

What is God thinking? Why natural disasters: hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis, earthquakes. What is God thinking? Why human disasters: suffering, war, disease, poverty, death. What is God thinking? If I were running the universe, things would be different. What is God thinking?

It's a tough question. It's such a tough question that there's an entire branch of theology devoted to this question. If you're into trivia, that branch of theology is called theodicy. Theodicy is a word that means "God's justice." The focus of theodicy is the basic question, "Is God really loving and just? And if so, why do bad things happen to good people?"

Those questions are central to the OT book of Job. We're in the third week of a series of four readings from Job.

Two weeks ago, we heard about how Job had lost almost everything. Mother Kiah preached a wonderful sermon about this part of Job. In one day, Job's 10 children are killed, and all of his thousands of livestock are destroyed. Later, he loses his health, he becomes afflicted by painful boils. Not a pretty picture. It causes Job to question God. It causes Job to wrestle with God. Yet Job refuses to abandon God. As Mother Kiah mentioned, Job holds on to his relationship with God even while the rest of his life is crumbling. He doesn't necessarily like what God is doing. In Kiah's words, Job "never let(s) God off the hook." Yet Job "never let(s) go" of God either.

The bulk of the book of Job involves Job's friends coming to comfort him and talking about the reasons he's suffering. There are a number of accusations that those friends make against God. But throughout the book, Job responds with faith and patience. For chapter after chapter, Job hangs in there with God.

But eventually Job's patience is exhausted, and he demands to know why he's suffering. Last week we heard Job questioning God. Job stands up like a prosecuting attorney and demands to put God in the witness box. Job demands an answer from God. Why? Why did all these bad things happen to me? What did I do to deserve such shabby treatment?

Which brings us to today's lesson, from Job ch38. God answers Job. God basically says, "You demand an answer from me? Well here it is." And God's answer to Job is not easy to hear, but it's one we must pay attention to. For 4 solid chapters, God answers. We read a part of God's answer this morning. God answers Job's question with questions of his own.

ch38 v2 "Who is this that darkens counsel (Who is this who is obscuring things) by words without knowledge?" God is telling Job, 'You're questioning me. But you don't have enough knowledge about the way the world works. You're in the dark.'

And then God follows with a long barrage of questions. The language is poetic. But the point is tough.

v4 "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" 'Do you know how I made the world?'

V34 'Can you control the clouds? Can you make it rain?'

V35 "Can you make lightning?"

V39 "Can you feed all the wild lions?"

V40 "Can you feed all the wild ravens?"

And it goes on and on for chapter after chapter:

'Who set the boundaries of the ocean? Have you ever walked on the bottom of the sea?

'Can you make dawn appear? Can you control the stars?

'Can you make a hippopotamus? Is the horse strong because you made it that way? Do you make the eagle fly?'

Over and over, for 4 chapters, God asks Job these kinds of questions. The message is clear. Job cannot do any of these things. And of course, neither can we.

Next week in our lesson from Job, we'll hear Job's reply to God. Job will admit that God's ways are beyond his understanding. Job will basically say, 'You're in charge and I'm not.' He'll say, "(God,) You can do all things...I have (spoken about) things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."

That's the bottom line, basic message of Job. God is God. We're not. God is in control of the universe. We're not. God sees the biggest of big pictures. We just catch a tiny glimpse of one small piece of the puzzle from time to time.

The message of Job is that there are fundamental limits to our understanding. There are limits to what we can know of God's will.

We cannot fully understand the ways of God any more than a cockroach can understand the finer points of nuclear physics. I don't care if you have a great textbook and a wonderful power point presentation. The cockroach still won't understand nuclear physics, no matter how well you present it.

The message of Job is it's the same way with us. We just don't have that ability to understand everything there is to know about the universe. The answer to our human question "Why?" is "God is God, God's in charge, and you're not. You just have to trust him."

