

## **“FINDING PEACE IN THE ASHES”**

**October 6, 2024**

**Job 1:1, 2:1-10**

Over the years we have moved several times. One of the furniture pieces that has always moved with us is our maple dining room table. It is rectangular with rounded edges in shape. Due to its size and more importantly, the size of doorways, we usually have to remove the table legs in order to get it in the house. This is not difficult. There is one bolt and nut in each corner.

Quite frankly, we do not think much about the table legs unless we are moving. They are underneath the table and mostly out of sight. Although, every now and then, the table gets wobbly, and I need to tighten up those corner bolt nuts. Even though we don't look at the legs of the table, they are essential to its function. If a leg suddenly collapsed the tabletop would hit the floor. There goes dinner! As on most tables, the legs are the main support to the working and eating surface.

My question this morning is what are the legs that your faith is built upon? Is your faith built upon the traditions of your family? Is it built upon the promises of God? Is it built on fear of the end? Is it built upon the idea that if we are faithful, we are guaranteed a happy, successful, and healthy life? Is it built on the superstitious belief that if we do our religion right, we will be spared suffering? Lest we forget, our faith is built on a cross and a suffering Savior. Do we think because Christ suffered, we won't have to? If so, I'm not sure our faith table will be left standing when the

troubles of life come our way. What leg do you stand on? If you don't know then perhaps, we need to read the book of Job.

Unfortunately, most people do not read or study this book. Even the Lectionary reading focuses on the introduction and conclusion chapters. The other 39 chapters are largely neglected. And this is unfortunate because in those chapters we discover the real meat of Job. There is where we find this moving theological dialogue on suffering and faith.

## **I. A BAD YEAR**

You heard about the man who was having a bad day. He gets pulled into a Florida court for disorderly conduct. The judge asked the man what happened. **“Well you honor I rearended a car outside Disney World. The driver got out and I saw he was a dwarf.”** He said to me, **I'm not Happy.**” And I replied, **“Well, which one are you?”** **And that's when the fight began.”**

Everyone has had a bad day. A loved one gets hurt, vacation plans get ruined, a flat tire before work, your check bounces, a project fails, someone hacked your email account, or you spill coffee on your new shirt. Bad days happen. What you don't want is a bad year.

Job is having a bad year. All his children are all killed in a terrible storm, raiders have taken away all his livestock and wealth, and he even loses his health. We find him sitting in the city garbage scraping the sores that cover him from head to toe. Job looks so bad his own friends don't

even recognize him. Life has gone so wrong that his wife encourages him to end it all. Now that is a bad year.

And here's the kicker, Job has done nothing to deserve all this trouble. He is a good man. In fact, the bible states, "**Job was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.**" He had a spotless reputation as an honest and faithful person. Yet, for all his integrity, he appears to be a pawn of heavenly politics. In an instant his stable, fruitful, blessed life is turned upside down, and he is left with nothing but pain and questions.

## **II. RAISING A STINK**

Every now and then a skunk will come around our house, usually between the midnight and 2 AM hours. I know the skunk is out there because of the smell. In fact, the stink can be so bad it wakes me up and burns my eyes. The problem is there is nothing I can do about it, except maybe move to another room in the house where the smell is not so bad.

Then Job's wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die." But he said to her, "**You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive good from God and not receive evil?**" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

It sounds like Job has made peace and accepted his situation. But nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, in the very next chapter he wishes he had never been born! Contrary to what people think Job was not patient. Job is angry and depressed, and we can hardly blame him. He

is feeling helpless, hopeless, and that his life is over. Job is a man in pain and deep grief. God seems to have disappeared and abandoned him. Job is far from patiently bearing his affliction in silence. He is raising a stink. Why God? Where are you God? I don't understand.

Job demands an audience with God. He wants to plead his case. He believes that he is innocent of wrongdoing. Why have all these terrible evils happened to me? I want answers. We feel for Job because many of us have gone through bad years or have witnessed the great suffering of others that is happening every single day. How do we deal with it all and still keep our sanity? Maybe we begin by stopping the blame game.

### **III. JUST DESSERTS**

Isn't that what we like to do. Point the finger at everyone but ourselves. Politicians are famous for it. There is the cause of all our problems, when rarely is the answer that simple. The blame game is a charade because it rarely solves anything. In fact, it often ends up as an excuse to do nothing.

In the book of Job there is no one to blame for the suffering. Not all human suffering is deserved. There isn't always a cause and effect. It is not always due to bad choices. Sometimes there is no rhyme or reason. Sometimes there are no answers and little we can do, except to be present to the ones who are going through hell.

