

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
October 21, 2018
Title: On the Mend: Healing Power
Scripture: Job 38:1-7
Mark 10:35-45

As I child, I remember my parents telling me to study hard, work hard, and I would do well in school. As I grew older, similar messages taught me that if I did those things I would find a good job, and likely have a good life. I was taught to do my best even when no one was watching and to live my life as God and my parents wanted me to live. The implied message was that if I did that, everything would work out well. Life would be good and go smoothly.

Probably some of you were taught similar lessons and many of us internalized the lesson taught either openly or implied that if we did all those things our lives would be good. There seemed to be an implied or open bargain with God that if we did all the right things, we would get what we wanted – or at least what we deserved – and what we deserved were only good things.

While we might not always believe that on a rational level, somehow that lesson is firmly entrenched in our hearts, and our psyches. It's a lesson that we run into whenever something bad happens. When someone is killed we hear about what a good student they were, or what a good mother or father they were, what a good person they were. The implication being that because they were good this shouldn't have happened.

The first funeral that I was involved in as a seminary student was the mother of a three-year-old child. Her life had not been easy. She grew up in poverty, she had been addicted to drugs and had been known to deal drugs as well. When her son was about two she entered a rehab program

and we believe she had been clean for about a year. She was killed by someone she knew when she was into drugs, but we didn't know more than that.

It was a horrible tragedy. One of the things that stayed with me though was all the conversation about how she was trying to turn her life around and with it the implication that if she had been killed while using or dealing that somehow that would have been less of a tragedy; that her life was worth less when she was using and that she might somehow have deserved her fate then, but certainly not now. One of the questions was why God didn't protect her when she was trying to get her life together.

There is very often an implied bargain with God that says, if we are faithful and do what we should do, then God will spare us from pain and suffering. Of course, we only have to look around us to know that this is not true, but it doesn't stop us from thinking that somehow God has not upheld God's end of the bargain.

We aren't the first people or the only people to believe this. Way back in the Old Testament, we have the story of Job. Job is a person of absolute integrity but who experiences great suffering. Job's distress isn't caused by something he did – though his friends think it is. His suffering results from the ill effects of natural events, windstorm, lightning, and related fires, disease, and moral evil of others.ⁱ

For 30+ chapters, Job's friends argue with him about what sin he must have committed and urge him to confess his sin and throw himself on God's mercy. They become angry at his insistence that he did not do anything wrong. Finally, Job insists that he should be able to plead his case directly to God and that is where our reading for today comes from.

The book of Job shows that suffering may occur because of the nature of the world that God created and because God allows the natural order to be what it was created to be. God permits but doesn't manage what happens in creation. Our world includes risks to human well-being, including water, the law of gravity, and wild animals. While these are resources that can enhance human well-being, God doesn't provide danger-free zones to keep people like Job from the harm they can cause.ⁱⁱ

Job is a tale or a story, set in an unknown period of time in an unidentifiable land. It is neither historical literature nor biography nor autobiography. It is in the genre of the stories that begin "once upon a time." At the same time, it is a story that probes the deep questions of why people suffer and quite frankly, it doesn't come up with any explanation that makes us feel much better. It doesn't equate suffering with doing something wrong. It doesn't guarantee that doing right will save us from suffering.ⁱⁱⁱ

What it does though is that it shows us that Job kept his faith that God would allow him to speak his mind without having to worry about God ending the relationship. It reminds us that no matter what happens we can ask God whatever we want to; we can question God, we can get angry at God and God will never turn away from us. It reminds us that God is God and we are not; and we cannot control God.

Fast forward to the New Testament and we have Jesus' disciples entering into that same thought pattern. They have been with Jesus, and they believe that in the near future, Jesus is going to show his real power, overthrow Rome and establish a Jewish kingdom. So, James and John think they should be proactive about this.

They go to Jesus and tell him that they want him to do something for them. When he enters his glory, his power, they want to sit on his right and left hand. They want to be number two and three in the kingdom. They want the power and glory that they think they deserve for being loyal to him. And for whatever reason, they think they deserve this more than the other disciples.

Rather than chastise Job for questioning God, God allowed the questions. God encouraged the questions and God showed Job that despite what Job thought he knew, he could really only see and understand a very small part of the big picture. God reminded Job that even though it seemed like his world had come to an end, there was a much bigger world out there and it was still functioning.

