

**“Worst. Sermon. Ever.”**  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**September 17, 2017**

**First Scripture Reading: Philippians 4:4-9**

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup>Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

**Second Scripture Reading: Selections from Job** (within the text of the sermon)

**Sermon: “Worst. Sermon. Ever.”**

It’s been a bad month or so for storms and natural disasters. Hurricane Harvey and then Irma dumped millions of gallons of rain on not just Texas, Louisiana, and Florida, but also in the Virgin Islands and Cuba and Haiti and Puerto Rico, and other places far less developed and with far fewer resources.<sup>1</sup> Flooding connected to seasonal rains in Bangladesh, and India, and Nepal has overwhelmed wide swaths of those countries, leaving hundreds of people dead, and hundreds of thousands of people stranded, cut-off from food, and medical care, their lives completely disrupted.<sup>2</sup> Then, while people in the Caribbean and the southern United States were preparing for Irma, a magnitude 8.2 earthquake hit in Mexico, bringing grief and devastation to people in parts of that country, as well.<sup>3</sup>

We describe events like these as “senseless” and “tragic” because we don’t understand why they happen. I mean, from a scientific perspective we do. Tectonic plates slide over and past one another, the ground shakes, and an earthquake occurs. The sun heats the earth, water vapor rises, clouds form and condense, and it rains; A lot. We get the science. But we don’t have the foggiest clue why God, who loves us and provides for us, seemingly allows us to suffer at the hands of the very creation that God, Himself, made.

If it were just the bad people, then we might be able to make sense of it. I remember several years ago, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that devastated New Orleans, one of my students told me that it was God’s punishment for “All the black magic” and the debauchery for which New Orleans is famous. Only problem was that the French Quarter, where most of New Orleans’ officially sanctioned debauchery occurs, went unscathed. It was the poor folks, living in the low-lying areas of the city that suffered the

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<sup>1</sup> Park, Madison, et al. “Hurricane Irma Leaves 'Nuclear Landscape' in Caribbean.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 13 Sept. 2017, [www.cnn.com/2017/09/13/americas/irma-impact-caribbean/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/13/americas/irma-impact-caribbean/index.html).

<sup>2</sup> Summers, Hannah. “Floods and Devastation in India, Nepal and Bangladesh – in Pictures.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 16 Aug. 2017, [www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/aug/16/floods-and-devastation-in-india-nepal-and-bangladesh-in-pictures](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/aug/16/floods-and-devastation-in-india-nepal-and-bangladesh-in-pictures).

<sup>3</sup> Villegas, Paulina, et al. “Mexico Earthquake, Strongest in a Century, Kills Dozens.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 8 Sept. 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/09/08/world/americas/mexico-earthquake.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/08/world/americas/mexico-earthquake.html).

most.<sup>4</sup> “Besides,” I told him, “if God was sending hurricanes to places because of people’s sins, then we’d probably have had a few in Washington DC and Las Vegas by now.”

But that kid’s basic struggle is one I think a lot of us share: Why does God seem to allow bad things to happen to good people?

Now, it’s at this point that I should probably warn you, that this is not going to be a very good sermon. In fact, this might be the worst sermon ever. You see, a good sermon can help us understand scripture. A good sermon helps us to find answers to our questions about God and the world and our place in it. But I don’t have any answers for you today. Which might be frustrating. I know. We like having our questions answered. Few things are more frustrating than unanswered questions. It goes to our desire for completion; to feeling satisfied that we understand what is happening and why. When we ask a question that never gets answered, it leaves us frustrated and unfulfilled. Here, I’ll show you what I mean.

Me: Knock Knock.

Congregation: Who’s there?

Me: Doris.

Congregation: Doris who?

Me: ...

See?

Questions are a part of life. God gave us incredibly complex brains capable of advanced thought and problem solving. Asking questions and searching for answers comes naturally to us.

How many licks DOES it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop? According to a study conducted at Purdue University, on average, about 252.<sup>5</sup>

And how much wood *would* a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood? According to a New York Fish and Wildlife technician who studies woodchucks and did the math, about 700 pounds.<sup>6</sup>

But not all questions have such pat answers. And when our search brings us to a dead end, where do we go? Some questions need answers that transcend what can be seen, and felt, and measured. Some questions lead us on longer, more difficult journeys. Why are we here? What is our purpose in life? And when bad things happen, we are confronted with the simple question “Why?” Why this? Why now? Why me? Why them? And perhaps more troubling for the person of faith, “Why did God allow this?”

