

Rev Claire Dawe Suffering Reflection 7 October 2018 Westfield Drive

Job 1:1, 2:1-10

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.

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. 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.' 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.' Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.'

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. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

Then his 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 the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Reflection

That poor man Job. We think that nowhere is there a man more beset by misfortune than Job. But the reality is that in life, each of us will experience some of the pain that Job experiences, each of us will be touched by sadness and loss.

As I met with the worship team on Monday, I said to them 'I don't want to teach grandma to suck eggs'. And that's because I know from the bit of pastoral visiting I've done that some of you have experienced, or are still experiencing, great loss and personal sadness. So I want you to know that I hold your stories gently and with great care. I don't know how you feel because only you can feel it. And your loss is your loss and it cannot be compared to anyone else's.

This morning we ask the question once again, where is God when bad things happen? And why, as a Christian church, are we so bad at answering that question? And we're doing this because this goes to the very heart of how we understand who and what God is.

It's actually easier to begin with what God is not. We know that God isn't like one of the ancient Greek gods moving humans around a chess board and creating

mischief, sending plagues and misfortune. And we laugh at the thought of it all. But then we pray to God using a shopping list of things we want done and actually, is that any different? Please note at this point that I'm also really bad at walking the walk and I often approach God with a shopping list of things I want sorted out!

God is not the dreadful judge waiting for us to go wrong and then leaping on us with condemnation and righteous anger. And we laugh at that model too don't we – how ridiculous! Think about Jonah (less of the fish) and the way he didn't want to go to Ninevah to talk to the people there. He wanted God to punish them, to teach them a lesson and he was really angry when God forgave them and showed them grace. But we also react like this when we see someone we believe should feel the wrath of God appear to be blessed in ways we are not. We call everso subtly for the judgement of God to be swift. Never do we for one moment do we consider how we should be judged, never turn the critical eye to our own lives, just like Jonah.

God is not a shield against natural disasters and climate change. We look to Indonesia where 2000 people are confirmed to have died and naturally we ask, where is God? How did God let this happen? This has been a natural disaster, a tragedy, and those people will take years to get back to some sort of normal. The scientists are explaining now there was some sort of movement on the seabed which is understandable because of where Indonesia is situated on different fault lines. But God did not cause the natural disaster, and God does not intervene like some magical dam to shield people.

A slight tangent.....The story of Noah is often quoted as an example of God's intervention but Noah's Ark was never meant to be taken literally. Our Bible is full of beautiful sacred stories which in other times, or today in other cultures, might be referred to as *myths*. Mythology is a rich and wonderful tradition of storytelling which has helped us since the beginning of time to understand the world around us, how to live with each other. Just because we don't take them literally doesn't mean they are not important to us or true on some level. What is truth is a question I might just leave to John Bodycomb for the next magazine. Our stories are sacred and they teach us, they speak to us, just not literally.

9/11 is often quoted as proof that God does not exist or does not care. How could God stand by and watch so many people killed and injured? Surely God could have intervened to stop such an act of terror.

In all of these examples, God is not *absent*, but very much *present* and this is where we move into an understanding of who or what God is.

In natural disasters, when a child is terminally ill, when someone is suffering, we ask where is God? That's normal. That's human. That's the psalms. God will not

intervene, God will not put right our shopping list of demands, but God is always present.

God was present with those who died in Indonesia, hearing their cries and feeling their fear. God never leaves a child or anyone who is dying – God is right there suffering with their families, holding them in their grief. God was certainly with those firefighters who ran up the stairs of the Twin Towers on 9/11 when everyone else was running down. How do we know?

There are plenty of Biblical quotes I could use to proof text for you the existence of God and God being in control. For example, taken completely out of context, the story of Hannah calling out to God for a child and Samuel being born – but that doesn't mean every woman who prays for a child will have one. This is incredibly unhelpful and can be quite damaging. So let's look at this from a different angle.

I have an image of God which someone shared with me at a time I found it helpful. I share it this morning in case it touches someone else in the same way.

Pastoral care is something we do for each other and the wider community – it's part of our lives as people of faith. When I care for someone, I get out of my puddle in which I sit and I join someone else in their puddle. And I listen to them as we sit side by side in their puddle. And when the pastoral conversation is over, I leave that person's puddle and return to my own puddle. And although most of the drops of their puddle leave me, I still take some with me as pastoral conversations don't leave us completely.

God exists in everyone's puddles. When I move into someone's puddle for a while, I join that person and God who is already there. I may think I am the knight in shining armour coming to the rescue to listen and bring comfort, but I am actually joining our God who is already and eternally present. And when I leave, God remains, eternally.

This is who God is. Always and eternally part of creation, creation that came from God in the beginning. God will never leave any part of creation. When I think about that, not only do I become aware of the suffering that God takes on for us, but also the suffering of the physical world – the oceans polluted by oil and plastic, the rainforests torn down by loggers, the mining here in Australia on sacred Indigenous sites. So the puddles that God sits in become broader and deeper and wider than just us humans. And yet, God knows each of us intimately. *This* is God.

Job suffered. We have only touched the start of his story. How do we respond when a person we know suffers? We suffer with them don't we – we get into their puddle with them. Let's open that up and think about other puddles and ask ourselves how we respond to suffering generally – the suffering of those making our clothing in poorly built factories that could collapse under the weight of the machinery at any

moment; the suffering of the people of Syria being bombed by artillery that's been traded by Australian companies. We ask where is God in that suffering? God is sitting with the machinist as she makes our t-shirts and hiding with the families sheltering from the drones. Let's ask ourselves a different question -where are we?

The book of Job is not about *why* bad things happen and where is God. It's about *when* they happen to *any* part of creation and where are *we*? The message here is what we do *when* they happen.

Last time I was here, we spoke about prayer. I said we don't pray to God to sort out the problems of the world, we pray to be equipped so that we can be part of the solution, so that we can be God's hands and feet. God is not the problem, God is the solution. So our question should not be where is God when bad things happen, our question should be where are we? Where are we?

I'm going to use the reading from 1 Corinthians 13 as a prayer. It's the love is patient, love is kind reading. You know the one very well I'm sure. Instead of reading 'love' though, I am going to substitute love for God.

"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have God, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have God, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have God, I gain nothing.

God is patient; God is kind; God is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. God does not insist on God's own way; God is not irritable or resentful; does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. God bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

God never ends."

And now I'm going to use 'I' instead of God:

"I am patient; I am kind; I am not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. I do not insist on my own way; I am not irritable or resentful; I do not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoice in the truth. I bear all things, believe all thing, hope all things, endure all things."

Let this be our prayer.