Rev. Dr. Camille Cook Howe September 18th, 2022

House of Hope Job 42:1-6, 10-17

St. Paul, Minnesota The Heart of Charlie Brown

Job 42:1-6

Then Job answered the Lord:

“I know that you can do all things
    and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
**3**‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
    things too wonderful for me that I did not know.
‘Hear, and I will speak;
    I will question you, and you declare to me.’
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
    but now my eye sees you;
**6**therefore I despise myself
    and repent in dust and ashes.”

And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends, and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring. The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning, and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. He also had seven sons and three daughters. He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job’s daughters, and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. After this Job lived one hundred and forty years and saw his children and his children’s children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

“All’s well that ends well.” As the saying goes. Do you believe in that colloquialism? With a quick read through the book of Job you might summarize this poetic folktale with that line. “All’s well that ends well.” In the book, Job suffers greatly. He is a good man with a good life until it crumbles around him. He loses his animals, his servants, his children, his money, and his health. No one can understand it. Job believed that if you were a good person then God would bless you with a good life. He tried to be good, he was known for being good, he was good and so he was incredibly confused. Job’s friends and his wife dismissed Job’s strong faith as faulty or Job’s God as weak but throughout the misery Job refuses to reject or curse God. It is a dark, sad story but at the end of the book, in chapter 42 where we read today, Job’s fortunes are restored, he had more money, more animals, and more children – hurray! See God is good – everything is fine! But is it? I don’t know if all is well now. Ask anyone who has suffered great loss, endured great trials, or undergone great trauma if when the tides turn, they would then reply, ‘all’s well that ends well.’ I doubt it.

How about this: It is a Saturday afternoon, and you are baking cookies and you make the mistake of adding twice as much salt as required by the recipe so then you must go back and double all the other ingredients and it’s a pain but at the end of it you have double the number of cookies. ‘All’s well that ends well.’ Perfect use of the phrase. But Job’s story is not the same thing…the depth of Job’s pain and suffering are not erased with new children and restored wealth. Does a new chapter erase the pain of the senseless suffering of the last one? It does not.

Our theology cannot be so flimsy that we would say to people who are suffering, “Things will work themselves out, just read chapter 42.” This was the preaching Job’s friends gave him, ‘Don’t worry you can get more animals, it is fine, the skin boils will get better, I’m sure you can still have more children.” It makes you just want to punch them. Unfortunately, there are a lot of well-meaning sermons on just this kind of message. “Have good cheer, God will work everything out in the end.” “Don’t worry, it is part of God’s plan.’ Or my least favorite, “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” As thoughtful, Reformed Christians, we must read carefully into this text and see both what is there and what is not there.

\*What is NOT there is an answer to the age-old question of senseless suffering and the role of God in its midst. Theodicy – God and the existence of evil is not solved for us in story of Job.

\*What is NOT there is the false notion that faithfulness equates to a carefree life. In 2018, when my house in Washington, D.C. suffered what insurance companies label – a total loss fire – structure and contents all destroyed, a well-meaning person commented, “I just can’t believe something like this could happen to a pastor!” As in, how could something bad happen to someone good. Job is a story that proves it can and it is not a book that gives us the answers as to why it can. It makes Job in many ways a hugely frustrating book.

\*But what IS there is a story of a man who spent a long, long-time suffering and a long, long time thinking about his faith and grappling with his theology and understanding of his God. And ultimately the faith of his youth, when all was easy, did not hold up as life’s chapters unfolded for him. The theology that God would bless those who were righteous, and their paths would be straight proved to be unhelpful for Job. And so, among all the other things Job lost, he also lost the assurances of his black and white theology. His faith was going to have to evolve or be destroyed.

Job’s understanding of God did change throughout the book – how could it not. And Job’s understanding of himself changed throughout the book – how could it not. He learned God was not just a divine being who handed out lottery cards and road maps to the people based on their behavior. And Job also learned about his own capacities and perspectives. He learned that he could handle far more than he ever believed, he learned that his faith was far more nuanced than he ever knew, and he learned that he could still be a man of integrity and faithfulness even when the chips were down. Both learnings about self and about God were significant and shaped his life and his faith forevermore. It isn’t a story that answers all our questions, but it is a story of man living life and growing in faith and seeking to be faithful.

