

**SLD10.11.09 28<sup>th</sup> Ordinary**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Job 38: 1-13, 18**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“Where Was God When \_\_\_\_\_?”**

Sometimes I think nobody knows as much about control as I do. About getting things done...right. What it takes. What should happen. How things are supposed to go.

I get an idea in my head and get the whole thing figured out: what I should do, what others should do, how it should go, how totally terrific the end result will be...IF the universe would just cooperate with what is obviously the best path for all concerned. That is, if other people, if God, would just see the wisdom of my ways and get with my program. Or, at the very least, just get out of my way.

Sound like anybody you know? Sound like you? Sound like me? I *know* it sounds like *me*. As an American, I value rugged individualism. As a selectively liberated woman, I value selective independence. As an Oglesby woman, I value resourcefulness, self-reliance, determination and a can-do spirit. Truly, my personal bone of “I am WOMAN, hear me ROAR” goes back generations.

I like to make things work. And I like best to make them work my way.

Anybody else like me?

Anybody else feel personally affronted, confused or disappointed when things *don't* go your way? Anybody get angry? How about depressed?

Okay, sure, we all know we gotta make *some* compromises, and deal with disappointments, and that not everybody is quite as sharp as we are, but we can't *help* but want what we want, right? And who of us doesn't want things to go well? That is, according to our personal view of what it means for things to “go well,” right?

So when things go wrong, especially when they go terribly, terribly wrong, who of us does not demand to know *why?!.* What happened? What caused it? Whose fault was it? How can we prevent it from happening again? When really big things go wrong in our lives, or in the lives of those we love, we feel we're owed some really big answers. I mean, who's in charge here? Who messed up? Whom can we blame? And, of course, why me? Or why, my beloved one?

If you don't believe in God, you've got it easier in a way. Fate's always been fickle; destiny, random or controlled by the stars, the cards of life are simply the luck of the draw. Or, as as a priestly version of the common bumper sticker might put it, "Poopoo Happens."

But if you *do* happen to believe in God, then you've got a problem. Well, really, an inescapable conundrum. I mean, if God is good, and God is all-powerful, then why is there suffering in the world? Why does poopoo happen? And especially, why does poopoo happen to *good* people? That's just not fair.

Unless maybe God's not all *that* good. (Can we say that in church?) Or maybe not all that powerful? *Cringe.* Or here's another idea: what if suffering's really not all that bad because, you know, you learn from it, and it deepens faith, and strengthens spirit, and like that. Helps you not be so judgmental. In fact, everybody probably needs a little suffering in their life, if nothing else, to make them more interesting.

So then, if suffering's such a terrific thing, does God maybe *cause* it for our greater good? You know, maybe to give us depth or teach us to be more fully human, or just whip us into shape, according to some greater divine plan? Or, since we all know suffering's really a drag, does God use it to punish us? Sort of a reap what you sow thing?

Or, when all is said and done, is it really the devil that causes suffering, that "other God" people have roaming the earth waiting to catch us at our worst.

Or, have we really got nobody to blame but ourselves for the suffering in the world – our own broken nature, our own broken systems, our own pride and greed pure-d meanness.

Still, why does God allow it? Why does God let such misery happen in our lives, in our world. Is it really because of some master plan? Or are we back to God not being all that good. Or powerful.

Whatever your explanation for where God was when, say, the planes rammed into the World Trade Center; or the Jews were incinerated at Auschwitz, or my vibrant big brother drowned in '56; or JFK or MLK or Harvey Milk got shot; or the body bags lined up from Vietnam, or Desert Storm, or Afghanistan; or the lady accidentally allowed her babies to starve because she didn't know how to feed them; whatever your answer for where God was when stuff like that happens, you'll have plenty of company.

And if you're a person of faith, you'll have plenty of company who will go to some pretty serious lengths to protect God's goodness and power. Determined to assert God's purity and omnipotence, we believers will formulate any number of rationales for the presence of suffering, so long as God ends up smelling sweet. Which exercise in futility has been going on for millennia.

Take Job, for example, from which today's text comes.

You recall the story of Job, that unfortunate fellow from Uz who, though he was blameless and upright and feared God and turned away from evil, nevertheless became the targeted chess piece in a high-spirited competition between Satan and God?

The story opens with God bragging on Job's righteousness and Satan wagging his pointing tail and taunting, "Well, sure, Job's righteous. You give him everything he wants! Take it away and he'll curse you to your face!"

And God says, "Oh yeah? Try it!"

So Satan does try it, seeing to it that all of Job's children and his servants and his beasts are killed, but what do you know but that Job *still doesn't* curse God. And God says, "See!"

"Oh sure," retorts Satan. "You let me harm everything but Job himself."

So God says, "Be my guest." At which point Satan afflicts Job from head to toe with nasty festering boils, which he sits on an ashpile and scrapes with a piece of cracked clay. Even then, Job refuses to curse God.