There's a story that comes from the Auschwitz concentration camp during WWII. A group of Jewish inmates decide to put God on trial. They put God on trial since he was apparently allowing his chosen people to suffer and die in the Nazi death camps, and he wasn't doing anything about their suffering. And at the end of the trial, the death camp inmates find God guilty. However, once they reach their verdict, they do an unexpected thing. The Jews in the death camp rise and recite the Kaddish, a prayer that praises God and tells of His greatness:

*Exalted and sanctified is God's great name,
in the world which He has created according to His will.
May He establish His kingdom,
may his salvation blossom, and his Messiah draw near...
May His great name be blessed
forever and to all eternity.*

Reciting this prayer, even at Auschwitz, is very much in line with Job. 'God, I think you're wrong. God, I don't understand. But God. I have to trust you. What else can I do?' A very similar answer was given by Rabbi Harold Kushner in his very good, classic book, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Rabbi Kushner reflects on the book of Job. And his answer is basically the same as Job's. God is God. You're not. You just have to trust him.

I know, that's not a very satisfying answer. Yes, it is an answer I can wrap my head around. But it does not warm my heart. It's rather cold. It's rather harsh. And sadly, there's a piece that Rabbi Kushner missed. There's a piece that the Jews at Auschwitz who put God on trial missed. God is God. You're not. You just have to trust him. That's true. And that's important. But it's incomplete. It's missing a piece. To get at that piece, I want to turn to our Gospel lesson Mk ch10.

James and John come to Jesus with a request. The request is based upon their assumptions about who Jesus is, and who they expect him to be. They expect him to be a military conqueror who will kill or drive out the Roman occupation force. He would then set himself up as King over Israel. Given that scenario, James and John have a request.

ch10 v37 "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." In other words, 'Lord, when you conquer and when you are crowned as king, when you sit upon your throne, can we have the important seats right next to you?'

v38 Jesus says, "You don't know what you're asking." 'You guys have no idea about what kind of Messiah I'm going to be.' "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

v39 James and John reply, 'Oh sure. Yeah, we're able. Anything you say, Lord.'

But they didn't understand. Because Jesus was talking about his death. Because when Jesus was later crowned as king, it was with a crown of thorns, not a crown of gold. And his throne was not a richly decorated chair; it was a hard wooden cross.

And the seats at his right and left hands were not occupied by James and John. They were occupied by the two brigands, two terrorists, who were crucified with him. When Jesus tells James and John that they don't know what they're asking, it is an incredible understatement. They don't even have the first clue. They simply don't understand the ways of God.

To that extent, the message of Jesus is like the message of Job. Mere mortals cannot begin to understand everything like God does. God is God and we're incapable of understanding anything on his level.

But Jesus goes a step further than Job. Yes, there is a fundamental lack of understanding by Job, James, and John. And yet in Jesus, God goes a step further. In Jesus, God doesn't just stop with a simple but unsatisfying, "Trust me."

Instead, in Jesus, God goes one step further. Jesus lives a very real human life. Jesus experiences the hardships we experience. And Jesus dies a very painful and real death. This NT good news is an important and huge step beyond the OT answer of the book of Job.

In fact, there was one Jewish Holocaust survivor who decided after WWII that he could no longer believe in God. His argument went, "Unless God could be a Jewish mother watching her child die in the death camps, I can't believe in him."

But the good news of the Gospel is precisely that. God is a loving parent who has watched a child die. The Father allowed his Son to be crucified on our behalf. I don't think that's a choice any human parent could make. But it reflects God's love in a powerful way.

In Jesus, God says, 'I know you don't understand why there's suffering. I know that frustrates you. But I'll suffer with you. I'll personally experience all the pain of life, and will undergo a painful death on your behalf.'

In Jesus God says, 'You don't understand why there's evil in this world. I know that's terrifying. But I'll take the brunt of everything the forces of evil can possibly dish out. I will take the sin of the world on myself.'

In Jesus God says, 'You don't understand about death. I know it scares you and saddens you. But I'm willing to suffer death so that you might know there's nothing to fear, so that you can trust in me, REALLY trust in me.'

In Jesus God says, 'You may not understand. But know that I love you. And know that I am with you. And know that you can trust in me.'

Yes, suffering and pain are part of the mystery of a human life. God does not exempt us from those things. But he has suffered alongside us. And he promises to be by our side in the midst of our suffering.

That's tremendous love. It's not the way I would have chosen to run the universe. My love is nowhere near great enough. But God's is. In response to such tremendous love, all I can say is, "Thank God I'm not in charge. Thank God you're not in charge. Thank God he is in charge."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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