

## **DROPPED CALL**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

October 15, 2006

Scripture: Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Hebrews 4:12-16

The Book of Job is arguably the most theological book in the Old Testament. It is also the object of a former Broadway play, *J.B.*, written by Archibald Macleish. The Book of Job deals with one of the most universal and complex of human problems, suffering. Nearly every world religion addresses this issue of suffering in some way because it is such a universal human theme.

The Greeks thought humans suffered because they were the pawns of the gods whose emotions of jealousy, rage, envy, and lust spilled over to human life. The best a person might do would be to get out of the way.

The Buddhists say that to live is to suffer, and suffering is caused by attachment to the world and our ignorance of that attachment. The way to end suffering is to become dispassionate, to negate the sensate world and achieve nirvana, the peace of mind that comes when one detaches from the world.

The Christian view of suffering is that *sin* is what is wrong, and it stands between us and God; the dividing line between heaven and earth. As a result, we suffer because the world is broken and humanity must be reconciled to God. In Christ's death on the cross, God has entered into our sinfulness, taken it upon himself, and in Christ restored the broken relationship. In Jesus we see a fellow sufferer. Because of his suffering, nothing can now separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, neither death nor life, nor any human experience.

One thing is for sure, from the first time we ever touch a hot stove or hit a thumb with a hammer, or stay up all night with a fever and vomiting and chills, we know that suffering is a reality of life with which we must reckon.

In the book of Job, a troubling wager is made when Satan strikes a deal with God. Satan is convinced that he can get Job to curse God. But it's no easy challenge. Job is a righteous man, pious, and a practitioner of his faith, so God feels that Job is a safe bet.

I have to confess, however, that none of this wagering with Satan paints a pretty picture of God. "Barterer with Satan" is my worst image of who God is. The very idea that God would use a person's life as a chip in a poker game seems appalling to me. I have to keep reminding myself that the book of Job is an archetypal story, not one meant to be understood historically, but rather as a story based in truth, if not in fact, the bearer of a truth that is greater than the sum of its parts, even if for the sake of the story God is depicted as doing something God would never do, play fast and loose with a human life.

The truth of human experience is that we sometimes feel that God has dealt us out, or stacked the cards against us, or simply turned away from us. In Job's experience, he loses his family, his wife and sons, his livestock and possessions, his health, his means of making a living. All are taken from him in the twinkling of an eye. His life is a wreck and it lies in shambles for all of his neighbors to see. The scene looks vaguely familiar.

Friday in the paper, there was a picture of a father leaned over the lifeless body of his thirteen-year-old son, the victim of an Israeli attack in the Gaza Strip where four militants were killed. I thought of Job in the picture of this man's anguish. There was no reasonable explanation of the loss he bore.

We see this kind of suffering every day in the stories that emerge from Iraq and Afghanistan and closer to home. We see it in the midst of war; or when someone is killed crossing the street, or in the gay bashing of a young man left senseless when four others attack him, or the latest fatality of a drunk driver; or a scaffold against a building falls and someone nearby who is in the wrong place at the wrong time is taken from us. We see it when a child is playing with a gun at home, and accidentally shoots a friend. It's on the news every night. Suffering is a part of our everyday life.

Job seems vaguely familiar in that respect, his misfortune so *undeserved*, if we can speak of misfortune as deserved or undeserved. Job's problem is compounded by the fact that he is both loyal to God, and unwilling to imagine a world that is not just, even if justice seems deferred or at best delayed.

In the midst of Job's grief and loss, he is visited by his friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. They arrive with casseroles in one hand and their Bibles in the other, and sit with Job in his living room talking over coffee. They are men of faith and of strong opinion. They believe that God is just and that if suffering has befallen Job it is because Job has done something to displease God. Gene Tucker, the Biblical scholar observes of the three neighbor's piety that, "When Job needed friends, what he got [instead] were theologians."

I shall never forget some years ago a well-meaning prayer group that formed around a family whose eight-year-old son had leukemia. Every day the prayer group prayed, and once a month they got together for a breakfast meeting. They read healing stories from scripture, celebrated communion, and held this child and his family in prayer. For all the good that was intended, there eventually developed in the group an impatience with God, and a palpable frustration with one another. Whenever the boy took a bad turn, they blamed each other for letting down in their prayers, or not doing enough. And when the boy finally died, the group disbanded with a sense of defeat, as if somehow the matter was more theirs to determine than God's. I wonder about imposing on God our demands for the way the world should work.

Susan B. Anthony was once quoted as saying, "I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do, because I notice that it always coincides with their own desires."<sup>1</sup> There is something about self-assured religiosity that makes me sad. Its easy and simple answers for impenetrable mysteries takes too little account of the complexities of real life.

Suffering is the stairway that takes you down to the cellar of the house of faith where you can examine the foundations. It opens your heart to a new degree of receptivity, because suffering causes you to ask deeper questions than you would at any other time in your life. That's what Job experienced.

You get a diagnosis of lung cancer and wonder what you have done to deserve it. The love of your life walks out the door and you wonder where you go from here. Your

child has some difficult burden to bear, and you wish that you could lift it from her, but some things you cannot do in this life.

Just about all of us want to believe that life is explainable, predictable and fair; that the good are rewarded and the unjust are punished and all things work out for the good in the end. But in truth life doesn't always work out that way.

This week I heard an interview on the radio with the author of the Lemony Snicket children's books, those dark and foreboding stories of the misfortunes and woes of the Baudelaire orphans. Snicket, in real life, Daniel Handler, said children read his books because they don't believe a word of what their parents have taught them, that if you do what is good you will be rewarded, and if you do what is bad you will be punished. Handler says that you only need to go to a school playground to see that this is not the case. There every child learns that the rules don't always work the way they should.