Now he gets pretty mad, and curses the day he (Job) was born. But instead of cursing God, what Job demands is his day in court. "Tell me WHY, God, this is happening to me! Let me tell you all the reasons why it shouldn't be happening and give me one good one why it should!" But God is silent.

Job's friends, though, they're not so silent. Well, they are at first. You gotta give them credit for the first six or seven days when they just sat around and silently commiserated. But then they can't stand it anymore; they just gotta weigh in. If only to calm their own anxiety, to reaffirm their own world view, Job's friends just can't *help* but dish out some explanations as to why Job is experiencing such misery. 'Cause there's gotta be a reason, right?

"Gee, sorry, Job," says Eliphaz the Temanite, "but you've obviously sinned against God. It's too bad and I'm really sorry for you but since God is all-good and all-powerful, what else could explain your suffering?"

"But wait a minute, Eliphaz," objects Job. "I haven't done anything wrong!"

"Come on, now, bro," says friend Bildad. "Does God reject a blameless person? Does God pervert justice? You'd better get on with it and repent, my friend."

“Okay, fine,” says Job. “I repent! I mean, who’s just before God? But I swear I’ve been as good as anybody *can* be on their own steam. And what *I* say is that God destroys the wicked and the blameless alike!”

“You are so arrogant, Job!” chimes Zophar. “I can’t believe you think you’re as good as it gets when it comes to a human being. And what’s more, that you imagine you know best what God should do with you. I’m telling you, if you’ll just direct your heart rightly and stretch out your hands in humility to God, it’ll all work out. The way I see it, God’s trying to teach you something here, Job. You just have to figure out what it is.”

“You guys are full of balloons,” retorts Job. “Not a thing you’ve said is making the least bit of an impression on me, and frankly, I don’t think you can say anything that would! Matter of fact, I don’t think *anybody* has anything to say to me that means a darn thing! Not reason, not natural law, and *certainly* not religion!”

“Now, Job, don’t you be putting down religion,” advises Eliphaz. “When you put down religion, you’re putting down God. Careful, there, Job.”

“Yeah!” chime in Bildad and Zophar. “God is good...all the time, Job. *You* know that. And, sooner or later, the wicked always get punished.”

“Oh baloney,” says Job. “You know full well the wicked go are forever going unpunished!”

“Oooh, you’re bad to question God, Job,” warns Eliphaz.

And so on. And so on. And so on...all the arguments you’ve ever heard to make sense of suffering, they’re all laid out there in Job. Most honest book in the Bible, I say, because you know what God does when God finally *does* respond to Job’s demand for an explanation? God says, “You know what? You guys don’t get to know. Deal with it.”

Not only do Job and his friends not get to know why Job is suffering, God rakes Job's friends over the coals for trying to make stuff up! Rages God against Eliphaz, "My wrath is kindled again you and against your friends *for you have not spoken of me what is right.*"

Mind you, God never gives anybody a hint about what *is* right; only that Job's friends are full of theological hot air and had better clam up. Not a very satisfying conclusion to the story, which, I suppose, is why the debate about God's relationship with suffering continues to this day.

Back in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the great catholic theologian, Thomas Aquinas, worked out a scheme for explaining why evil and suffering exist by stating that (quote) "God wills only the good directly, but permits some evils, and indirectly wills others." That is, God permits and indirectly will defects for the sake of the harmony of the whole.<sup>1</sup> I'm not exactly sure how Aquinas arrived at that ungarbled word but it was especially important in those days to sound like you knew what you were talking about.

John Calvin, on the other hand, approached the topic with a little more humility, suggesting that the human mind is simply not adequate for grasping how or why God wills or does not will things to happen. Though he never would back down from the claim that God is the just cause of everything,<sup>2</sup> hence the annoying doctrine of double predestination (which did not, ladies and gentlemen, distinguish Calvin from Luther, and to which, incidentally, we no longer subscribe.)

More recently, from outside the fold of traditional Christian belief, a *Wall Street Journal* article pitted controversial theologian and author of *The History of God*, Karen Armstrong, against confirmed atheist scientist, Richard Dawkins, on the topic of the existence of God as well as of God's place in the workings of things. I include this here because whether you're a

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from *Summa Theologica* in The Wall Street Journal, "Debating the Really Big Questions of the Universe." September 19, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.fallenandflawed.com/mark-talbot-dg-2009/>

believer or not, it's amazing how easily the question of "where was God when\_\_\_\_\_?" morphs into the question of whether or not God exists at all. (I mean, what kind of god would let this stuff happen?)

Well, British biologist Dawkins begins by asserting that God never existed in the first place, that the only forces responsible for life on earth or anywhere else are the laws of physics marched through the phenomenon of Darwinian evolution, the process of primeval simplicity fostering, by slow, but explicable, degrees, the emergence of complexity, through the nonrandom survival of randomly varying coded information.<sup>3</sup> See Scott if you have questions about this.

