

When God Is Silent (Job 1:1-3, 13-20; Acts 2:1-8, 12-13; Matthew 27:41-46)

Our journey through the Older Testament today takes us to the Book of Job. Now Job's a character we're probably all familiar with. We can say, "I feel like Job," and almost everyone knows what we're talking about.

Job was a good man, a righteous man, who had it all. Wealth. Social standing. Great family. But then his wealth was stolen, all his children died, and even his health went bad. He found no comfort anywhere--not with his wife, not with his friends, not even with God. In fact, unlike his wife and friends, God was silent.

Now sometimes we people bring bad things upon ourselves. But that wasn't the case with Job. Job knew that he hadn't done anything to deserve so much suffering. So Job just couldn't make any sense of his suffering. If God was good, if God was fair, then why had he allowed such horrible things to happen to a good guy like himself? And where was God anyway? Why didn't God answer him? Job was full of questions.

We too are full of questions when bad things happen in our world. And horrible tragedies happen to every generation. Those of you in the World War II generation probably all remember exactly where you were when you heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Those of us in my generation probably all remember where we were when we heard about the assassinations of President Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. Probably all of us here remember where we were when we heard about the planes hitting the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Such tragedies are unforgettable because they don't make sense to us any more than Job's suffering made sense to him.

And then there are those personal tragedies that come to us that don't make any sense either. And those questions, again, just pour from our souls. Why me? Why my kids? Why my wife? Why my husband? Why my marriage? And the response we get is similar to the response Job got: silence.

No wonder Gary Larson portrayed God the way he did in his *Far Side* cartoon called "God At His Computer." In the cartoon, Larson showed God with his

beard and long white hair watching a guy on his computer screen. The guy was walking down the street, and unbeknownst to him, directly above his head, there was a piano suspended by a cable. God's hand was on the computer keyboard, and God's finger was hovering over a key labeled "SMITE."

The cartoon suggests the way we sometimes feel about God when bad things happen in our world and to us personally, bad things that we didn't bring upon ourselves. Like Larson, we want to ask God if he's as uncaring and capricious as he sometimes appears to be. We want to ask God if he's paying attention. We want to ask God if he's as involved in the universe as we want to believe he is. We want to ask God why bad people sometimes seem to get off scot-free. We want to ask God why he seems to answer the prayers of others we've heard about but not our own. We want to ask God why he's so distant....why he's so silent. It's a common complaint of people who suffer: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Even Jesus on the cross wanted to know why God was silent.

Yes, we understand all those questions Job had for God, cause they're the same questions we'd like to ask God ourselves. Like Job, especially when we're suffering, we think, "Oh, that I knew where I might find him."

But the Book of Job is not only about suffering. It's also about faith. After all, what made Job's suffering unbearable was that it didn't fit his understanding of God. Job expected God to act as he thought God should. Job had it all figured out: if you live a good life, God will see to it that only good things happen to you. And since Job thought he was a very good man, he just couldn't believe that God had allowed so many bad things to happen to him. It was clear that God wasn't who he thought he was. And then of course Job's faith in God was even more challenged by God's silence to all of his questions.

But, you know, maybe it's that silence of God in the Book of Job that we are meant to take special note of. Through his silence, God makes two powerful statements to us.

First, God's silence is reminiscent of that of a parent who refuses to be drawn into the child's constant chattering, questioning, and badgering. For

example, a mother is running errands, accompanied by her two small children. All morning the children pester her: "Can we go to the new toy store? Let's get some ice cream. We want to go home now." Pretty soon their pestering turns to complaining, then to angry questions. "Why can't we go where we want to go? Why do we have to go in that store? Why can't we eat lunch now? Why do we always have to do what you want to do and never what we want to do?" Finally the mother stops and answers. She stoops to face her children chin-to-chin and says, "Because I'm the Mommy, that's why."

Similarly, God let Job go on and on, progressing from acceptance of his suffering to complaining to questioning to bitter accusations. And God's silence made his response, when he finally gave it, even more dramatic and memorable. The only response Job got from God was pretty much, "Because I'm God, that's why." God said, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" God demanded, "Who are you, to tell me I don't know how to run the world?" God didn't think he owed Job an explanation. So instead of answering Job's questions, he simply asserted his authority. "Can you send forth lightning? Can you make rain, or food for lions? No, you can't; but I can, because I'm God." Through his silence, God made the powerful statement that we, his creations, cannot begin to understand how "all things work for good" in the universe."

But God's silence made another statement. God's silence made Job think and wrestle with his faith. We could say that God's silence made Job go on a journey of faith. Theologian Leslie Weatherhead said that when we have a painful experience, we ought to try to get from that experience everything it has to teach us, because we've paid such a high price for the wisdom it can give us, the high price of our suffering.

There's a story about a wise man who had attained a reputation for spiritual maturity. A disciple asked this wise man to describe how his thinking had changed along his spiritual journey. Taking pen and paper, the wise man wrote: "I know." Then he added the line, "I may not know." And then another line, "I do not know." And then, "I would like to know." Then, "I will try to know." And finally he wrote, "I know."

Similarly, when Job had everything he could possibly want, he thought he knew all about God. But his suffering followed by God's silence led him on to "I may not know," and then, "I do not know," and "I would like to know," and

finally, "I know." For it was God's silence that gradually led Job right to God himself, so that Job could finally exclaim to God, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6).

As a result of the silence of God, Job didn't know all about God, but he did know that he didn't know all about God and that he would and could never know all about God. He came to know God well enough to know that he couldn't fit the great God Almighty into a neat little package of his own making. He came to understand that his ways were not God's ways. Job never got his answer to the "why" or the "why me," but he got something even better: a close, personal relationship with God. The silence of God in the aftermath of his suffering led Job into a closer relationship with God, a personal relationship with God. He became a better man, a more humble man.

God's silence didn't mean that God wasn't paying attention or interested. God was watching over Job throughout his suffering. A man named William Hinson described his experience of finding a baby owl in his front lawn one morning when he went out to get the newspaper. Since he didn't know what to do about the baby owl, he called a naturalist. The naturalist said, "Don't do anything to that baby owl. If you look up, somewhere in a tall tree, you will see he is not alone. His mother has told him to sit very still in order that he might not be seen by a cat or anything else. It takes about two dark nights for a baby owl to spread his wings and fly. In the meantime, if you will look up, you'll see his mother."

William Hinson said he and his wife went out into the yard and looked up into the top of an oak tree, and sure enough, they saw the mother owl with her dark, unblinking eyes fastened on her baby owl and everything and anything that came near him.

The Book of Job has good news for us when we look around us at the tragedies in our world and when we ourselves experience loss or sorrow. While God himself does not cause the suffering, he watches over us and silently waits with his perfect timing to bring good out of suffering.

Debbie Arden testifies to this. Debbie's husband was the agent for golfer Payne Stewart. He and Stewart died in a freak airplane accident a few years ago. Debbie Arden has said that her husband's death led her to a new place of assurance and faith in God. She has said, "God used the death of my beloved husband to, as Oswald Chambers said, "Pierce a hole in the darkness so that I could behold the face of God.' I am a changed woman."

What a great way to illustrate the good news of Job. When the darkness of suffering presses in against us, we can expect that God will take the suffering and through his silence, "pierce a hole in the darkness so that we can behold the face of God." Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; May 23, 2010