The poster boy for that question is Job. When tragedy strikes, and the innocent suffer, it’s hard not to think of Job and to look to his story as a source of insight and wisdom. Job is one of the most well-known yet unread stories in the Bible. I think most people could tell you the basic plotline, but few people can make it through what amounts to 42 pages of Hebrew poetry. The story begins by describing Job as “blameless and upright,” a man who “feared God and turned away from evil.” He is a family man with

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<sup>4</sup> “Effects of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 20 Sept. 2017, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Effects\_of\_Hurricane\_Katrina\_in\_New\_Orleans.

<sup>5</sup> “Tootsie Roll Inc.” *Tootsie.com*, Tootsie Roll Industries, 2017, www.tootsie.com/howmanylick-experiments.

<sup>6</sup> “How Much Wood Would a Woodchuck Chuck.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 16 Sept. 2017, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How\_much\_wood\_would\_a\_woodchuck\_chuck#Answers.

many children, and a herdsman with vast numbers of sheep and camels and oxen and all sorts of farm animals. He's a wealthy man, with many servants, and he is widely respected in the area where he lives.

Yet within the first two chapters of the story, he loses everything: his wealth, his children, everything. And after that, as he grieves his loss, he is afflicted with painful boils on his skin. But in spite of everything, he refuses to say anything against God. Job's wife, looking upon the wreckage of his life, says to him [Why don't you just] "curse God and die." But Job responds, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not the bad?"<sup>7</sup>

Three of Job's friends try to comfort him, but they all come to the same conclusion, that for Job to be suffering, he must have sinned against God. Job maintains his innocence, but the friends persist. Their belief is that God rewards the righteous and punishes sinners. If Job was wealthy and by all measures blessed, it was because of his faithfulness to God. If he has now lost everything and is suffering, it is just as clear that it must be because of something he's done wrong.

Yet Job refuses to make a confession when he doesn't believe he has done anything to confess. He states his case and demands an accounting from God. And this is some of what he says:

*"Oh, how I long for the good old days, when God took such very good care of me. He always held a lamp before me and I walked through the dark by its light. Oh, how I miss those golden years when God's friendship graced my home, When the Mighty One was still by my side and my children were all around me, when everything was going my way, and nothing seemed too difficult." (Job 29:1-6, MSG)<sup>8</sup>*

*"And now my life drains out, as suffering seizes and grips me hard. Night gnaws at my bones; the pain never lets up. I am tied hand and foot, my neck in a noose. I twist and turn. Thrown face down in the muck, I'm a muddy mess, inside and out.*

*"I shout for help, God, and get nothing, no answer! I stand to face you in protest, and you give me a blank stare! You've turned into my tormenter— you slap me around, knock me about. You raised me up so I was riding high and then dropped me, and I crashed. I know you're determined to kill me, to put me six feet under.*

*"What did I do to deserve this?" (Job 30:16-24, MSG)<sup>9</sup>*

That's a question I believe most people ask at one time or another. When we suffer through difficult days, through tragedies, death, illness, when life seems unfair, when life is colored by betrayal, despair and anger, it can feel like we must have done something wrong for which we are paying a heavy price.

Job doesn't agree with his friends, but he does believe God is singling him out for punishment. And he can't for the life of him figure out why. So, he demands an accounting of God. He asks *"Why have you made me your target? Why have I become a burden to you?"<sup>10</sup>* And sure enough, God appears to answer

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<sup>7</sup> Job 2:9-10, NRSV

<sup>8</sup> Peterson, Eugene H. *The Message*. NavPress, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Peterson, *The Message*.

<sup>10</sup> Job 7:20, NRSV

his questions. And you might think that God will now provide that satisfying, complete answer to Job's question that brings understanding and closure.

You might think that, but you'd be wrong.

