

## **“Where Is God When Bad Things Happen?”**

Psalm 130, Exodus 17:1-7. John 4:7-15

“He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’” Exodus 17:7

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This third Sunday in Lent, we continue our journey to Good Friday and to Easter Sunday by means of a sermon series addressing some of the more perplexing questions of faith. Next Sunday we will explore the question “Should I Believe in Miracles? Last Sunday, we talked about Jesus as the way to salvation. Today’s concern is the whereabouts of God when bad things happen.

The story is told of an encounter between the famous theologian Paul Tillich and one of his students after he had delivered a particularly obtuse lecture, the theologian that is, not the student. Tillich’s fame and stature were due in part to the fact that he had developed a whole new glossary of terms to be used in the theological conversation. For example, he referred to what the Christian tradition refers to as “God” as “the ground of all being” or “the power of being” or “being itself”. Instead of the word “faith,” Tillich preferred to use the term “ultimate concern”. On the day in question, Tillich’s student mustered his courage after class and said, “Professor Tillich, I very much appreciate your remarks about “the ground of being” and “ultimate concern,” but what I really want to know is this: do you think that the ultimate is concerned about me?”

In the student’s question, we hear the echo of the anxious questions of people throughout the ages who find themselves in circumstances of loss and need and wonder where God is, whether God cares, and if God intends to do anything to help.

As I did last week with the question of salvation and the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, I want to invite you to step with me into the passage rather than standing outside of the scripture and fishing around for answers. The answers to these questions we are raising during Lent are not simple. They are complex and multi-faceted, but within the world of God’s imagination, we can come to see our lives and our seemingly God forsaken world in a different light.

In the Old Testament lesson, the people of Israel have found themselves to be in a place that could be described as between a rock and a hard place. The Exodus from Egypt is over. They have been brought out by God’s mighty, liberating power. They had expected and anticipated new life filled with joy and well-being, but they had found nothing in the wilderness that made for life or joy or well-being. (1) Already there had been three crises of major magnitude. You know the story, how “Pharaoh’s horses and chariots and chariot drivers and armies had pursued

them and overtaken the people.” Desperate and fearful, they had complained to Moses that it would have been better if they had stayed and served the Egyptians rather than die in the wilderness. In the nick of time, the Lord intervened. “The Lord told Moses to stretch out his hand across the sea, and the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land and the waters were divided,” and the Israelites were saved. We will talk another Sunday about what happened to the Egyptians. (Exodus 14)

After that near-death experience, they traveled for three days in the wilderness and found themselves with only bitter water to drink. Again they complained. Again they cried out to the Lord and the Lord showed Moses a stick of wood which he was told to throw into the water and the water became sweet. (Exodus 15). Then came the hunger crisis which was resolved by the Lord and his agent Moses with the daily provision of manna. “Tell the people,” the Lord said to Moses, “that I will rain bread from heaven for you,” and so the Lord did. (Exodus 16)

And now at Rephidim, another crisis occurs, another crisis having to do with water. This time there simply isn’t any. The people again quarrel with Moses. The Hebrew word here means more than to argue or complain. It is the same word used for the filing of an official lawsuit or complaint. The people register their official complaint with Moses against God. No matter that God’s mercy and loving kindness have been with them up to and including the present crisis. They have a new need, and they want it answered now.

I wonder if you have ever been tempted to haul the Lord up on charges. “Excuse me, gracious God, but I have mentioned this problem to you before, and I am still waiting. Are you going to do something? Can you not see that I have a real need here? Are you there? I say, are you there?”

The people in the wilderness are frustrated and fearful, and so they heap their complaints and frustrations on Moses’ head and Moses takes his fears and frustrations and piles them on the Lord’s head. “What am I going to do with them Lord? They are about to stone me.” Though he says no more, one can infer that if he wanted to go ahead and say, “I am pretty irritated with you too, O Lord.”

God acts in a very lean and terse way here. He responds quickly. He responds with first a command and then with a promise. (2) He instructs Moses to go ahead of the people, to take some of the elders, and to take the staff with him that he had once struck the Nile with during the Egypt years. “Just do what I tell you,” the Lord says. That is the instruction. The instruction is followed by the promise. “When you get to where I am sending you, I will stand right there in front of you. Strike the rock and the water will come out so that my people will have something to drink.” And so it came to pass. An odd command and an outrageous promise. When was the last time you saw water coming from a rock? Flowing water from a piece of granite? God delivers. Israel drinks. Misery ends.

Apparently the Lord intends to be with the children of Israel all the way. Apparently, God intends to sustain life, not because the Israelites demand it, not because they have been so winsome in asking for it, but because God is good and God is by nature the One who supplies, as Paul affirms, “every need of yours.” (Philippians 4:19), perhaps not in the way you expect and

not in the manner you anticipate, and perhaps God does not give you exactly what you ask for, (though God does in this incidence), but God intends to sustain life.

Whatever peril we face, God provides what we need for the journey: the journey through the wilderness, the journey of our lives, the journey toward joy, hope, and well-being, which is what God promises for all people, not necessarily on the timetable or in the form we ask for.

I haven't done it in recent months, but last spring I spent a lot of time watching the Travel Channel. Maybe it was because I was in an in-between place in my own life journey. You can get addicted to the Travel Channel. People sit by pools in Acapulco. The sun is shining. A waiter in a crisp white coat offers a frosty drink with a pink umbrella in it. I would like to think that the journey of my life would be like that. But real life is never like that. Real life always passes through the wilderness. There are real problems to be dealt with and real fears to be stared down. As someone wise has said, "in this business called human life, it's hard to get twenty-four smooth hours in a row."

