

Sermon: D: None of the Above

Year B, Proper 7

[Job 38:1-11](#); [Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32](#); [2 Corinthians 6:1-13](#); [Mark 4:35-41](#)

Offered June 21, 2015 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH
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How many of you have heard that the Book of Job is about when bad things happen to good people? Do we really need a book of the Bible to tell us bad things happen to good people? We live in a world after all, when the minister of the Brookline Community Church can write her Sunday sermon at the same time that the pastor of the Emmanuel AME church in Charleston gets ready for Wednesday night Bible study. This can't possibly be some ancient insight that, indeed, bad things happen to good people.

Step through the Book of Job with me. Chapters 1 & 2: we learn that Job was a truly good man to whom truly bad things happen: he loses his property, his children, his health, everything. Chapters 3 to 37: Job has four, well, let's call them friends, but with friends like them, who needs enemies, who come to tell him that, in fact, bad things happen to bad people. He must not be able to remember the bad things he has done. Chapters 38 (the one from today's reading) to 41: God tells Job that Job is in no position to challenge God. Chapter 42: Job agrees and has his former life restored to him.

If this is a book about bad things happening to good people, then the lesson we should draw, based on the page count alone, is that when bad things happen to good people, the friends of the good people show up to help figure out why the good people deserved it. No one needs a sacred text to tell them that.

So what is the Book of Job about? Job spends 35 chapters telling his friends that he has lived a righteous life, that he has lived in right relationship with God, God's creation and the community that Job is a part of. Job spends 35 chapters saying that he believes in a just God. Job spends 35 chapters saying that he can't find a way to reconcile the two.

So perhaps the Book of Job is about something like, "given that bad things happen to good people all the time, why be righteous?¹ why remain in the right relationship with God?" Because throughout the whole Book of Job, Job is unrelentingly faithful to God. He's snippy. He's a bit whiny at times. But he is absolutely tenacious of his faith.

In today's reading from Mark, something really bad happens to some apparently good people. The disciples and Jesus are coming from a long day of teaching, a day that included the Parable of the Mustard Seed that we heard last week. They have been besieged by an enormous crowd, so they get in a boat and head to the side of the lake which is mostly gentile, where a Jewish teacher can expect to get some rest.

Remember that the disciples have just been called. A day or two before, most of them were fishermen on this same body of water. If they were like the vast majority of men of that period, they lived and died in the towns they were born in, following in their father's profession. They may have been rookies at proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God, but they were pros at handling a boat on that lake, coming from a long line of men who had seen every kind of weather

¹ Tom Are Jr, "Job 38:1-7" *Interpretation* 53, no. 3 (July 1999): 294.

that lake could throw at them. Yet the windstorm was so ferocious, such a terrible thing, that the only thing these good people could do was to wake up the carpenter asleep in the stern.²

Jesus says to the wind, “Peace, Be Still.” The storm dies away. In this moment where the world goes from pure chaos to ordered reality, Jesus shows who he is. He is the God of Genesis who moved over the face of the deep and brought the land from the chaos of the waters (Genesis 1:2, 6). He is the God of Job who shut in the waters with doors when it burst out from the womb, who wrapped the sea in clouds and prescribed bounds for it and set bars and doors and said, “thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped.” (Job 38:8-11). Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit are one in three and three in one. In this moment on the Sea of Galilee, we, the readers of the Gospel of Mark, see Jesus and God as one.

But the disciples don’t. They have found Jesus so compelling that they have done something that the long lines of the fishermen before them have never done, they left their nets. They had spent a whole day hearing Jesus telling parables to the crowd about faith starting as small as a mustard seed. They have seen him drive out a demon and take on the scribes. As good people there was a very bad thing happening to them, threatening their very existence, and then, miraculously, it was gone. Of all people in all times, these disciples have the best chance of correctly identifying Jesus for who he is. But the best they can do is come up with “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” They have the right answer staring them in the face and they pick “D: None of the above”.

Jesus knows what the problem is, when he wakes to their terror. He calms the storm and then turns and asks, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (Mark 4:40). He doesn’t say that there isn’t anything to fear.³ It was a dangerous storm. From everything we can see in the story, the experts, the fishermen knew what was going to happen. They were going to perish. Jesus doesn’t deny that reality. But he also doesn’t deny the reality that faith takes away some of the fear in the face of that reality. Fear clogs up your brain and your muscles.⁴ Fear freezes the words in your mouth so you can’t ask for help or build on the suggestions of others. Faith takes on fear so that people can face the bad thing that is happening to them.

Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus does miracles. After he does them, he either tells people to keep quiet or they simply don’t believe he’s the Son of God. Mark’s message again and again is not to look for Jesus in miracles.⁵ Look for Jesus in the every day. Next week we’ll hear a story about Jesus healing someone miraculously, but in the most every day way imaginable. Look for Jesus in the every day. Jesus’ disciples experienced a miracle, their bodies felt the shift from a wind torn boat, driven almost on its beam ends, to a ship bobbing on a calm sea waiting for them to cast their nets. They couldn’t identify him through the miracle. They couldn’t identify him through their everyday life with him. But as readers of the Gospel of Mark, we can.

