

"200 Years of Stewardship: Dreams and Nightmares"
Job 1:1, 2:1-10

The problem of human suffering is an age-old issue that we confront. From the beginning of time, people have sought to understand and explain why we suffer, especially when our suffering seems to be innocent/undeserved. Why do children who are innocent get abused? Why do people who do good get laid off from their jobs? Why do people die in natural disasters? And in the midst of suffering, how do we see and experience God? This issue more than any other issue in human history has been the leading cause for many people to lose their faith in God.

David Hume, the Enlightenment Scottish philosopher put it powerfully in this statement, "If God is good, God cannot be omnipotent. If God is omnipotent, God cannot be good." In his book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins denies the existence of God based on the argument that the level of evil in the world is incompatible with either a good or an omnipotent being such as God, particularly because so much of the evil in the world is either perpetrated or permitted to go unchecked precisely by religious adherents.

This was the framework of the book of Job in the Bible. It is a book of wisdom with a story that is told to us about a righteous man named Job. The story begins just like many fairy tales begin, "Once upon a time..." "There was once a man in the land of Uz..." with an emphasis on the innocence and goodness of Job. Even the setting of the story is in the land called Uz which in Hebrew means fertile. So, we come to this story expecting good things to happen. But instead, we hear about the plight of Job where his righteousness is tested. He loses his children, his wealth, and his health. By chapter two, Job is confronted with the eternal problem of suffering. His wife even tells him to curse God and die. The image of the heavenly court of this story is very indicative of the people's understanding of the problem of suffering at the time. We see God sitting in a court-like setting. Satan was an image drawn from the Persian court system. Satan's job was to question every decision that the king made, to ensure that he had thought things through. In that sense, he was an adversary of sorts, but he was simply doing his job. In the folktale, Satan is not presented as "the Devil," the arch enemy of God. Instead, Satan is presented as a member of the celestial court, one of the "heavenly beings" who attend God and assist in the management of Creation. In fact, in the original Hebrew of the passage, "Satan" is not even a proper name: it is a *title*, bearing a definite article, "the Satan," meaning "the Adversary" or "the Opposition" or even "the Naysayer." So, with this role of the Satan we see that there is no real explanation of the origin of suffering but an attempt to deal with it by using an image that people at the time would have been able to understand. In fact, the book of Job does not end up giving a real explanation of why people suffer. But what it does is that it negates all the traditional answers that were popular at that time. We see that clearly later on in the arguments between Job and his three friends who present the traditional view that Job must have sinned and therefore deserved his suffering. They berate him to confess his sins, although they themselves could not think of what sins he needed to confess. Their worldview said that God always rewarded good behavior and punished bad behavior and there was no exception to that rule. The key of faith for Job was his relationship with God. Nothing could take that away.

With this folktale of Job, this wisdom book, the people of Israel are being challenged to grow in their understanding of God. They are invited to let go of their worn-out belief that God punishes people. The book of Job was a very radical message about God's love. In his book, *Why God*, Burton Cooper notes that, "Perhaps the book of Job will not make sense until we see it as turning away from the monarchial image of God and toward an image of God as vulnerable. Our

failure to look forward, so to speak, in interpreting Job makes us like Job's friends who cannot speak rightly about God because they cannot break away from earlier patterns of thinking.”

The book of Job asks some very hard questions of us. When bad things happen in your life and in the world, how do you understand/know/experience God's presence? Do you blame God? Do you question God's providence? Do you lose heart? Do you just think that your suffering is a test that you must conquer? When our dreams turn into nightmares, how do we cope or where do we see God? Can you let go of old images/understandings of God?

The message of hope in Job is that Job never turns away from God and God never turns away from Job. Even though the questions of faith are left unanswered, the relationship continues. God and Job are together in the good and bad times, even in the mystery of suffering.

