are told that through it all he neither sinned nor blamed God. Now that is proper fear of God.

In the portion of the second chapter which we read this morning we find the second installment of Job’s suffering. The scene in heaven is the same, same players, same questions and same affirmation of Job’s integrity by God. Of course Satan has a comeback. ***“OK, sure, people will give up all they have if they are just able to save their lives. But let his health be taken away and see if this Job guy doesn’t curse you then.”*** Again God allowed Satan to carry out his plan, only insisting that Job survive. So Job became leprous, sores from head to foot. He would not only have endured the pain and frustration of his illness but he would have been forced to avoid contact with others, so we find him sitting in the ashes of a trash heap scraping his sores with a piece of broken pottery.

As he sits there his wife comes to offer moral support, or not. She is disgusted both by the appearance of her husband and by his refusal to be broken by his circumstances. So she suggests that he simply curse God and die. Here for the first time we encounter what will become a recurring theme as we read Job’s story, misguided advice offered by others in response to his suffering. There is a message here for us all. We don’t have all the answers, don’t always understand all situations, and sometimes just keeping our mouths shut is a pretty good option, especially if we can’t come up with anything to say that will help the situation. Who could blame the wife for being disgusted and distraught? But that is no excuse, what she had to say was certainly of no help, nor was it said out of compassion. We will hear nothing more of her, she must have simply washed her hands of the situation when Job refused to follow her suggestion.

He didn’t just refuse, he set her straight. ***“You are speaking foolishness. I’m not about to give up and I certainly am not going to curse my God.”*** Then he offered that profound and piercing question which is at the heart of our first difficult life lesson. ***“Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?”*** Job understood that servile fear of God is no good. We are not called to be good to avoid encountering the bad, for it will come to all of us. Rather we are called to, like Job, have a healthy, proper fear of God marked by respect, reverence and a willingness to endure even the suffering we cannot understand, trusting that God will never abandon us.

Way back in the nineteenth century a Presbyterian pastor, James Finley, summed up this whole matter pretty well with these words, ***"If we are absolutely grounded in the absolute love of God that protects us from nothing even as it sustains us in all things, then we can face all things with courage and tenderness and touch the hurting places in others and in ourselves with love."*** That is proper fear of God. For your sake, for the sake of all the hurting people and for the sake of the kingdom of the one who knows all our sorrows, may we come now to the table empowered, humbled and in the proper fear of God. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.