

THE BOOK OF JOB

5. The Lord Challenges Job

Job 38:1-11; 42:1-6

PENTECOST 10

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Last Thursday, at the conclusion of our Bible study on the Book of Job, John and Betty Neupauer approached me to share how Rabbi Harold S. Kushner's book, **When Bad Things Happen to Good People**, helped them following the tragic death of their then fourteen-year-old daughter.

Betty said she read the book several times.

For over thirty-six years, Rabbi Kushner's 1981 best-selling book sat on my study bookshelf.

After our conversation, I retrieved the well-worn and underlined copy, with a picture from a magazine taped on the inside back cover, showing Rabbi Harold and Suzette Kushner holding hands and squatting before their fourteen-year-old son's grave marker.

Just as the British theologian, Leslie Weatherhead's **The Will of God** did for the World War II generation, Rabbi Kushner's book has provided a way through the problem of evil that is both persuasive and comforting for so many people of our time, like John and Betty, and maybe some others worshipping this morning.

The very first paragraph of the book gives us a clue to its popularity, and serves as a wise counsel for those who read it:

"This is not an abstract book about God and theology.

It does not try to use big words or clever ways of rephrasing questions in an effort to convince us that our problems are not really problems, but that we only think they are.

This is a very personal book, written by someone who believes in God and in the goodness of the world, someone who has spent most of his life trying to help other people believe, and was compelled by a personal tragedy to rethink everything he has been taught about God and God's ways" (p. 1).

What prompted Rabbi Kushner's book was indeed a personal tragedy — the death of his son, Aaron, from **progeria**, a rare and universally fatal genetic disease which has, among other symptoms, the

appearance of rapid aging.

When Aaron Kushner was three years old, the Kushners were told by their physician that their son would grow only to be about three feet tall, would have no hair on his head or body, would look like an old person even in his early childhood, and would die in his early teens.

The doctor was correct.

Aaron experienced all of these manifestations and died at age 14.

Among Rabbi Kushner's several reactions to this terrible diagnosis was a sense of moral outrage at God for the unfairness of it all.

Kushner wrote of Aaron:

“He was an innocent child, a happy outgoing three-year-old. Why should he have to suffer physical and psychological pain every day of his life? Why should he have to be stared at, pointed at, wherever he went? Why should he be condemned to grow into adolescence, see other boys and girls beginning to date, and realize that he would never know marriage or fatherhood?” (p. 3).

This was not the way God's world was supposed to work.

What Rabbi Kushner sets out to answer in his book is the question of suffering, which is a great mystery to us now.

Hopefully one day, the reason for it will be made clear.

What the good Rabbi seeks to answer is the age-old “*theodicy*” problem.

As theological terms go, *theodicy* is a relative newcomer.

You won't find it in the writings of a Saint Paul, a Saint Augustine, or even a Martin Luther.

It was coined over three hundred years ago by the famous German philosopher, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.

Etymologically speaking, the word *theodicy* is formed by the combination of two Greek words, *theos* for God and *dike* for justice.

It means the ‘justification of God.’

In a world where terrible things can happen, and where people suffer beyond any sense of deserving, it was felt that God had some explaining to do.

The ways of God needed to be justified.

God needed a good defense, and *theodicy* was the best approach.

A Fourteenth Century mind like Luther's would encounter terrible suffering and say:

***“This is from the hand of God.
What is God saying to us?”***

A contemporary mind encounters suffering and asks:

“How does the reality of suffering fit into my world view?”

Since the time of Leibniz, there seems to have been a collision among four truth claims:

- There is a God,
- God is all-powerful
- God is good and loving, and
- There is innocent suffering

Trying to hold on simultaneously to these four truth claims has been called “the impossible chess match,” a theological statement, so to speak, since no good moves appear available.

The Eighteenth Century Scottish philosopher, David Hume, addressed the problem in this memorable way:

“Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?

Then He is impotent.

Is God able, but not willing?

Then He is malevolent.

Is He both able and willing?

Whence then is evil?”

Faced with the impossible chess match, the only possibility available seems to be to give up one of the truth claims.

But which one will it be?

The belief in the existence of God?

The goodness of God?

The power of God?

Or would we just close our eyes and deny that there is innocent suffering?

For many in our culture, the notions that God is loving and that God is all-powerful are seen simply as churchly and creedal spins on the more basic claim of theism that there is a God at all.

As one web blogger said, after posting David Hume’s quotation on the internet:

“This single quote . . . made me an atheist.

What a great quote.”

Many secular people do not believe in God, but the God they don’t believe in is loving, gracious, compassionate, and all-powerful.

So many people settle for being agnostic.

Like the contemporary British novelist, Julian Barnes, opined:

“I don’t believe in God, but I miss him.”

This morning we heard powerful words from a source that Rabbi Kushner ultimately turned to during his time of grief and anguish — the Book of Job and the voice of God speaking out of the whirlwind.

Throughout the speeches in Chapters 3-37, various human speakers — Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and young Elihu — claim to know what Yahweh, or God, thinks about Job’s situation. However, in Chapter 38, God breaks His silence and speaks.

Until this point, like the character, George Bailey in the movie **“It’s A Wonderful Life,”** Job responds to his troubles by wishing he had never been born.

But Job doesn’t get a visit from the portly, comforting Clarence, the angel. Instead, here in Chapter 38, the One who appears to Job is none other than the Creator of all creation, the Lord God Almighty!

And God doesn’t come to comfort Job.

Instead, God comes to put Job in his place, lecturing from the center of a cyclone.

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up your loins like a man.

I will question you, and you shall declare to Me.

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” (38:2-4a).

God does not address Job’s situation or Job’s questions about God’s justice.

God does not even acknowledge Job’s suffering.

Instead, God takes Job on a whirlwind tour of the cosmos, beginning with the foundation of the earth and the birth of the sea.

God spends a lot of time “where the wild things are,” describing all kinds of fierce and untamed creatures — lions, mountain goats, ostriches, eagles — and two primordial chaos monsters — Behemoth and Leviathan.

These speeches of God at the end of the Book of Job leave many readers dismayed.

We want God to tell Job the back story, about the wager with Satan.

We want God to apologize for all of Job’s suffering.

We want God, at least, to be comforting.

Instead, in the words of William Safire,

“It’s as if God appeals in a tie-dyed t-shirt emblazoned with the words

‘Because I’m God. That’s Why!’ ”

This is not the answer that Job expected from God.

And yet, these speeches can’t be dismissed.

Like a fierce summer thunderstorm, they are beautiful, fascinating, even terrifying.

The images and creatures described by God grip our imagination and introduce us to a world much, much bigger than ourselves.

And that, beloved people of God, is the point.

The world is not centered on human beings, according to God’s speeches to Job.

It is not an entirely safe or predictable world, but it is beautiful and good nonetheless.

And God invites Job to live in that wild, wonderful, and beautiful world.

Is this an adequate response by God for suffering?

It is not, in a conventional sense, very comforting.

I would have failed my Clinical Pastoral Education course if I had said these words.

However, these speeches of God at the end of the Book of Job accomplish something profound.

They move Job out of his endless cycle of grief into life again.

They enable him to live freely in a world full of heartbreaking suffering and heart-stopping beauty, and to do so in a way that reflects God's own care for the world.

We will read about the response of Job at the end of his story next week.

AMEN