The Israelites had just two choices, and they were exactly the choices you and I face ourselves: either we can give up on God, or we can trust that God will supply what is needed for us to handle whatever it is we have to handle.

On Friday, when I got home late in the afternoon, I found a message from a friend on our answering machine. It was Patti. She is the mother of two girls. She is a pastor in Louisiana. She is the wife of one of the most fabulous guys I know. Tom has been fighting a particularly aggressive form of cancer for the past 11 months. When I heard Patti's voice, I was concerned about what the message might be. Much to my delight, the message was simply to thank me for an article that I had written in a preaching journal that she happened to read in the course of her sermon preparation. The end of the message was this: "We are doing pretty well, Tom, the girls and I, all things considered. We're doing all right in the midst of this living water that never will run dry." I was blown away. Not "in this wilderness of illness and daunting challenges," but "we are doing okay in the midst of living water that never does run dry."

You have every right and reason to shake your fist up to heaven and say, "Why is this happening to me?" Take it to the Department of Divine Justice, if you want to. You are never going to get an answer as to why it is happening to you, but what you will receive, I promise you, enough living water to keep you going. Where is God when bad things happen? Standing right in the middle of it, offering you enough to get you through. Hold your cup up to the rock at Mount Horeb, and you will see what I mean.

Psychologists talk about the difference between the presenting problem and the underlying problem. Let's say a couple comes for therapy. He says, "She is always nagging me to turn the television off." She says, "He never talks to me any more." The presenting problem is the television. The underlying problem is "Do you love me still?" That was the question the Israelites had. Yes, they were worried about the water. That was the presenting problem, but the deeper question was the constancy of God's love. Are you there, and do you care?

In our Presbyterian Book of Common Worship, there is a prayer of confession that has in it these words: Holy and merciful God, you alone know how often we have sinned, in forgetting your

love.” Have you ever thought of sin in terms of forgetfulness about God’s love? When we decide that God doesn’t care, we are likely to fall into pessimism and even despair. I truly believe that despair is the heart of all other sins because when you decide that God doesn’t care, then you begin to wonder, “Why should I care? Why should I care about myself? Why should I care about anybody else? Why should I care about the city in which I live? Why should I care about the suffering of others? If God doesn’t care, why should I care? You plunge into meaninglessness. The chariots and horses of despair descend. Don’t ever let despair happen to you.

I haven’t seen him this morning, but I always look forward to seeing our scout master, David Cox, at church, because David always has hooked on his belt a stainless steel drinking cup. He gets his punch from the punch bowl in the parlor with his stainless steel cup. David reminds me that we ought to go through life with our cups out. The cup of our need. The cup of our trust that wherever the journey takes us, through bright joyful days or through dark valleys of loss, there will be living water to drink through the mercies of God.

I have no idea what your outlook on life was when you came to church today. Perhaps you were just in a particularly sunny mood and happy that all your needs are being met, and the way ahead looks clear. Perhaps you have never known significant loss or fear about whether you are going to survive. If that is the case, then take today’s sermon and tuck it away somewhere and take it out again when the bottom drops out and God seems far away.

I want to turn now to the 130<sup>th</sup> Psalm and its anguishing supplication “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice.” These words are attributed to King David after the death of his son, Absalom, whose life had come to a grim, violent end. You remember how David wept, saying, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom would that I had died instead of you.” Notice that the one who cries out assumes that God is there. Don’t ever assume that just because you can not sense that God is there, God is not there. God is always there, whether you feel God’s presence or not.

David does not blame God for the tragedy that has occurred. If you know the story of David, you know that David was himself, in large measure, responsible for the loss of his son’s life. The matter of who is responsible is mute when grief is great.

I don’t about you, but I sometimes worry about my own prayers when I am in a valley. I wonder if I have said it right. I wonder if I have adequately named the problem. Let David be your role model. You don’t have to compose a perfect paragraph. You just have to know your need and be able to name it. A cry in the dark will suffice. Out of the depths I cry to thee.

I close with a story about a bad thing that happened. William Sloan Coffin, the famous preacher, lost a son in a terrible traffic accident. His son was killed one rainy night. On the day after the accident, a woman came to visit Coffin and Coffin’s sister. She came to offer comfort. She said, “I just don’t understand the will of God when something terrible like this happens.” Dr. Coffin answered: “I’ll say you don’t understand the will of God, lady! Do you think that it was God’s will that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper of his? Do you think it was God’s will that Alex was driving too fast in the rain and that he had had a couple of frosties too

many? My only consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that my son died, that when the waves in Boston harbor closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first to break."

Out of the depths we cry to God and discover that God is there already.

And so this Lenten season, we wait for God, for the one who comes not in power and might but in the form of self-giving love. Almighty God, who makes water come from the rock, becomes the broken, crucified one who knows our losses and our needs to the core. O human race, God cried, would that I could die instead of you. And so God did, and by that death, living water was released upon the world – water that will never run dry.

Jesus said, "Those who drink of the water I give will never be thirsty, and the water I give will become in them a spring of water, gushing up to eternal life." (John 4:14) Thanks be to God. Amen.

(1) Walter Bruggemann, Gaventa, etc. *Texts for Preaching*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995.

(2) Ibid.