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Job 1:1; 2:1-10

Where is God in our Suffering?

Sometimes things go wrong for no reason at all.

When we left for home from northern NSW last Saturday week, I diligently checked the engine on my old falcon and made sure the coolant level and oil level were correct. I had repaired and serviced the engine regularly – I was confident that my old falcon would get us the 1200 kms home safely.

But, as some of you have heard when only an hour or so out of Sydney, for no apparent reason, the radiator decided to burst its seams in a spectacular fashion as we were travelling at 110Kms per hour on the freeway. I had little chance to react in time to what had happened and in those few minutes that followed the engine cooked so thoroughly that it melted the spark plug leads just before it seized completely as we rolled to stop in what seemed like the middle of no-where.

Now it is interesting what goes through your mind on such occasions. I was philosophical of course and yes, the inconvenience and expense of getting towed, finding a hire car, arriving late and having to travel 750Kms back up the road to retrieve the car, were all a reasonable price to pay for my economical choice of keeping an older car going...

But, another side of me was just a little indignant. "Its not fair! I did all the right things, I was being careful and conscientious, I looked after the car – I treated it kindly and serviced it regularly I don't deserve this! Had I been sinful and wantonly neglectful, not ever bothered to check the fluid levels and service the car – then I deserve such things to happen to me. And you think it could have waited till I was nearly home too, why did it happen so far away from anywhere?"

Why was God punishing me when I was so righteous! Why do bad things happen to good people?

"There once was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job." With these words, the Bible introduces one of its most memorable and fascinating characters. In the popular imagination, Job is an icon, a archetype of the sufferer who endures the unendurable without complaint. And the grief and pain that Job suffers is a little worse than his car engine blowing up. His entire life blows up and comes crashing down around his ears. Job is plunged into absolute ruin - he loses his livestock, his children, his house and his possessions and eventually his health too, and yet (at least in the first part of the story) he remains patient and faithful to God and trusts in his view of a God who rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked... Thus we have the saying, "the patience of Job.."

In the section that we read today, we get this picture of Job being faithful to God despite what appears to be suffering for no reason other than God "testing him".

But, and this a big and complex "but", if we read on in the story past this spot where Job's wife encourages him to "curse God and despair and die" – we find that at least on the first part he does just that – he has a little complaint toward God – to put it mildly...

Listen to some of these words out of Chapter 16..

7 Surely now God has worn me out; he has ^{F76} made desolate all my company. **8** And he has ^{F77} shriveled me up, which is a witness against me; my leanness has risen up against me, and it testifies to my face. **9** He has torn me in his wrath, and hated me; he has gnashed his teeth at me; my adversary sharpens his eyes against me. **10** They have gaped at me with their mouths; they have struck me insolently on the cheek; they mass themselves together against me. **11** God gives me up to the ungodly, and casts me into the hands of the wicked. **12** I was at ease, and he broke me in two; he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces; he set me up as his target; **13** his archers surround me. He slashes open my kidneys, and shows no mercy; he pours out my gall on the ground. **14** He bursts upon me again and again; he rushes at me like a warrior. **15** I have sewed sackcloth upon my skin, and have laid my strength in the dust. **16** My face is red with weeping, and deep darkness is on my eyelids.

What is significant about this outburst is that here we have Job pouring out his pain and anger on God. He does not say, God is cursed! He doesn't even exist – there is nothing, no-one and only despair awaits... In some mysterious (perhaps even perverse) way Job senses that God is involved with him in the midst of his pain..

This darkest moment in Job's life is echoed in the words of a Psalm. This is a Psalm you will not find in the Lectionary, or preached on very often or recommended for devotional reading. It is Psalm 88 and it begins and ends in loneliness and pain..

1 O Lord, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you. **2** May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry. **3** For my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave. **4** I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like a man without strength. **5** I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care. **6** You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. **7** Your wrath lies heavily upon me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves. Selah **8** You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape; **9** my eyes are dim with grief.

10 Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do those who are dead rise up and praise you? Selah **11** Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in Destruction? **12** Are your wonders known in the place of darkness, or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion? **13** But I cry to you for help, O Lord; in the morning my prayer comes before you. **14** Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me? **15** From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death; I have suffered your terrors and am in despair. **16** Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me. **17** All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me. **18** You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend.

That this Psalm is there in our Bible is a wonderful thing. There is a sense in which this Psalm perhaps even more than the story of Job – gives permission to be angry with God – to struggle with God, to even accuse God..

In the cycle of the story of Job, this part of the story where his incandescent rage against God is an important part of his opening to hope and grace..

Allan Tsai in an excellent article on Job has this to say about this necessary transition.

Individuals need to risk being unrighteous in their encounters with God. The full force of feelings from rage, bitterness, and hatred needs to be expressed, especially if we believe that we have been somehow cheated by life or by God. For our own healing, and for the sake of a deeper relationship with God, we must take the risk of revealing our inner world, no matter how unrighteous it may seem to us.

To cross the line into what many consider profane is psychologically a death experience—which can, paradoxically, initiate us into a greater relationship with the divine. To fiercely wrestle with the divine—like Jacob with the angel—is often necessary to come into a deeper experience of grace.

..Suffering comes to any and all, the good and the bad. To this suffering, we must find our own authentic response—not what we imagine we should feel or what others think that we should feel, but what we actually do feel. Job teaches us the necessity of honest expression. A dishonest Job would suffer in silence and false humility, which would please his friends but would have been dishonest to his own soul.

Pain and suffering are a very personal experience – no one can feel it for us and thus it is important to be able to express our deepest pain to God.

There is a story told of a boy who was walking along a beach and came across a seagull that was struggling near the water's edge unable to take off and fly away. As he approached closer, he saw that the bird was in great distress and pain from a fishing hook that had embedded itself in its foot with the line tangled around its wing. He decided he must help this fellow living creature, and he bent down and as carefully as he could, caught the gull and held it firmly but gently in his hand as he began to disentangle its wing. But the seagull only felt more pain and great fear that this big creature may actually be its end. So it thrashed and wriggled, and lashed out with its beak at the hand that held it. For minutes the bird pecked and struggled and finally, bleeding and in pain the boy finished removing the hook and set the bird free to fly again.

What I love about this story is the idea that the injured bird was conscious of being held only as it struggled against the hand that held it...

The God of the Old Testament is in fact a God of Grace and is a pre-cursor to the theology of the cross that speaks the truth of a God who comes alongside us in our suffering.

We can never know the answer to the question, “why me” but we can know that in the midst of our pain we are held. The mystery of Grace opens to us when we are able to stop asking why and begin asking who.. And this grace seems to honour us when we risk sharing our vulnerability and darkness before God. As we are opened then to grace, as we give up on our ideas of divine justice intervening on the unfair world we are in, we find ourselves able to receive and channel God's grace which leads to hope..

Perhaps the four most powerful words in Christian faith are those four words on the green banner on the wall behind me, "We are not Alone". They are the words we speak in faith to each other and they are words we speak in faith to the God who holds us and redeems us from despair..

Sing: We are not alone in suffering... #282