DIFFICULT LIFE LESSONS – PART TWO
Scripture: Job 23:1-17

FOCUS: God allows us to ask the heard questions, but the answer only comes in God’s own time and may not fully satisfy our mortal minds, because God’s ways are not our ways.

As we wrestle with Job we are drawn to some thorny theological questions. You know the ones, for you have surely asked them in your mind, if not out loud, as have I. If God is a God of love, indeed a God who is portrayed simply as love in 1st John, why does God allow us to know unexplained pain and suffering? If God is a God of justice, as we are told in scripture, why do innocent and vulnerable people suffer? If God is in control in this world, why does he let too much rain fall in some places and not enough in others?

We have questions, and we want answers, now! Ours is a culture steeped in the rational influence of the Enlightenment. We believe that if we look hard enough, and work at it long enough, or at least consult Google, we can find an answer to even the most difficult question. We have almost convinced ourselves that we have within us the analytical power to seek out, find and neatly package well-reasoned explanations for every question and every event in our lives.

But deep inside we know that is not really the case. There are things we cannot understand. The inclusion of the book of Job in the Bible stands as a reminder to the church, and to each of us who are the church, that things are not always as simple as we may want to believe, that there are unanswered questions which may remain unanswered. Yet we can come to experience the wonderful truth that amid the complexity, in spite of the questions which remain, God is present. So let’s see what Job has to teach us this morning about unanswered questions and godly faith.

Before we get to our text think back to last week and then let’s fill in the blanks between that text today’s. Last week we learned that Satan was allowed by God to inflict suffering on Job as a test Satan argued that the only reason Job was faithful was because he had everything he could possibly desire. So God allowed Satan to take it all away, family, material wealth, even Job’s health. Job is afflicted with leprosy. Last week we left him alone on a pile of ashes scraping the sores which covered his body with a piece of broken pottery.

As he sits there three close friends come to bring consolation and comfort. It was a wonderful gesture, one that only true loving friends would have dared make. They were putting themselves at risk by even approaching him in his condition. Quite possibly, had the authorities known they were with him, the three would have, at best, been forced to self-quarantine themselves for a while to insure they were not also afflicted. When they found they Job they tore their robes and threw dust in the air over their heads, proper signs of mourning and then sat silently with him for a seven full days.

There is a lesson in compassion and nurture here. First of all, the three were genuinely concerned for their dear friend. They joined together and traveled some distance to support him. It was probably not all that convenient, they surely had responsibilities at home. But their friend needed them, so they made a way to go. They put feet to their friendship and took a risk. It was a selfless act, the risky kind of action to which God calls us all. As they arrived sat silently in the dirt with their friend. Words could not be found, and words were not necessary. For seven days they just sat on the ground there with Job in solidarity with him.

Now I doubt many of us have ever sat silently for seven days, much less in the company of one who is suffering. But there is an important lesson here. Many of us have found ourselves in situations with folks facing suffering or loss. We may well have had a hard time knowing what to say. The friends show us that sometimes there don’t need to be words, sometimes presence, silence and empathy are just what folks need. Sometimes, as we will see later, words, especially words filled with platitudes only make matters worse.

Finally Job speaks. He stands firmly by his innocence and proclaims he wishes he had never been born.Who could blame Job? He wonders why he is being kept around in such a wretched state and longs to simply be put out of his misery. We are told he laments that the thing he most fears has come upon him, that what he has dreaded has overtaken him. I wonder what he was talking about, we are not told. The obvious answer, especially seen through the filter of twenty first century American ideals, would be to assume he was talking about having lost everything including his own health. But we will come to see that, perhaps, that was not at all what he meant.

The silence having been broken by Job his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar take turns sparing verbally with Job concerning his suffering. None of the four were quite sure how to deal with the situation. They are up against a universal human problem, how to deal with what appears to be unmerited pain and suffering. They are all asking the same questions, the questions we ask when we consider the problem of suffering. Why is this happening? What does it mean? How are we to cope, what can we do?

We see pictures of the unprecedented flooding in the Carolinas and we ask, “Why?” We see good, innocent people being gunned down while simply seeking to better themselves by getting an education, and we ask “What does this mean?” We go to the doctor and get news we didn’t want to hear, news that is going to significantly impact our lives, and we ask, “What can I do to cope?”

Job and his three friends are all struggling to find meaning in what seems to be a meaningless situation. They are all confronted by that nagging question, “Why?” They all seek to make sense of suffering, to find meaning in the horrors of what Job has encountered. But they are coming to the situation with completely different perspectives. The friends, who are not directly affected, approach the situation rationally, from an emotional distance. They were genuinely concerned for their friend, but his suffering was not theirs.

A word here about compassion. Have you ever been going through a challenging time and encountered a well-meaning soul who assures you that they know exactly how you feel? Have you ever said that to someone who is struggling through hardship or loss? If you have, I understand that you meant well, I’m certain that I have said those words or similar myself, when I couldn’t figure out what to say. Over the years I have come to understand that sometimes silence in such situations is just what the doctor, or more accurately what the Spirit ordered. So do me, and those suffering souls you are bound to encounter a favor, don’t say such things. Sometimes words just don’t work.

