

July 12, 2020 We Are Witnesses Pt. 12 Job 31:1-8

Dearly Beloved;

I am writing to you today to share a sense of marvelous personal blessing. This past week, on Tuesday, Rebekah began her summer holidays. Late in the afternoon, she drove into the heart of downtown Toronto, picked up Matthew (so that he would not have to travel on any part of public transportation) and the two of them came to Belleville, arriving at about 8:00 pm. It was the first time we had seen either of them since February, and we delighted in taking turns hugging and holding them close. They have been careful about self-isolating in their separate residences, and Rebekah on a number of occasions did grocery runs for her brother so that he would not have to line up and mask often. She also got him grocery items that were out of stock in some of the stores in the heart of the city. That was a problem in April and early May especially. We spent Wednesday, Thursday and Friday at the farmhouse until mid afternoon and are weekendening in Belleville. You know what I am doing at my desk, and Rebekah is putting the last touches on a video service for her people as well. I said summer holidays, but she continues to blog daily, and put up services she has been working on as pulpit supply is not possible in the year of Covid-19. And then there is the additional problem that great numbers of our clergy are simply not up to speed on doing internet services. No one was prepared for the era we are currently working through. So we redefine the holiday period. My delight is to be able to share with you that we have our family around us, with us, and the

addition of Rebekah's dog to add to our own. We celebrated at the farmhouse by doing the turkey dinner (which of course lasts for most of the week) that had been planned for Easter. You will probably remember that that is precisely when this self-isolating era broke upon us. We are all well, and I pray this pastoral note finds you well, too. May God be praised for the privilege of having our family unit together. I also want to say thank you to those who send messages our way, both inquiring after us, and reminding us that we too are being remembered in the prayers of our people. God bless you.

This week's message is found in the Book of Job in the Old Testament. In chapter 31 we are reminded of something we have witnessed in our own lives, in our own circles of family and friends. Job is suffering. His circumstances have changed radically. First he lost his wealth. The raiders who took his flocks and herds gave him the equivalent of living through a stock market crash that wiped out the investments of a life time. Then personal tragedy struck. A storm hit the building in which his children and their families were celebrating. It is a parent's nightmare. The kids are no more. A heart once filled with love for and from others is a heart that is now broken and grieving. The third blow is the loss of Job's health. He is confined to bed. His body is wracked with pain. On the life of Job, the sun no longer seems to shine.

And now comes that dark night of the soul. His words express his certainty that he did not do anything that should have caused God to forget him, or judge him, or punish

him. We have all witnessed the anguish of family members who have lost a loved one, or grieve over a loved one's pain who "never did anything wrong." Every person in the surrounding circle finds himself/herself asking the question why? And if the victim is still alive but suffering the anguish of mind and soul and body, convinced that they have been living a "good life," as a good neighbour, as a morally upright person, a responsible citizen of the community, their pain and suffering is in fact multiplied. The innocent victim cries out "Why?" Such is the lot of Job. And we have been witnesses to the injustice of suffering.

I know a young woman. She has been a faithful wife. A loving mother to an autistic child. An effective teacher of flocks of children. She has a deep and abiding personal faith in the Lord her God, who is my God too. She praises the name of Jesus. She has spent her life before the alters of God in a tradition of worship and service as part of a local church. When diagnosed with cancer, she was told by her doctors that it was possible to fight the disease and perhaps win several bouts of severe illness, but that in the end, the disease which would continue to return would claim her life. Barbara and I have had the privilege of walking (to a degree) with her parents as this woman continues to suffer. Like Job she has moments when she is really strong. She also has moments when she is really angry. This was not supposed to happen to her! "the Lord has seen her ways and counted her every step." When she asks what has she done wrong, she is really asking the question, "Why me?" She also seems to experience moments of genuine

peace which deepens the anguish of those who love her and attempt to encourage her as she bears her appointed lot.

For so many Canadians the placing of a parent in a seniors home was an attempt to make sure their parent or parents got the kind of care they could not receive at home. It was supposed to be safe. It was supposed to give their parent more time. Covid-19 came out of nowhere and turned the world upside down and then tore it apart. Good intentions were reduced to ashes and dust. We have heard the cries of anguish and anger from children who lost a parent or parents, who were supposed to be in a safe environment which turned out to be a killing ground for the aged with pre-existing health problems. And in spite of the protestations of government officials, we know the problems with senior care will not be easy to fix. It is not just staffing, it is also architecture, that assumed a caring community meant sharing meals and socializing, open and shared spaces.

In Tolkien's marvelous novels which became movies a little over a decade ago, "The Lord of the Rings," Theoden, the King of Rohan, surrounded by the enemy which has the single aim of wiping out his line of Kings and the world of men, utters the question raised by the Book and the testimony of Job. "How did it come to this?"

Further, Tolkien's novels, like the Book of Job lay the details of what is happening at the feet of the devilish prince of evil. In the Book of Job it is Satan who is the author of Job's

pain. In Tolkien's vision, it is the one who rules over Mordor, the land of darkness where the shadows lie. How often have we looked on the suffering of a friend or loved one and said, "What the devil is going on?" A question which comes so close to the truth, we refuse to embrace it.

There is a simple (which does not mean easy, but rather means singular) thing to be remembered about suffering of all kinds, pain of every description. It never goes on forever. One way or another it comes to an end. The season changes. Time passes. I said it is a simple truth. Singular. One in number. For reasons that may indeed baffle even the best doctors and science, the patient may recover. The patient may also die. The broken hearts may mend. The brokenness may be ended, only by the passing of yet another generation. And witnesses may simply be left with their questions.

The Book of Job teaches us two things. The gracious God, Holy, and loving, gracious and redemptive, really is. Job's suffering ends when he has a deeper experience with the God who redeems. God loves Job in the midst of his pain. Further, God set a hedge about Job that Satan could not breach. And of course that is the other lesson the Book of Job teaches us. Pain and suffering give us insight about the real nature of evil. It reaches out to hurt and destroy. In temptation it seeks to rob us of our humanity, and our souls.

These may seem like heavy and even troubling thoughts in a season of plague like the one we continue to

observe as case counts and death continue to mount world wide. But remember this, we have witnessed things we did not expect to see. We will remember this year and its effect upon us and our loved ones, our nation and our people, our world and our kind for the rest of our lives. We have seen what plague can do. We have had a glimpse of sickness without medication or vaccine. And in the midst of it all we have also tasted of the grace of God, the love of Jesus, salvation that is more than mere doctrinal statements or philosophy. We are witnesses to the fragile nature of life, and the love of God that saves.

Let us pray;

Lord Job lived to admit he had “spoken of things he did not understand” and that were “too wonderful for him to know.” He also confessed that when it came to faith, “he had heard of you”, but in the midst of the whirlwind, “he saw your holiness and repented in dust and ashes.” Lord no person wants to suffer. No person looks for the end of the number of their days. What we would pray, is that your Spirit would be with us and in us, no matter where we are, no matter what we do, no matter what thoughts trouble our sleep, or invade our minds. Be with us Lord Jesus. Amen