

January 15, 2017 “Strangers In A Land Of Darkness” Job 2:11-3:10

Let me share this memory with you. When I first came to faith, I launched into reading the Bible with a vengeance. Barbara and I were in our late teens, and she gave me my first Bible as a gift. In the last section of that volume there was a reading programme which if followed as a daily discipline would take the reader through the whole of the Bible in a single year. It consisted (I am over simplifying, but you will get the idea) it consisted of approximately 3 chapters from the Old Testament, one Psalm and half a chapter of the New Testament each day. I went at that discipline like a dog after a bone.

When I arrived at the book of Job, I confess I was not a happy camper. And this morning's reading supplies you with the answer to the question, what was it that disturbed me about the book of Job. It was a little too close to home. I have said a number of times that when I was younger, I continually battled with depression. In my late teen years that was especially true. When I was up...I was very, very up. And when I was down, it was like I had been plunged into a place of darkness. It was probably pretty serious. I know this: our minister at the little Presbyterian Church Barbara and I attended as young people, the minister cautioned Barbara against marrying me....because of my depression. Clearly he felt (and it may have been sound advice) that I needed professional help.

One thing is certain. I have always believed that it was only faith in Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the church during those years, (in other words the grace of God) that got me through that season of depression, and the seasons of depression that have dogged my steps through the major portion of my life. But the book of Job did not seem to help! And the reason I believe was simple. It is a very accurate description of a man who experiences the “dark night of the soul”. Job's suffering is real. It started out as coping with material loss, and the death of family and friends. And then in the second round of Satan's endeavour to break him, it becomes the battle with physical illness.

In the first portion of this morning's reading, Job's 3 friends come to visit him. Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. They have heard about all the troubles that have come Job's way and like good friends will do, they set out and came to Job with the single goal of comforting him in this time of darkness. The severity of Job's condition surprises them. They can hardly recognize him. He has lost weight. His colour is like his mood...gray. If they said nothing, what they were thinking was, “O my!” Clearly they feel that Job is in danger of losing his life. They weep, they tear their clothes, they sprinkle dust on their heads....they are in mourning...a symptom of how bad Job looks. In other words, this is really serious. So for seven days they sit with Job. They do not say a word. In part, because they do not know what to say. They are in shock. They fear for his life.

What we have been told is that this is all the result of Satan's work. He has engineered Job's losses. And in this second stage, he has engineered Job's illness. What Job does not know, is that he is not going to die. He is not going to die because the Lord his God, Almighty, has forbidden Satan to destroy Job's life. And here is a singular lesson about the trials and tribulations of life. Hardship harms our ability to be steadfast in faith. And it is only by the grace of God, that the experience of hard times fails to destroy our faith. Only the grace of God, makes it possible for us to come through what I will continue to call the dark night of the soul, and still be a person who believes.

And Job reacting to his new circumstances, the psychological pain, and the physical pain of his infections, finds himself in a strange land, the land of doubt.

Here is something I found difficult to grasp as a young man. The lessons of the book of Job

in the Bible include these insights. Suffering is real. No one, no one is immune. You cannot build your life so that you will never know pain. People you care about and love are going to die. Circumstances that you are going to witness first hand will cause you to wonder how these things could happen...especially if God is a loving God, a caring God, an Almighty and Saving God. In fact the negative impact of painful experiences, are eventually going to cause the average person to doubt everything he or she has believed. And in part, (I underline this because it is important) and in part the reason things will not make sense and will reduce us to asking why, why me, why this, why now, is that there is at work in the world and even in people around us, one whose principal goal is to destroy us and our relationship with God...Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

That is part of what this book called Job is about. Evil is real. And it is not about the roll of the dice, or bad luck. It is personal. We are in the cross hairs and are targeted by the one whom the Bible calls Satan. The one Jesus called Satan. The one whom the Holy Spirit of God knows as the spirit of chaos and destruction. There is a war for the soul's of men and women and children. Satan does his best to destroy that which brings light and joy, in order to produce darkness and pain. As we become seriously old....having tasted the flavours of many summers and many winters and everything in between, we have not seen it all...none of us have.... but we are less surprised by what people do to people, and by what happens in what seems to be circumstances that produce pointless suffering. And yet it disturbs us. We shake our heads. It drags us down. We wonder. We doubt. We cannot reconcile what occurs, with what we believe... The story of Job proclaims that we are not dreaming, and we are not weak. That we are indeed living in a war zone.

Job has arrived at that point at which he wishes he had never been born. The pain is too much. All he can see is the darkness. Reminds me of the concluding line of a recitation I did in public school. "There is no joy in Mudville. Mighty Casey has struck out." This is no joking matter. Suffering brings us at least close to the point, at which we are in danger of losing hope. Which is dangerously close to losing faith. If you are not there you have a big reason to rejoice. But this Biblical story of Job reminds us, and reminds us all, me too...faith, hope, love...these are fragile things. They need to be handled with care. They need to be nurtured. And it is not all God's work, or God's responsibility. We have to be willing to fight, to consciously put forth effort to keep, and to increase our ability to believe, to hope for a better day, to love, and to give love to others, and more and more of them.

I want to share with you a marvelous secret. I hope it inspires you in the midst of this gray lesson. Job is cursing the day he was born. He says in the midst of his pain, "that day...may it turn to darkness. May God above not care about it." It is in chapter 3 and it is verse 4. In the King James Version it is said this way, "Let that day (the day he was born) be darkness. Let not God regard it from above." You see what those words mean is this. Job is cursing the day he was born. There is no question that he is suffering. His suffering is real. As his friends can see it could well be life threatening. But here is the point.

Even in his pain, and his depression, (because Job is depressed and distressed) Job knows something he finds hard to recognize. It is a secret in his soul. And it is a result of his walk with God, his life of faithfulness. He says, may God not care about the day I was born, and Job says that because in some part of both his brain and his soul, he knows God does care about the day he was born. He knows God does care about who he is and how he lives. He knows God regards him. Recognizes him. Created him. Blessed him. Raised him up. And in that same corner of his mind and soul, he knows God cares about him on this day, this day of pain and loss, this day when it seems to him to be so dark. That he is tempted to shake his head and think, it's over. I'm alone. He never says that. You know why? Because he knows in that corner of his mind and soul, he is not alone, even if he cannot see God at this

moment and these circumstances.

In times when we are really in trouble we say things like, “Jesus, where are you? God where are you right now?” Because in a corner of our being, mind and soul and body we know...God is. He cared before all this...and He cares now.

Hang on to that. Especially when you are hurting. God is. God is in heaven above. And God cares about you, your mind, your soul and your body. He sent His son into the world to redeem you. Every bit of you. To redeem you for eternity. In time and beyond time. No, we are not going to live forever in this body that shows signs of wearing out and wearing down. But even as the believer Job becomes a stranger in a strange land, he knows, and we know...God cares. God regards you, recognizes you. He loves you.

It was number 514 in the old, old, old Presbyterian Book of Praise. “God sees the little sparrow fall. It meets His tender view. If God so loves the little birds. I know He loves me too. He loves me too, He loves me too, I know He loves me too. Because He loves the little things, I know He loves me too.”

Let us pray:

O Lord our God, Jesus our Saviour, Holy Spirit our comforter, remind us in times of pain and circumstances that cause us to see only what is wrong in the world, of your precious, redeeming, forever love. Pull the clouds that blind us apart and warm us with the light of your presence, that we might serve you and be a good neighbour to those around us. Remind us that in Your presence our weakness becomes marvelous strength. In Jesus name we pray. Amen