Rather than chastising James and John, Jesus knew that they still did not understand that he was not about political power; his kingdom was not about overthrowing Rome and seizing power. Jesus knew that they did not understand that it was because he would not fight back, it was because he would not engage in violence, power, and force as the world understood it, that Jesus would die – but that while his death would seem like defeat, it would really be about victory. It would be about something far greater than they could yet understand.

So, Jesus did not admonish James and John, but rather he continued to try to teach them the ways of the kingdom, where membership is based not on favoritism or power but on the ability to love and to serve.

We still tend to hear Jesus' declaration that "My kingdom is not of this world" as a designation of geography. We tend to think of it as something way out there in heaven where we will go some day when our earthly life is over. Yet, if his kingdom is only somewhere out there in heaven, then our

lives here are only place markers or timekeepers until that time when we do to heaven.

Certainly, God's kingdom includes heaven and the eternal, but God's kingdom is also still trying to break into the here and now – into our everyday life. God's kingdom comes a little bit more every time we refuse to be part of oppression, every time we choose love over hate; every time we choose patience and understanding over anger and retribution. God's kingdom lives within each and every one of us and we get to share a little bit of that kingdom when we choose to live as God would have us live.

It can be easy to doubt God's presence and work in the world when we are in the middle of times of loneliness, loss or impatience. At those times it seems as if the whole world should stop because our world feels like it has stopped.

Many of us have had the experience of noticing that while our world seems to have been put on hold, or seems to have come to an end, there are still people going to the grocery store, or doing laundry, or going to dinner or living life. We may find it hard to realize that life continues for others when we can't imagine that there is life after this moment.

It is at those times when we may be least likely to see and feel God's love that God is still there surrounding us, loving us, holding us, even when we are too wrapped up in our own situation to see it. At those times, if we are able to even for a moment, see beyond where we are, we may see and discover God's love in a thousand ways around us.

Many of us tend to live our lives at a hectic pace. We find it hard or impossible to slow down and simply contemplate God, just to think about God and to observe God's creation. Some years ago, I started out on a mountain hike with several friends. We hadn't gone very far when it

became apparent to me that I could not continue. They went on, and I stayed on the side of the mountain by myself. I was sitting on a rock just off the path. For the next two or three hours, I simply sat there. I did not have a book with me, and many of you know that I always have something with me to read. I did not have paper to write on. I had nothing but our hiking supplies which given the short nature of the hike was nothing except my water bottle. I couldn't do anything productive except sit and wait for my friends to return.

What I did have was an amazing view. I could look out on a valley, and across to another mountain. I could see the blue sky through the trees. As time went by, I began to notice the shape of the leaves of the trees, the different kinds of trees, and then the shape of the rocks around me. Later I was paying attention to the ants crawling on the ground and the snap of a twig when something moved in the woods. I was noticing how quiet it was, but also how even in the quiet there were small sounds of bugs scurrying over dried leaves, and wind gently moving through the trees.

I think I will always remember that day – two or three hours with absolutely nothing to do but sit and contemplate God and God's world. Eventually I saw that as a gift – a gift I might have missed had I been able to continue the hike with my friends. I'm sure if I had continued, I would have seen other beautiful scenery, but I came to know intimately a very small section of that mountain in a very special way.

Sometimes we just need to get out of ourselves and be open to seeing what is beyond us. But when and until we are able to do that, we can be assured that God is still with us, still walking with us, still guiding us,

still ready to listen to our sorrow, our anger, our frustration, whatever our emotions may be.

When we begin to believe the myth that it is all about us, God gently reminds us that there is a bigger world out there; one that needs our love; one that needs us to remember that greatness in God's kingdom is not about power, but about love. We are reminded that we are not part of a bargain with God, but rather the recipients of an invitation to a different way of life. Jesus met people where they were. He ministered to them not from a place of power but from a place of vulnerability.

As bold as James and John's request to Jesus was, Jesus used the opportunity to imagine a different world, a world where power dynamics have shifted. Jesus called his disciples – calls us – to live in a way that differs from the world. He calls us not to abuse power but to serve our neighbors, to serve the poor, to serve the earth that God created.

The Upper Room Disciplines this week reminded us that Jesus knew that being counter cultural was hard in his day and it is hard in ours. There are always competing values that have louder voices. There are competing ideologies with more resources. There are always people peddling fear, anger, and shame.

We are called to stand up to those voices. We are called to live calmly, lovingly, and with deep peace. We know our role and our place. We know that we are called to be servants to all; that we are to model gentleness and love and that we are to treat all of God's beloved children with respect and service.^{iv}

ⁱ The CEB Study Bible; introduction to the Book of Job.

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Upper Room Disciples, 2018 p.350