Julie Lythcott-Haims wrote a book called *How to Raise an* Adult and another one called *Your Turn* on how to be an adult. From 2002 to 2012, Julie was the Dean of Students at Stanford University. Over her time at Stanford, she witnessed a concerning trend that more and more students were arriving with great lists of accomplishments but no sense of independence – kids who had never made any decisions for themselves, kids who had been totally protected from failure, kids who never needed to solve any complicated problems. All obstacles had been removed from their paths. They had just been overparented and consequently were lost and anxious and absolutely did not know how to handle it when life did not go their way. Her books are about how to try to combat this and to raise resilient, self-sufficient, and successful children. One of the key mistakes she says parents try to make are to shield their children from any kind of suffering. And ultimately this doesn’t pay off or prepare kids for adulting. As a parent, I get the instinct.

It is a unique privilege to preach at the House of Hope Church and bring my own children to my home church. My three brothers and I used to love taking those gold seals reserved for visitors and sticking them on each other’s backs without getting noticed…naughty! Do not do that, children. House of Hope is the place where I was baptized a few decades ago. My parents stood alongside, John and Ann Tulloch, whose son Rob was baptized on the same July morning. Neither Peg nor AJ, or John or Ann, or the minister Rev. Molly McMillion, or the members of this church at that time promised baby Rob or baby Camille that our lives would be free from suffering or from trials of different shapes and sizes. Jesus never made those promises to the men and women he baptized. The promises have to do with God’s unfailing love and God’s presence to be with us always. Suffering, even random and senseless suffering, is woven throughout the biblical texts. It is woven in the lives of men and women of all ages, even those of us trying to be faithful and decent. God’s existence and presence does not eradicate the hard in life. God’s existence and presence, I believe enables us to keep going through the hard, to get back up when we have fallen, to keep the faith even when doubters are all around. Job is a good story to tell our children, not for the easy answers it provides but for the model of faithfulness it displays.

I haven’t lived in Minnesota for over twenty years, I have lived in several different countries and different states. And I have spent many hours defending my Minnesotan roots. One of my preaching professors at seminary, after listening to one of my sermons, asked me where I was from. I told him Minnesota. He said, “I thought there were only cows and mosquitos in Minnesota!” As though real humans could not possibly originate from such a place. My freshman philosophy professor at Vanderbilt was appalled to have someone from Minnesota in his class – this was the time when the professional wrestler Jesse ‘the body’ Ventura had recently been elected Governor and many were donning, “My Governor can beat up your Governor” t-shirts. My professor insisted we must all have lost our minds.

Now I consider myself a self-appointed ambassador of the state. One of the cards I like to play about our Minnesota gems – besides F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Prince, is Charlie Brown. Come on! We are the state of Charles Schultz and Peanuts, the universally beloved cartoon. Take that East Coast elites – Minnesota gave you Snoopy!! Okay, I digress.

But here’s the connection – Biblical character Job, I believe, had the heart of Charlie Brown. Remember how many times Charlie Brown charged the football, ready to kick it with all his might, only to have it whisked away and then he would fall flat on his back? Charlie Brown never lose faith, he just gets up, dusts himself off and tries again. Our faith doesn’t protect us from falling, it just enables us to get back up when we do. That is what Job was like – never losing faith – always getting back up.

The writer Willa Cather wrote, “There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they never had happened.” In all these stories there is loss and there is joy. The ways the stories diverge is through the ways we respond to the joy and to the loss. In times of joy can we be humble and open enough to share it and spread it? In times of loss can we find a place beyond our mourning to seek after God? In all times, can we keep faith in the divine, keep hope in the future, and keep sharing ourselves and our love with others?

There are no guarantees in this life and bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. Suffering exists and not even the best helicopter parent can completely shield a child from it. And God didn’t shield us from it. God just tried to be in it with us. And so, we will try to have the heart of Job – not because ‘all’s well that ends well’ but because we have been given a way to live in times of joy and in times of loss - faithfully, hopefully, compassionately. Be proud Minnesota, you’ve got that in you – the heart of Job, the heart of Charlie Brown, the heart of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.