

*Theology for Thinking People: Theodicy*  
The Story of Job  
John 11:1-44

We've been talking for several weeks about *Theology for Thinking People*. Next Sunday, Brian McLaren will be here and will speak from his book called *Faith After Doubt*. If this series has left you more sure of what you don't believe than of what you do, or if it's encouraged you to wrestle with questions you always thought you were supposed to push away and not think about, I think Brian will help. And if this series has raised for you even more questions, I want to say, 'That's good.' Faith does no good at all if it's not honest. You are meant to bring all of yourself into conversation about God. Conversation with God.

Today we come to what is often called 'the problem of evil,' or sometimes, 'the problem of suffering'. The fancy word for this theological dilemma is *theodicy*, which means, literally, the *vindication* of God. In other words, how can we stand up for God—how can a good, loving God stand up for himself—in a world where so much goes wrong, unexplainably, unfairly.

The Bible doesn't shy away from this question. The Old Testament Book of Job, which you just heard summarized pretty well, I think, heads straight into it. It comes up again in the New Testament when Jesus arrives in Bethany, later than expected, and finds that his friend Lazarus has died. Bethany is a city whose name means 'House of Affliction', a clue the Bible gives us that we're headed into rocky waters here. Lazarus' sisters meet Jesus, and the first thing they say to him is, 'Where were you? Our brother wouldn't have died if you'd been here!' The friends who had gathered echo the same confusion. They whisper to one another, 'This is the person who made blind people see, who stilled storms, and fed thousands of people with a little boy's lunch. Why couldn't he save his friend?'

Thoughtful people have always asked 'Why?' Why does God let children die? Why do terrible things keep happening to good, innocent, even faithful people, while others seem to get away with plainly evil acts? Why would a good God let—or make—hurricanes, tsunamis, fires, earthquakes destroy whole swaths of the earth? We do not understand. There is no excuse. Many have walked away from faith, given up on God, because they do not have an answer to these 'why' questions. To them, God *cannot* be vindicated.

Theologians sometimes treat 'the problem of suffering' as though it were a challenging math equation. Like some genius with a beautiful mind might figure out what God is thinking, make sense of suffering that feels to us irrational, even cruel. Like Job's friends, they—we—offer explanations for what cannot be explained.

- Everything that happens is part of God's plan.
- Free will explains everything; human failure and bad choices must be involved somehow.
- God is using this tragedy for some greater good, a device to make someone else a better person, or the world a better place.
- God is as pained by suffering as you and I are, but some things even God cannot change.

Mostly, I have believed this last argument: that even God is powerless to stop the forces of life and death that are at work in the world. That the most God can do sometimes is love and

empower us through whatever hardship life brings us—grief, illness, injustice, loss. That God promises to stay with us no matter what. That that must be enough. That it *is* enough.

Now I'm not so sure that's right. I think maybe I too have tried to wrap up neatly a whole bunch of questions that keep poking out of their taped-together box. How do I justify giving God credit for good and beautiful things and not also hold God responsible for the things that seem so wrong? Have I reduced God by the reach of my imagination, made God into something less powerful, less absolute than God actually is? Forced something infinite into the size of my mind, a shape I can understand and have words to explain?

I don't know.

I want to hold these two stories up next to each other this morning, this one from the Old Testament, and one from the New. The story of Job, and the parallel story of Jesus, who heard his friend Lazarus was sick and went to him, but arrived only after Lazarus had already died, too late to help.

Job railed at God. He didn't hold back his anger, or put his complaints in polite, submissive language. Job did what the biblical writers did much better than anyone I know: *lament*. They hurled their sorrow, their anguish, back to a God they did not understand. The psalmists accused God of unfairness, made those accusations their prayers. They said things to God like, 'You have lifted me up and thrown me away' (Psalm 102). Jesus used their words on the night he knew he would die: 'Why have you forsaken me?' (Psalm 22) They addressed God directly: *Why would you do this to me?*

No matter how angry or hurt they were, they, and Job, never stopped talking to God.

Before Jesus went to Lazarus' tomb, he too prayed. He wept. Tears are signs of sorrow, but they can also hold other emotions. The Greek word for this moment in the Gospel doesn't mean sad; it means 'to snort with anger'. Like a horse jerking its head and pawing the ground, Jesus was angry at the injustice of Lazarus' death. Frustrated, maybe, that he couldn't save his friend.

Finally, Job stops talking, and God answers him 'out of the whirlwind'. For four chapters, God talks back to Job. God asks Job questions—not to shut Job up, or to shame him into silence, but to give him a different perspective. God takes him on a virtual tour of creation, of the cosmos actually—from grasshoppers to the galaxy. With question after question, God asks Job to imagine a creation more expansive than the one that Job—and we—have imagined ourselves to live at the center of. God challenges Job to see himself as part of an intricate universe that includes everything ever created. At the end of this exchange, Job is still beaten down and exhausted by his losses. But he is satisfied, at peace. He knows who he is. He has glimpsed the immensity of a mysterious creation he is part of. However diminished he is, he is a person who stands in the presence of God.

Jesus performs an amazing miracle. He makes Lazarus, four days in a tomb, breathe again. And then he reminds the people gathered around, the ones who had felt powerless in the face of death, that they too are part of Lazarus' resurrection. 'Unbind him, so he can live.'

In my experience, and in every Bible story I know, God never answers the question *Why?* No matter how many times we ask, God never answers this question. The reason why bad things happen--and why good things happen--is never explained to us.

Maybe we are meant to keep asking, to lament at the injustice of it all. Maybe it's our questions, our lament, even our anger, that bring us into the presence of a God who is so much bigger than our stumbling, inadequate theologies and explanations.

But God is not inattentive to our suffering. When the worst things happen, there is one question God always answers:

*And now, how shall we live?* How shall we live as people who are faced with unexplainable loss, who have seen that life is often unfair, who know that we cannot always bend the world into the shape of justice?

*And now, how shall we live?*

You know God's answer. It is the same every time.

Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly beside the Creator of the universe who is your God too. Love your neighbors—the ones you feel affection for and the ones you don't—with the same compassion and concern you feel—you need—for yourself.

And that is enough. No matter what happens, it will be enough.