

First Presbyterian Church  
October 28, 2012  
Rev. Pen Peery

The Grace of Dust and Ashes  
Job 38:1-7, 34-38; 42:1-6  
Reformation Sunday

Our scripture for today is from the book of Job<sup>1</sup>. The passage is from the end of the book – but first it is important to know what came before the parts of scripture that I will read in a moment.

Job is unlike any other book in the Bible. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that “The book of Job [could be classified as] dramatic fiction. That is, it does not purport to be history; [rather] it is theater designed to voice an alternative reality to invite [the people of God] to reimagine [their] explanation of reality.”

On the surface, the reality that Job explores is the problem of suffering. Of “why bad things happen to good people.” And so the book begins, sounding very much like a story: “There once was 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.” Job had a large family, a successful business, and a happy life.

Covering 37 chapters of the book in about 30 seconds, here is what happens: Seeing that Job is righteous and blameless, Satan enters the picture and decides to test God by making a wager. “Job loves you – but you have blessed him with material possessions, good health, and a large family. Yes, he is blameless and faithful – but does he fear you for nothing? Would he be so faithful if you caused Job pain?” God takes the wager – and Job experiences pain, humiliation, the loss of his family, his possessions, his health, and his dignity. This is how the story begins.

The majority of the book is made up of speeches between Job and his friends. When all is lost, Job’s friends show up to console him. At first, they do something helpful – they sit with Job in silence. Then, they do something that is less helpful – they try to make sense of what has happened. “One by one they come to Job with their traditional explanations for Job’s pain and suffering. (Maybe you have heard these explanations before...) ‘I’m sorry you are in a bad way, but you must have done something wrong,’ says Eliphaz. ‘Don’t forget - God is always right,’ adds Bildad. ‘Even if you don’t know what you have done wrong, God does,’ suggests Zophar,

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<sup>1</sup> For much (most!) of this sermon, I am indebted to my friend and colleague, the Rev. Dr. Chris Tuttle, pastor at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Durham, NC. Chris’s paper on this text provided much of the exegetical guidance and his personal story is wrapped up in the interpretation of this passage. (The Well, 2009, Austin, TX)

'You should just go ahead and say you are sorry and let God apply whatever repentance is due.'

In the end, the friends' explanations for Job's suffering prove to be altogether insufficient. Job has done nothing wrong; he is blameless; and there is no reasonable answer for the "why?" question that Job asks.

And so, with nothing – especially with no answer to his questions – Job lashes out in anger at God, questioning God's goodness and mercy and justice.

And then...finally...in the 38<sup>th</sup> chapter, God speaks.

Listen with me for the word of God:

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Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:  
'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?  
Gird up your loins like a man,  
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?  
Tell me, if you have understanding,  
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!  
Or who stretched the line upon it?  
On what were its bases sunk,  
or who laid its cornerstone  
when the morning stars sang together  
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?  
'Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,  
so that a flood of waters may cover you?  
Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go  
and say to you, "Here we are"?  
Who has put wisdom in the inward parts,  
or given understanding to the mind?

A little later, Job speaks. I am continuing to read from the 42<sup>nd</sup> chapter:

Then Job answered the Lord:  
'I know that you can do all things,  
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.  
"Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?"  
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,  
things too wonderful for me, which 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;

therefore I despise myself,  
and repent in dust and ashes.'

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Today is Reformation Sunday. It is a day when we sing big hymns written by John Calvin and Martin Luther; a day when we celebrate our heritage as children of the Protestant Reformation; a day when we lift up what is distinctive about our Presbyterian brand of faith.

A few weeks ago, the lot of us who celebrate this Reformation Sunday made the headlines...but not necessarily in a good way. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, for the first time in the history of our country Protestants make up less than half of our population (48%).<sup>2</sup>

When it comes down to it, we Protestants are losing our market share because of the growth of another group. The Pew research finds that the fastest growing group within the religious landscape are not Catholics, or Non Denominationalists, or atheists, or, even, Pentecostals. No, the fastest growing group is the “nones” – not the n-u-n-s, but the n-o-n-e-s. People who believe in God but who have chosen not to affiliate with any particular church or denomination or sect. The numbers are pretty shocking: the “nones” comprise 20% of the US population as a whole and more than 1/3 of the population for those aged 30 and younger<sup>3</sup>.

There are plenty of people who make a good living trying to make sense out of this new reality.

Some blame the mainline Protestant church for the perceived ways we have acquiesced to the culture around us. Others, for the ways we have refused to take the needs of the culture around us seriously.

Some blame the politicians.

Some blame a lack of good parenting to raise children in the faith.

Some blame the rampant individualism of our culture that leads people to think that religion is all about finding personal fulfillment and comfort.

Some blame the very way religion became institutionalized to begin with – and see the breakdown of religious institutions as a good thing.

Who is right?

Who knows?!