As far as suffering goes, Dawkins says, God, not existing and all, is hardly responsible for it. The responsibility for strife obviously rests with humanity. And usually, from Dawkins' point of view, religion itself is somehow at the poisonous root of our misery.<sup>4</sup>

Former nun and current pluralist, Armstrong also asserts that the problem around suffering in the world is not with God but with religion; that is, with the primitive understanding of *modern* western faith. Throughout history, she says, the most influential Jewish, Christian and Muslim thinkers understood that what we call "God" is merely a symbol that points beyond itself to an indescribable transcendence. As the Zen saying goes, we're not meant to "confuse the finger pointing to the moon with the moon itself." "Religion," says Armstrong, "was never supposed to provide explanations that lay within the competence of reason but to help us live creatively with realities for which there are no easy solutions, and find an inner haven of peace."<sup>5</sup>

Maybe so, but that never stopped us believers from *trying* to find explanations that lay within the competence of reason, especially since the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century when Christian

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<sup>3</sup> <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203440104574405030643556324.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://richarddawkins.net/article,1237,God-is-not-responsible-for-war-and-suffering,John-Heard-The-Australian>

<sup>5</sup> <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203440104574405030643556324.html>

theologians (including Calvin) started insisting on transforming God into a hard, provable, intelligible, explicable fact. Armstrong argues that such an approach makes of God little more than an idol of our own projection. Instead, she says, God is an indescribable transcendence whose existence cannot be proved but only intuited by means of spiritual exercises and a compassionate lifestyle that enable us to cultivate new capacities of mind and heart.

So, where exactly *was* God on 9/11, or in 1945, or '56, or '68, or last week or this morning, in the midst of tragedy and suffering on this earth?

Ask Job, or his friends, or anyone else with a strong position on the matter; there's certainly no shortage of opinions. Better yet, ask those who suffer what explanation suffices for them in any given moment. And if they have one, please offer it back with sincerity and compassion.

Just weigh what anyone says or thinks with whatever you know in your own heart about God. Because although Job never got answers to his questions about his suffering, he did, in the end, find peace. Not from information, or doctrine; nor from justifications or rationale, nor even from his belief system, but from his own personal encounter with God. Somehow, through the mystery of some sort of communion between God and Job, Job attained not only peace and restoration but, as scripture says, "to twice as much as he had before." Jb 42:10b

It's still not a happy ending, mind you. Job still lost his whole first family and fortune, which still didn't make any sense, and from which his heart would never heal. Yet through his encounter with God, Job *was* restored to life.

I've seen it happen, haven't you? I've experienced it myself, though I'll be darned if I can explain it. But when God comes to us, we are restored.

To accept, trust, even anticipate this possibility can be a source of hope and comfort, I suppose, even though it also hold a component of tragedy. After all, who of us does not want more control and less pain? Who of us can't come up with a better plan for a happier ending? Who doesn't prefer certainty to mystery, evidence to miracles, clear answers to vague universal inquiries?

But what I learn from Job and from my own life is that when it comes to God's relationship to suffering, we flat don't get to know. Which for me raises another question: what would it mean to trust God anyway? What would it mean to surrender and make room for a mystery we can't grasp, an outcome we can't control, a divine process we don't understand, except perhaps through occasional glimpses of God's nature through Christ Jesus? (Someone else the world could not understand, control, or make room for.)

It's hard to say. Step back far enough and all these positions about God and suffering seem arguable. Me, I'm drawn to the words of one Donald D. Dowdy of Greensboro, N.C. in an op-ed piece responding to the article by Dawkins and Armstrong.

Says Dowdy, "I conclude from their writings that both (Dawkins and Armstrong) are here on planet Earth totally by accident, and that their ancestors evolved from some primeval stuff that just happened to be around, which leads one to think there is no reason for their existence. They have no purpose, no one to answer to, nothing to look forward to after death, and when they die, they will cease to exist. Their accomplishments during their 70 years of life, compared to eternity, will be completely insignificant. ...I, on the other hand," writes Dowdy, "have a purpose and a future. I was created by God to worship God and enjoy being in God's presence forever. I am in unity with God through God's son Jesus Christ and

am assured to be with him when I die, at which time I will live forever with joy, contentment, etc. No pain, no tears. Frankly,” concludes Dowdy, “I prefer my position to theirs.”<sup>6</sup>

And so do most of us here at Emory Church, at least most of the time. Most of the time, what carries most of us here in this community through the rollercoaster of life, what comforts us in the face of mystery and accompanies us on a path of faith so populated with unanswerable questions, is our faith in a God enfleshed in Christ Jesus, and now present through the ever-livening breath of the Holy Spirit.

But you know, when that fails to suffice? When we’re just so let down or numbed out or generally befuddled that we can’t believe or even care anymore where, or whether, God is? Then, more often than not, what carries us in *this* community is simply our acceptance, affection, and support of one another. Which, in the end, is perhaps where God was all along.

To the glory of God. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204518504574419671471971230.html> Letters to the Editor, 10/9/09