Job's life is an absolute mess, leaving onlookers to wonder, "What did he do to deserve this?" The answer, of course, is, "Nothing." This

intense suffering descends on Job through no fault of his own. Jesus himself knew this, and observed a number of years later that God “sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous”. We should never be quick to conclude that anyone deserves the suffering they experience ... anyone, including ourselves. By the way, Job never did get an answer to his questions on suffering.

Gerald Sittser was a history professor with a wonderful family. But one day, his wife, his 4-year-old daughter and his mother were all killed in a car accident caused by a drunk driver. Sittser’s life had been going very well, but then, in one horrible moment, he lost three of the most precious people in his life. His suffering was compounded eight months later, when the driver of the other car was acquitted of vehicular manslaughter. The defense attorney was able to cast enough suspicion on the testimony of several witnesses that he was able to get his client off the hook.

Sittser was enraged. But then he began to be bothered by his assumption that he had a right to complete fairness in life. “Granted, I did not deserve to lose three members of my family,” he writes in his book **A Grace Disguised**. “But then again, I am not sure I deserved to have them in the first place.” His wife was a woman who loved him through some very hard times. His mother lived well and served people to her life’s end. His daughter sparkled with enthusiasm and helped to fill his home with noise and excitement. “Perhaps I did not deserve their deaths,” he

concludes; “but I did not deserve their presence in my life either.”

We should never be quick to conclude that people deserve the suffering they experience ... but at the same time, we should never jump to the conclusion that people deserve their blessings, either. Job makes much the same point when he asks the question, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?”.

#### **IV. HOLD ON TO GOD**

The second clear message of Job is that faithfulness to God is of critical importance, in bad times as well as in good times. Gerald Sittser did not turn his back on God after his family was killed by a drunk driver, nor did Job abandon the Lord in his time of overwhelming loss. It is essential that we not give God the cold shoulder when we encounter a period of undeserved suffering.

Can we scream and yell at God? Sure. “I will not restrain my mouth,” shouts Job. “I will complain in the bitterness of my soul”. There is nothing wrong with offering up a passionate and honest complaint, as long as we direct our complaining to God. Job grabs hold of the Lord like a dog with a bone, and he won’t let go until God responds to him. What saves Job is that he remains faithful to God, always demanding that God hear him and take him seriously and respond to his concerns.

In the end, as Carl Jung puts it, Job saw the shadow of God. He hears a word from God and is satisfied. **“I know that you can do all things,”** Job admits, **“and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted”**. He finds

a sense of peace in his relationship with God, not in a list of neat and tidy responses to all his unanswered questions.

The same can be true for us. Like Job, our challenge is to accept both the bad and the good, and to remain in close contact with God through every twist and turn of life, never turning from God nor giving the cold shoulder. Ultimately, we'll find that it is an honest and intimate relationship with God that saves us, and puts us in a position to discover true serenity and peace. With this relationship, we'll be able to face any ordeal. Without it, we'll just stew in our own juices.

## **V. THE CROCODILE DENTIST GAME –**

Recently, my grandchildren and I were playing the Crocodile Dentist Game. The game has a plastic crocodile head that is spring loaded. When you pull the mouth open the white bottom row teeth pop up. The players take turns pushing down the individual teeth. At some point, when a player pushes the wrong tooth, the crocodile's mouth snaps shut on you. It is very safe; the mouth doesn't hurt but I got bit so many times I thought I lost my hand.

The three of us began pushing the teeth as fast as we could so if the crocodile mouth came down we wouldn't get nipped. The thing is, you never knew when you were going to get bit.

Here's my point, no matter what you do in this life or how careful you play, there are times when you are going to get bit. It might be just a

nip, it might feel like your hand got bit off, or that your heart is breaking. There may be no rhyme or reason to it. There may nothing you can do or no problem to solve. You may grieve in utter despair or rail at the sky.

But at some point, there comes a choice. It is a choice to live in fear or to live in faith. To live in fear is not to play, of course that doesn't stop you from getting bit. To live in faith is trust that God is with you, even when it doesn't feel like it, and that same God sees beyond the present trouble and losses, even when we don't, and the present suffering will not have the last word, God does. In faith, we will discover that we do have a leg stand on, when all the others are knocked away. Amen.



# First Presbyterian Church in Hawley

## Sunday, October 6, 2024

### Second Scripture Lesson

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Job 1:1, 2:1-10

**1** There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

**2** One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. **2**The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." **3**The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason." **4**Then Satan answered the LORD, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. **5**But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." **6**The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life."

**7**So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. **8**Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes. **9**Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." **10**But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

This is the Word of the Lord.  
Thanks be To God.