Life is not always fair. And our life's disappointments and misfortunes are often shrouded in mystery and seem inexplicable.

Nevertheless, we want meaning, we want to understand our lives, which is why every religious tradition in some way addresses the problem of human suffering. It has us all stumped. Like Job we do not accept it quietly, and we hold God accountable.

Job, unfortunate man that he was, actually got to take his complaint to God, according to the good book, and he argued his grievances with his Creator. What had he done that was wrong? What was it in his past that deserved such mistreatment?

Job's persistence is persuasive, his tenacity moving. He wrestles with God like Jacob wrestles with the Stranger at the River Jabbok.

But much of what he encounters is the absence of God. Like being on a cell phone, and reaching the most important point in the conversation, the words you need most to express and to hear; the reason for making the call in the first place. And you get to that point and the connection is lost. But you don't know it. You keep on talking anyway, not realizing that there is no signal, that you have been dropped.

One of the cell companies has made a point of the aggravation of the dropped call and is running a series of commercials that uses silence to emulate the frustration of no connection. The actor rants and raves and gesticulates with no sound, which makes the point of how infuriating it is to be lost in cyberspace disconnected.

This is Job's complaint. In the story, when Job realizes that he is flailing into thin air, he searches the four points of the compass. He turns to the east (forward) and the west (backward), then to the north (left) and to the south (right) but the God he seeks is not to be found.

At perhaps the lowest point of the book, Job concludes "[God] is not there." "I cannot perceive him." "I cannot behold him." "I cannot see him."

Someone has written that the worst that can happen to us "is not to suffer without reason, but to suffer without God – without any hope of consolation or rebirth. All other pain pales next to the pain of divine abandonment."<sup>2</sup>

Which is why God has come to us in Jesus Christ, to make God's presence known to us, to experience our pain, to know our lot, to accompany us in our shadowed times in life, and to take our hand on the journey so that we need never be alone.

The heart of the passage that we read today from the letter to the Hebrews expresses that understanding that "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are..."

The good news of the gospel is that we are not abandoned by God in the way that Job had feared, but rather we are accompanied by God in the way that Job had hoped, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who in every respect has been tested as we are.

The good news is that we are not alone in this life. And the bad news is that sometimes we will suspect that we are anyway, as Job, strong in faith, confident in God, nonetheless felt as if he were on a dropped call, unable to make contact with the One in whom he had ultimate faith and trust.

Our suspicion in life, regardless of how strong our faith may be is that we are on our own. And to some extent we are. Being a Christian is not an insurance policy against misfortune. It is not a firewall against disappointment or disaster. There is nothing this side of heaven that inoculates us against heartbreak, disappointment, loss, and suffering. It is simply a given in life. The Buddhists are right about that part, life is suffering. But that does not mean that life is hopeless, nor that God has abandoned us. And sometimes it is the hard things of life that teach us the most about that on which we can rely.

Walter Brueggemann, the Old Testament scholar, has written, "The world for which you have been so carefully prepared is being taken away from you, by the grace of God."

And the point of what he is saying is that even in the changes of life that we least desire, God is teaching us to rely on him, even when we find that we can no longer rely on the things and the ones that we once did. Our tendency, after all is to make permanent in our lives what is impermanent. Money, possessions, people, home, our good looks, our portfolio. We substitute the impermanence of these things for the permanence of the enduring. The real truth is that our lives are lived by the grace and mercy of God on whom all that we have and all that we are is dependent.

Don't you get it? Every breath we take is a gift from God, every day we live is a blessing of mercy, every moment that our heart keeps beating and our life keeps going we are sustained by Something greater than ourselves.

We are really not the captains of our own destiny. That is an illusion. At any moment life can change. You're at the top of your game, life is looking good, and then you bank left over the river and suddenly a building stands in the way. Where did we get the idea that we are the only permanence in the impermanent universe? The world for which we have been so carefully prepared is being taken away from us, by the grace of God.

It is always easy to love God and to believe in God and to even take God for granted in the high noon of success, when all is going well, and life feels good and everyone thinks you're terrific. It is not so easy to love God and to believe in God, nor so easy to take God for granted on the dark and clouded days when events have taken you to the bottom and all that you had counted on has been taken away.

In the last chapter of the book of Job, there is a powerful scene in which God answers Job's complaints not so much with satisfactory answers, slick and appealing, but in answers which are really questions that probe for the truth.

Where were you, God asks Job, when I laid the foundation of the earth? Do you know who determined the earth's measurements and who stretched out the line upon it? Do you realize who awakens the dawn each morning since the coming of the first day? And can you explain in which direction is the dwelling of light, and where does the darkness reside?

God asks Job questions that are more than he knows and deeper than he understands. And in his asking we realize that even if Job, or we, knew the answers we would not understand them. This side of heaven there are some things that are greater than we can know.

What we do know is that we are not alone, standing here with a dropped call and no one hearing our voice. Rather, God hears us, God knows us, God is with us in Christ Jesus who, by the grace of God, has shown us in spite of the worst that the world can do, he will not forsake us. Through him God is able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses, for he is One who in every respect has been tested as we are.

There is an old saying that if we fall out of the left hand of God, we are caught in God's right hand. This is to say that in Jesus Christ we are never dropped at all.

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*, New York: HarperCollins, 2006, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "Out of the Whirlwind," in *Home By Another Way*, Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1999, 166.