² Efrain Agosto, “Proper 7, Exegetical Perspective, Mark4:35-41” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 165.

³ Michael L. Lindvall, “Proper 7, Pastoral Perspective, Mark4:35-41” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 166.

⁴ Agosto, 169.

⁵ William F. McInerny, “An Unresolved Question in the Gospel Called Mark: ‘Who Is This Whom Even Wind and Sea Obey?’ (4:41)”, *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 23, no. 3 (September 1996): 268.

How come? Because we bring our faith to the reading. We look at the same story that unfolded around the disciples and we can see things in it that they, who experienced it, could not.⁶

In today's reading from Mark, we see something really bad happening to good people. They have to answer the same question Job does, given that bad things happen to good people, why remain in right relationship with God, God's creation and each other. One answer from today's story in Mark is that faith confronts fear. It does not deny that there is something frightening happening, but it does give those who have faith another way to keep in touch with the resources around them.

It takes a while to shake off fear and think clearly, so perhaps that's why the disciples ask each other, "who is this?" rather than going directly to the source and asking Jesus who he is. Job has been talking to his friends and railing at God for 35 chapters. Suddenly, out of the whirlwind, God answers Job directly. Given that bad things happen to good people, why should Job remain in right relationship with God? God speaks in poetry describing Creation, its foundations, its cornerstone, all put in place when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy. (Job 38:6-7)

What kind of an answer is that? Well, it is God's answer. Job doesn't completely understand it. No one completely understands it. We won't completely understand it. That's why it remains in our holy Scriptures. Because it is God's answer and it calls for our understanding. But if Job can gird up his loins like a man, like fathers have done throughout time when there was something hard to be done, then we can too.

Job has made the same argument for 35 chapters. In the three chapters of God's reply, God *never* disputes that Job is a good man and God never disputes that God is just. Instead, God returns again and again to Creation and God's role as Creator. God indisputably created so that we may be a part of Creation.⁷ Jesus witnessed to us that we are God's beloved children. Trying to reduce the complexity and suffering of this world to a predictable set of rules is going to lead to 35 chapters of completely missing the point, both by Job and his friends. The suffering and complexity takes place in this world that God created, created out of love, created with poetry. The love and poetry God created with is in us, because we are God's creation as well. Our commitment to righteousness, even in the face of suffering, has to be grounded in that commitment to creation. God was there at the beginning. God is here now. God will be there at the end and beyond any ending of human imagining.

Job was unrelenting in his faith and unrelenting in his questions. We can look at God's answer and be confused or frustrated or simply want more clarification. That can make it easy to overlook that God answered Job and God answers us. The answer may be "D: None of the above" but God remains in loving and poetic relationship with God's creation. That is where our commitment to right relationship has to spring from and return to. We were born out of God's commitment to eternal relationship with God's creation. Our faith, in the face of fear or loss or injustice, must draw on that fundamental commitment to creation.

So we can look at this world where one minister gets to sleep in her bed on Wednesday night and one lies in the morgue and we can give up, saying that there is no point in trying to remain righteous, to remain in right relationship with God and each other. A broken young man can

⁶ McInerny, 268.

⁷ Are, 298.

show up with a gun at any point and in his madness can cause bad things to happen to good people. We can shake our heads and say that God created a complicated world where unspeakable, unthinkable things happen.⁸

For the people killed on Wednesday night, killed by someone whom they presumably welcomed to study the Bible with them, this is as random a bad thing as cancer or an earthquake, as the sufferings of Job. But if we are to remain righteous, we have to be honest. This crime was not unthinkable. It took a great deal of thinking, as much as bank robbery or money laundering. It builds on the real living history of this country, where we have not fully confessed and repented of the sins that result from taking men and women from Africa and enslaving them in this country. It was the ships and sailors and most of all the capital investment from the North that allowed the slave trade to prosper, so we in New England have as much to repent for as anyone living in the South. As long as we allow racism to smolder in our nation, it is not unthinkable that someone who loves his hate so much will think he can begin a race war.

This crime is only unthinkable if we, righteous people who long to remain in right relationship with God and each other, do not think about it. This crime is only unspeakable if we, the righteous, do not speak about it. If we allow others who want to simplify it into a simple set of cause and effect about guns or mental illness or state's rights or religious freedom or pure campaign politics, if we allow them to strip it of the complexity that all of us thinking, speaking, believing, praying people see that it has, then we are not remaining in right relationship with those who have died. Think about what happened at Mother Emmanuel. Speak about what happened at Mother Emmanuel. Talk to those whom you know and love. When others shift the blame, repent and confess, show the world what honest witness looks like.

And pray. Pray that we might live into the gift of creation and the gift of relationship that God has given us when God set the foundations of the earth.

⁸ Charles P. Pierce, "Charleston Shooting: Speaking the Unspeakable, Thinking the Unthinkable." Esquire Politics Blog for June 18, 2015. <http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/politics/news/a35793/charleston-shooting-discussion/> (accessed June 21, 2015).