It is one thing to be concerned for folks, it is quite another to declare that you know what they are going through, even if you have had a similar experience. I think of words of comfort offered to those who have lost loved ones. Most of us have been their. Many of us have lost parents, some have lost children others have lost spouses. But there is no one right or appropriate way to react, and none of us will react in exactly the same way. While we can certainly identify with the general feeling of lose which comes, there is no way we can know how others are coping or how they feel. And when we are suffering we generally do not want to be told people know what we are experiencing. We want to know we are thought of and loved and that is enough. That is what we most need. We probably will not remember most words that were spoken, but lives shared will be remember for a long time.

As is so often the case when surveying a situation from the outside, it was going to be rather easy for Job’s friends to offer logical advice to the one who was suffering. For them there was but one answer. It was universally accepted wisdom in that day that all suffering was directly and inevitably linked to sin and was required by God as restitution. So for the well-meaning friends it was a no brainer, Job is suffering because he is guilty. That would pretty much be the response of the three again and again. Their attitude reminds me of an old Jimmy buffet song from the late eighties. The chorus incudes these words, “***That's my story and I'm stickin' to it. That's my life and all that I've got.”*** For the friends there was but one answer. So it became their mission to make the facts fit the predetermined answer, never a good way to approach a problem.

 Job’s struggle is different. He knows that his level of suffering is not reasonably justified. And the stock answer he is expected to accept just doesn’t work for him. We need to remember that Job doesn’t know, and never will know that the suffering he has endured came at the hand of the accuser, Satan. God allowed it, but it was Satan who applied it. Job does not know all that so he cries out in agony, lamenting that, given his level of suffering, he is still living and expressing his frustration that God seems to be silent offering no answer to his cries.

His request is more than reasonable. He simply seeks an audience with God so that he might make his case and receive some sort of an answer. His suffering is incomprehensible and Job wants to discuss the situation. His complaint is not so much about his situation as about the silence. He is having what John of the Cross referred to as the dark night of the soul. That is not to say that Job had lost his faith. That is not what the dark night is all about. The dark night is that inexplicable time when we encounter stuff we just can’t figure out, but maintain our faith all the same, accepting that despite how things might look, God remains in control.

That doesn’t mean that we must simply become stoic and accept without questioning. As we have already seen, during his dark night Job had questions, and was more than a bit emotional. His issue with God was that he couldn’t seem to get through to ask the questions. So he kept asking and never lost faith. We will see next week that eventually, in God’s own time he will get an answer. In the meantime, in stark contrast to the cliché touting the patience of Job, Job actually became rather impatient. He lost patience with his friends and he lost patience with God. In his response to Zophar in chapter twenty-one he asks rhetorically, ***“Why shouldn’t I be impatient?”***  Then in chapter twenty-two Eliphaz, sticking to the party line, insists that folks don’t suffer unless they have transgressed and encourages Job to simply accept that notion so that he might be at peace with God. The friend then declares that if he will do so Job will be restored.

At this point Job has heard enough so he speaks eloquently from his heart and soul. In The Message he responds, ***“I’m completely in the dark, I’m not letting up-I’m standing my ground. My complaint is legitimate. God has no right to treat me like this-it isn’t fair! If I knew where on earth to find him, I’d go straight to him. I’d lay my case before him face-to-face, give him all my arguments firsthand. I’d find out what he’s thinking, discover what’s going on in his head.”***

Three things stand out to me in his words, and they offer three important lessons for us as we ponder life’s difficult lessons. First Job confesses that he is in the dark, that he does not have an answer concerning his suffering. Unlike his friends, he doesn’t simply spout the predetermined line about sin and suffering. Secondly he stands his ground. But his response is not simply a matter of stubbornness as is so often the case when we stand our ground. He stood his ground because he knew that he had a legitimate complaint, because he had sought to live the life to which God had called him. Likewise, when we have lived godly lives we too have the right to stand our ground. Finally Job declares his willingness to take his complaint directly to God. We learn from Job, that when we have a legitimate complaint, and the key word here is legitimate, we have the right to take it directly to God. Of course as Job has already discovered, God’s answer doesn’t always come when we would like for it to. It comes in God’s own time. And it may not satisfy our mortal curiosities, for God’s ways are not our ways. .

The lectionary text for today from the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that we have what the author calls a high priest, who is able to sympathize with what we go through, because he has been through unimaginable human suffering himself. The faithful to whom the letter was written were charged to approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that they might receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Job approached with boldness. There can be no mistaking that. Time and time again his friends sought to have him buckle under and adopt the party line. Yet Job knew that line was, at least in his case, not true. He did not have an answer for his suffering, but he knew that the explanation being repeated ad nausium by his well-meaning friends was simply not it, so he persevered, he boldly kept going to the throne even though he was not getting answers.

In Hebrews the author did not say that by boldly approaching God’s throne we would get all the answers we desired. We are told that we will find mercy and grace there. The last verse of our morning’s text has been translated in a lot of different ways. I like these words from the NIV, ***“Yet I am not silenced by the darkness, by the thick darkness that covers my face.”*** When Job goes through that dark night he continues to speak his mind, but he never loses faith. He confesses fear, yet he holds fast to a faith which allows him to say, as he sits on the ash heap, scarping his sores with a broken piece of pottery, being scolded by his confused friends, ***“I cannot see him, but he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me I shall come out as gold.”*** Job’s was a bold faith which sustained him even in the midst of suffering and questioning.

For your sake, for the sake of a world more in need of mercy and grace than answers and for the sake of the kingdom of the One whose ways are more wonderful than our ways, may your faith be so bold during dark nights and bright days alike. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.