This message is so relevant to our lives today as the American dream has turned into a nightmare for so many people. With our recent economic crisis, many are losing jobs, homes, and the basic necessities of life. The hope of a comfortable and decent life has been shattered for millions of Americans. How do we respond in a time like this? This is the stewardship season in the life of the church and we will be praying about how much to pledge and give this coming year. But with the downturn of the economy, how do we respond faithfully? The way we answer these questions depends on our understanding and experience of God.

It is interesting as we celebrate 200 years of being a church here in Batavia to look at how the people of this congregation have responded in the past to the call to give in good and bad times.

Catherine: I can tell you that there were many years when the budget of the church was balanced and people give sacrificially. For example in 1909, this congregation was the largest Presbyterian Church in any village in the United States. During that year they had added eighty-one new members while losing 42 through death and letters of transfer. The membership stood at 848 with 30 baptisms. In Sunday School there were 581 students with 40 teachers and officers. In that year the Chapel was enlarged at the cost of \$18,850. People pledged and paid \$20,000. Per Capita income for that year was \$319 (then twenty-dollars-worth of our 2009 goods). Mission funds for that year were \$2578.

Roula: That sounds wonderful. But how did people respond when things were not going so well with the economy.

Catherine: I am actually amazed that this congregation kept its doors open during the Great Depression in the 1930's. These were truly the times when our dreams turned into nightmares, but people remained faithful in their giving. According to a January 6 article in The Economist, "Giving has proven remarkably recession proof, at least in America. During the Great Depression, giving rose. Over the past 40 years there have been several recessions, but just one year in which total giving has fallen in America: 1987, the year of the "Black Monday" stock market crash. Even last year with our economy being so shaky, people in this congregation responded with faithfulness and some people even increased their giving. In fact, we were able to do more mission last year than probably more than any previous years in our recent past.

Roula: So, the people of this congregation have always been generous with their giving and the church has had a good track record with its budgets.

Catherine: Well, the people have always seen the importance of giving to the ministry and mission of this congregation as a witness to Christ's love in this community and beyond, but there are some interesting episodes in our history of dealing with stewardship ideas and the budget. Just to give you an example, in 1857, the trustees of the church planned to sell or rent the pews of the church. The pews were appraised and a fixed value placed on each, a copy of the appraisal was left in the office of the County Clerk. A purchaser had the option of paying the appraised value in cash, or by giving his note, bearing interest for the amount. But the problem came when a very large number gave their notes but could not fulfill their pledges because the interest accumulated and made it difficult to fulfill.

Roula: Thank you Catherine for sharing these insights with us. It is amazing to see how the people of God stayed faithful in their relationship with God especially in difficult times. The invitation is for us today to remember that we are not afraid when our dreams turn into nightmares because God is with us. With the current economic crisis, there is an opportunity for us to re-examine our priorities, our spending habits, and the justice behind our whole economic philosophy. Those who went through the Great Depression continued to find it possible to give to others. The church didn't close its doors as a result of the economic crisis because our relationship with God is not dependent on the temporary circumstances of this world. We are citizens of the kingdom of God. We dwell in the realm of love and possibilities. We may not fully understand how to explain the problem of innocent suffering in the world, but we do know, just like the story of Job teaches, God is with us, no matter what. William Sloane Coffin wrote, "God offers us minimum protection and maximum support."

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote this in his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, "Some years ago, when the 'death of God' theology was a fad, I remember seeing a bumper sticker that read 'My God is not dead; sorry about yours.' I guess my bumper sticker reads 'My God is not cruel; sorry about yours.' God does not cause our misfortunes. Some are caused by bad luck, some are caused by bad people, and some are simply an inevitable consequence of our being human and being mortal, living in a world of inflexible natural laws. The painful things that happen to us are not punishments for our misbehavior, nor are they in any way part of some grand design on God's part. Because the tragedy is not God's will, we need not feel hurt or betrayed by God when tragedy strikes. We can turn to [God] for help in overcoming it, precisely because we can tell ourselves that God is as outraged by it as we are."

The invitation today is to know that God is with us all the time even when our dreams turn into nightmares. This is the mystery of communion. This table is set before us telling us the story of how God's love defies all the nightmares of life. Amen.