Beginning in Chapter 38, the book of Job records God's reply.:

*And now, finally, God answered Job from the eye of a violent storm. He said: "Why do you confuse the issue? Why do you talk without knowing what you're talking about? Pull yourself together, Job! Up on your feet! Stand tall! I have some questions for you, and I want some straight answers. Where were you when I created the earth? Tell me, since you know so much! Who decided on its size? Certainly, you'll know that! Who came up with the blueprints and measurements? How was its foundation poured, and who set the cornerstone, while the morning stars sang in chorus and all the angels shouted praise? ... That was me! (Job 38:1-11, MSG)<sup>11</sup>*

*"Do you presume to tell me what I'm doing wrong? Are you calling me a sinner so you can be a saint? Do you have an arm like my arm? Can you shout in thunder the way I can? Go ahead, show your stuff. Let's see what you're made of, what you can do. Unleash your outrage... I'll gladly step aside and hand things over to you— you can surely save yourself with no help from me! (Job 40:8-14, MSG)<sup>12</sup>*

*"Or can you pull in the sea beast, Leviathan, with a [rod and reel] and stuff him in your [basket]? Can you lasso him with a rope, or snag him with an anchor? ... Will you play with him as if he were a pet goldfish? Will you make him the mascot of the neighborhood children? Will you put him on display in the market and have shoppers haggle over the price? Could you shoot him full of arrows like a pin cushion...? If you so much as lay a hand on him, you won't live to tell the story. What hope would you have with such a creature? Why, one look at him would do you in! If you can't hold your own against his glowering visage, how, then, do you expect to stand up to me? Who could confront me and get by with it?*

*"I'm in charge of all this—I run this universe!" (Job 41:1-11, MSG)<sup>13</sup>*

And that, is essentially, God's answer to Job's question.

From the pit of despair, when nothing seems to be right in his world anymore, when he has lost all that he cares for, with nothing left to live for except to love and serve God, Job asks "Why?" And God's response is essentially, "I was here before you got here, I'm far more powerful than you, and I made all of this and control everything that is. Who are you to question me?"

It's unsatisfying, isn't it?

But that's not the only time in the Bible someone asks God for an explanation and doesn't get one. Jesus asked from the cross "God, why have you forsaken me?" And he was quoting the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm in which the Psalmist asks the same question of God when the Israelites are being carried way into exile.

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<sup>11</sup> Peterson, *The Message*.

<sup>12</sup> Peterson, *The Message*.

<sup>13</sup> Peterson, *The Message*.

God's answer to Job, such as it is, is not wrong ... God is sovereign and God will do what God will do, but there's no explanation; there's no resolution, no satisfaction.

In the end, God turns his anger on the friends of Job because they have not told the truth about God, but Job has... Job's friends had argued that God sends wealth and easy living to the righteous, and misery to the unrighteous. But Job told the truth by saying that we experience good and evil, regardless of whether we are righteous or not.

In the last chapter, Job is healed of his boils, and he is given new children and more wealth than he had before, but Job never does get an adequate answer to his questions. He never learns why he was allowed to suffer. *We* know the answers, because *we* read the prologue.<sup>14</sup> But Job never does find out why. And yet even so, he remains faithful to God

And in the end, that's probably what were supposed to take away from this, too. That we may never understand how God works; but then that's not really our role. We are tasked with loving and serving and caring for one another. And the answers to our deepest, most troubling questions may never come.

In the book of Job, we learn that life just happens, whether you're rich or poor, powerful or, not so much. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says that God "makes [the] sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."<sup>15</sup> And the same turning of the earth and shining sun that makes beautiful days beautiful, also causes hurricanes and floods and tornadoes. Life brings wonderful, amazing joy interspersed with moments of crushing, painful defeat. And it doesn't always or even often make sense. And our questions of why, more often than not go unanswered.

I know, that's not very satisfying. But I will offer this word of reassurance: In the grand scheme of the universe, there are answers and God does give us an ability to understand why we are here and our place in the world. God reaches out to us when we are unable to reach back. God saves us from ourselves when we are bent on destruction. God loves us and cherishes us and has promised never to abandon us. But sometimes, in the face of tragedy and evil and hardship, we ask "Why?" and there simply are no answers. Just more questions. No satisfaction, just discomfort with hard truths and mysteries too deep to comprehend.

But maybe that's not such a bad thing. Maybe when we find ourselves in a place of uncertainty and discomfort, that means we should turn to God all the more. Maybe having a few questions unanswered pushes us to think a little harder; to work a little longer at trying to understand God and our relationship with God.

Maybe.

I'm sorry that I can't offer you more. If good sermons resolve ambiguity, and send us away with satisfying answers and comforting understandings of who God is and how God works, then this surely has not been one of those.

And yet we come to the end and still we say with conviction, to God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

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<sup>14</sup> Job 1:1-2:10

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 5:45, NRSV