What I do know is that in the face of anxiety, there is always a lot of blame to go around.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-201\\_162-57528437/protestants-no-longer-the-majority-in-u.s/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-201_162-57528437/protestants-no-longer-the-majority-in-u.s/)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>

I don't have clear opinion about how we arrived at the point where 1/5 of our country does not affiliate with a particular religion or church, but I do have a conviction that many...not all, but many...of that 1/5 of our population are actually hungry to connect with and worship God...and that one reason why the "nones" are sitting on the sidelines is that they are not satisfied with the easy explanations and smug certainty that they perceive from America's churches or places of worship.

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Scholars believe that the book of Job became a part of Holy Scripture because it offered a counter-testimony to those *all-too-sure-of-themselves religious people*. People who thought they had God all figured out. People who thought they could define all the parameters of faith in order that their actions would generate God's equal reaction: if they did something good, God would reward them. If they did something bad, God would punish them.

The book of Job upends all of those assumptions and introduces us to a God who doesn't always make sense. When we hear about God making a wager with Satan...and taking away Job's family, possessions, and good health...it just leaves us kind of cold.

It leaves us cold because there is a part of us, like Job, that wants answers. There is a part of every one of us that needs things to make sense. Each of us has asked the question "why" in the midst of life's storms.

We yearn to know what I did to deserve this,  
or whose fault it is that she was diagnosed,  
or how could I have missed the fact that he was struggling with that?

Surely the God we worship provides those answers, right?  
Maybe not.

Says Brueggemann, "The most remarkable factor in the drama of Job is the complete mismatch between Job's demand [for answers] and God's response."<sup>4</sup> What God gives is, essentially, a non-answer. In the face of Job's questions God is silent.

As someone has said, it is almost as if God's response to Job's questions could be paraphrased like this:

"[Okay...] Do you persist in staying locked into a world of easy explanations? Are you going to dispute my right to control what comes upon you? Are you trying to imprison my free and gratuitous love in your theological concepts? Do you want to make yourself judge of my actions?"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, Walter

<sup>5</sup> Gutierrez, Gustav, *Job: On Suffering*

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We Presbyterians call that “the sovereignty of God.”  
It is one of the hallmarks of our faith.

We use that phrase, not so much to acknowledge that there are things about God that we do not – and cannot – understand, but more, we describe God as “sovereign” to remind us of the fact that God is free to do whatever God chooses; that God is God, and we are not. And that God will continue to be God, regardless of how well it fits into our expectations of how God should act.

On April 4, 1968, Robert Kennedy was campaigning for President and was on his way to give a speech to an African American audience in Indianapolis when he found out that Martin Luther King, Jr. had been shot and killed. As Kennedy arrived at the site where he was to give his speech, he knew that the news had not yet reached the poor, African American crowd.

As he stepped to the podium, Kennedy told his audience that he would only be speaking for a few minutes because he had learned of some devastating news. After sharing the tragic account of King’s assassination, Kennedy gave one of the most remarkable speeches of his career where he reflected on King’s life and encouraged those gathered to put away any tendency towards bitterness and hatred and replace it instead with compassion and love. He ended his speech by quoting – from memory – lines from a poem by [Es-cha-lus] Aeschylus:

“Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the human heart. Until...in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.”<sup>6</sup>

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I have a friend – a best friend – who has experienced more suffering than I could possibly imagine. I have come to believe, when considering the problem of suffering and where God is amidst that suffering, that we are wise to first listen to the voices of those who have suffered. Reflecting on his difficult experience, my friend Chris said this:

“God’s grace comes to us in many ways – in times of joy and celebration, as friends are made, as babies are born, as we use our gifts for something beyond ourselves, whether in our law firm or on a mission trip to Mexico. But it comes, too, in times of crisis, as we receive a diagnosis, as we lose a job, as we sit beside a hospital bed wondering if our son will live.

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<sup>6</sup> Again, with great thanks to my friend and colleague, the Rev. Dr. Christopher Tuttle for his paper on this text from *The Well* (2009). Here, Chris quotes from a book written by Joe Klein.

That awful grace of God meets us in those places, rarely answering our question directly, but always, always, transforming us. Sometimes the silence, the non-answer, is so full and so loud and so overwhelming you cannot help but cover your ears. And we are re-focused, re-centered, on the One it is about. Not us, not our families, not the fierce love we have for anyone or anything, but the God who brings it into being, sustaining it all, sustaining us.”<sup>7</sup>

I think there are lots of people in our world – especially people who are not yet in our churches – who are hungry to be in a relationship with a God as big as that.

Not a God of easy explanations – but a God who speaks to us from the whirlwind. A God whose grace is sufficient and amazing and mysterious.

And a God who, believe it or not...in all of God’s splendor, claims us through a Son.

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<sup>7</sup> Tuttle (The Well – 2009)