

**“Demanding Goodness from God”**  
**Texts: Job 42:1-6; Mark 10:46-52**  
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*Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Mark 10:51*

Thirty years ago a book was published that people have been talking about ever since. Authored by Rabbi Harold Kushner, the book was entitled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Notice “when” not “why” but “when.” *When* the rabbi’s son began gradually to waste away and eventually to die from a cruel, degenerative disease, Kushner found himself questioning how such suffering and loss could happen to him and to his family. He had spent his entire ministerial life trying to comfort and support other people, but when tragedy struck at home, he found himself rethinking everything he had assumed about the nature and will of God. He searched for answers. As generations before him had done, he turned to the Hebrew Scriptures, and there, he began to read again and more deeply than ever, the Book of Job, an account of a righteous man who had himself believed in an all-wise, all-powerful, all-knowing God.

Job’s approach to life was that people were rewarded for living a good life and punished through calamity for their wrongdoing. But that approach, that understanding of how reality works failed to hold water. When Job’s own life fell apart, this honorable man was visited by an unimaginable string of suffering and affliction. He lost his property; he lost his family; he lost his standing in the community. Even his capacity to hope was taken from him. He raged and complained to the Almighty. He demanded an explanation, but none was forthcoming.

What he received was something different – a voice. The voice of the Almighty spoke out a whirlwind and asked Job a series of questions. God questioned Job, after Job had questioned God. “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Where were you, Job, when I laid the foundations of the earth? Do you have an arm like mine? Can you thunder with a voice like mine?” On and on, from the whirlwind, the Almighty spoke, until finally, Job came to the point of understanding. No, the wrong word. He came to the point of acknowledging that only God is God, that he would will never fully understand the ways of God because he, a mere mortal, was finite, and God alone is infinite.

In the passage read this morning, Job kneels in humility and awe before the Creator of the universe and offers a prayer before the Lord. “I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. I have uttered things that I did not understand. I have spoken of things that are just too wonderful for me. I did not know. But now my eyes see.” The suffering and loss Job and his

family had experienced were not wiped away, but now at least the man has a framework in which to heal from calamity and to move beyond suffering.

It was the same with Rabbi Kushner, thousands of years later. The rabbi wrote at the end of his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*: The question is not why bad things happen. What we must do is ask how we will respond, what we intend to do now that what has happened as come to pass. (1) At the end of his response to Almighty God, Job admits his mistake. *I see now that You, O God, alone are holy.*

The Greek writer and philosopher Nikos Kazantzakis wrote, "The highest point a human being can attain is not knowledge, or understanding, or virtue, or goodness, or victory, but something greater than all of those, more heroic than all of those. The highest point a human being can attain is sacred awe." The capacity to experience awe lifts us to the highest pinnacle. Do you sense the irony here? When we are reverent and humble before the greatness of the One Sovereign God, we are at the highest place a human being can go.

Today is Reformation Sunday. We began with the great Reformation hymn, written by Martin Luther, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." We celebrate the particular theological tradition that is ours as Presbyterian Christians. At the very heart of the theology of this great tradition that began in the 16th century is the idea of divine sovereignty, and the conviction that nothing can ultimately thwart God's will or quench the power of divine love. The Reformed tradition has always insisted that for human beings, the glory of God should be our first and last concern. Some of you remember the first question of our Catechism, "What is the chief end of man, [woman too]?" "To glorify God and enjoy God forever."

Our tradition reminds us that God is not answerable to us; rather, we are answerable to God. Even the most ridiculous tragedies and injustices cannot rob life of meaning, because the God whose compassion for creation is so great that when there seemed as if nothing else would do, God sent his own son, who died a senseless, ridiculous death for the sake of this broken world. In his death and in his life beyond death, we are assured that there will never be a darkness, a deprivation, a human suffering that is finally irredeemable.

There is no doubt that an inherent arbitrariness afflicts life in this world. God made the world free, and as a consequence of the misuse of that freedom and the vagaries of nature, the world is broken, and we get broken a lot as we try to maintain our place on this planet. But think about it. Would you want it another way? Would you want your own life to be preprogrammed like a computer? Would you wish that human history be a book that is already written? What if you had no choices? Imagine being a puppet controlled by strings. Would that be a life worth living?

The ambiguity of things does get to us from time to time. Over the years, I have quoted from Archibald MacLeish's play *J.B.*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for drama and a modern interpretation of the story of Job. One of the characters in a rather cynical way has this to say:

If God is God, he is not good.  
If God is good, he is not God.  
Take the even, take the odd;  
I would not stay here if I could  
except for the little green leaves in the wood  
and the wind on the water.

I spoke with a friend a week or so ago who lives in Cobb County. I asked her how she and her family had fared during the torrential rains of late September. She said, "My house had one leak in the roof, but on the street behind me, my friend's house was flooded so badly that the refrigerator was washed out of the kitchen and down the street."

Who can explain why?

During my first years as a pastor, I walked through a very dark valley. The son of an elder in our church was plagued by terrible mental illness. He would not take his medication. He had become menacing toward his mother. One dark day, his father took his son's life, and then took his own life. In his tragically turned way of thinking, he was trying to protect his wife and his son's mother, but it was loss upon loss as dark and deep as life can be. The day of the funeral, I stopped by their house for lunch at noon. The funeral was at 2:00. People had poured in with food - casseroles and sandwiches and hams and everything you can imagine - what do you do except bring a ham? I don't know what you do... The grandmother asked her granddaughter, who was about five, if she would say the blessing. We all bowed our heads, and we prayed, *God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for our food.* When the blessing was over, the grieving grandmother looked at me and said, "At least that's still the same."

God is great, and God is good. We have no right to demand answers from God, but we have every right to demand goodness from God. That's what blind Bartimaeus did that day so long ago. Jesus passed. He cried out to him, "Son of David, have mercy on me." The people nearby were convinced that the blind man was wasting his breath, but Bartimaeus was not deterred. He yelled, "Have mercy on me!" Maybe it was a request but it seems like a demand, doesn't it?

When Jesus saw that the blind man could see that he, Jesus, had a power in him that was beyond the powers of this world, Jesus stood still and said, "Tell him to come here."

The people who had told him not to bother Jesus said, "You better go on over there, son."

Throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Jesus asked, "What do you want from me?"

"Let me see again."

Jesus answered, "Go! Your faith has made you well."

His physical cure was only the half of it. He both regained his sight and was able to follow Jesus on the way. His life had a new direction and meaning he had not even asked for. God's capacity for healing mercy is not limited by the scope of our asking; our prayers are often too modest for the Almighty.

You might spend the rest of Sunday afternoon wondering why it was that Job had to suffer every imaginable indignity and loss on earth and why this man in Jericho was healed and why all the other blind people or deaf people or disabled people in town didn't get healed. If you do, you will miss the miracle of transformation that took place in one person's life. You will miss the glorious news that the power of Almighty God was uniquely present in the person of Jesus Christ. The power of Almighty God is uniquely present in the spirit of Christ, with us here and now. The children sang "Every Time I Feel His Spirit," reminding us there is a power for life and the renewal of life that is all around us everywhere. Destruction will never have the last word.

As we prepare for our Stewardship Season, I hope that you will have your own eyes open to the crying needs all around us in this city and in the world and to the power of God at work in and through the body of Christ, the church.

A Catholic priest, friend in Ohio shared this story some years ago. He had led a Bible study on the Gospel of Mark. When the group got to the passage that we read today, the 10th chapter, they had a very lively discussion about what it meant to be healed, and whether such miracles happened today, or was this just all back in Bible times. Later, a member of the Bible study came to see his priest. He said, "You know, Father, I went home and thought, 'What in the world does this have to do with me?' I prayed that God might show me how the Bible study had anything to do with my life. I came to see that in some ways, I was like blind Bartimaeus. I have beautiful children, but I never spend any time with them. I neglect life in this parish. I'm just too busy for my own good." He told priest, "I prayed that night for the power of Christ to cure my blindness, and to illumine my path to a more balanced life. I'm here to tell you, God answered my prayer."

I cannot explain to you why terrible things happen, but I have come to see that, even in the midst of the most terrible things, God is present. God can even bring life out of death.

The great Reformer Martin Luther, using the imagery of the Psalms, offers the sturdiest answer I know of how to cope with life's darkness and loss: "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing. Our Helper, he amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing..."

So it was, and so it is, and so it shall always be, world without end. Amen.

(1) Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Avon Books, 1981, p. 136.