

## **“When Bad Things Happen”**

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First Presbyterian Church  
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### **Old Testament Lesson - Job 7:1-11 New Testament Lesson – Hebrews 5:7-10**

Within a few years (five, 10, 20, or 30) I will no longer be on this earth. The thought of this does not frighten me but fills me with a quiet peace. I am a small part of life, a human being in the midst of thousands of other human beings. It is good to be young, to grow old and to die.

It is good to live with others and to die with others. God became flesh to share with us in this simple living and dying and thus made it good. I can feel today that it is good to be – and especially to be –one of many. What counts are not the special and unique accomplishments in life that make me different from others, but the basic experiences of sadness and joy, pain and healing, which make me part of humanity.”

This, from Henri Nouwen, the author of 40 books on spirituality, as he reflected on his fiftieth birthday, just 14 years before he did, in fact, die. Nouwen continues, saying, “The time is indeed growing short for me, but that knowledge sets me free to prevent mourning from depressing me and joy from exciting me. Mourning and joy can now both deepen my quiet desire for the day when I realize that the many kisses and embraces I received today were simple incarnation of the eternal embrace of the Lord himself.”<sup>1</sup>

Today, in the second of our four sermons looking at what’s happening “When Christians Get It Wrong,” we’ve taken a somewhat dour turn. Today, we’re looking at what’s going on “When Bad Things Happen.”

But, as I hope you got from Nouwen’s reflections on life and death, it’s OK to have bad things happen – it’s just a part of life. Our lives by definition are made up of both good things and bad things, and both good things and bad things can give us access to encounters with the divine, encounters not possible in any other way.

In our Old Testament Lesson today, we heard from Job – one of God’s faithful followers, who experienced both bad things and good things. You may remember, Job was a very blessed man who lived life in accordance with God’s will.

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<sup>1</sup> A Latin American Journal, (San Francisco: Harper and Rowe, 1983), 120.

One day, Job becomes the victim of evil and misguided forces, causing him to lose all his wealth, his children, and his physical health. And the expectation is that Job will curse God for his misfortune – and die.

But Job does not. Throughout it all, Job remains true to his faith and confident in God's love and protection – even when it's not there, at least as far as anybody can see.

And because Job looks at life through the lenses of his faith in God rather than through the murkiness and distortion that the world serves up to us, because Job keeps the faith, he can actually embrace life, in both good times and bad, in keeping with God's will for us.

But wait. How can we say Job never strayed from God's will when clearly in the Bible Job says, "I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul." Complaining to God about his terrible life? Does that sound like Job is being faithful? Actually, it does.

Last week we saw that the first trouble area that arises within our faith is thinking that Christians are somehow supposed to be better or holier than people who don't go to church, which isn't true. We're all broken and limited and fallible human beings.

And now we see that the second trouble area is thinking that Christians are somehow supposed to have it better or experience more success than people who don't go to church, which, according to Job's faithful witness, is also not true.

While a Christian lifestyle can lead you to many blessings such as health, happiness, prosperity and contentment, many Christians, just like everyone else, experience terrible setbacks in life. The difference for those who are followers of Christ and who claim their identity as children of God is that these people have a sense of peace and resolve that can withstand any onslaught, any trouble life throws their way.

As we saw with Job, this does not mean that life is trouble-free, but rather, that for Christians, troubles are experienced in full view of the cross of Jesus, knowing that God can and will raise us up from any and all circumstances. That cross is empty for a reason.

What Job teaches us is that being certain of our faith doesn't mean that Christians shouldn't or don't complain or grumble or cry out in the midst of devastating, overwhelming, or even just irritating circumstance – we do and should. God is big enough to take all our outbursts and laments, all our doubts and fears, even all our hatred and despair. God can take it – take it in AND take it away. In fact, it is when we hold our emotions in that we get into trouble.

A woman, who was just frantic hurrying to get to her destination, drove up onto the sidewalk and across people's yards to get around a traffic jam, with her two girls, ages 10 and 13, in the car. Police officer Lori Fansler, who was directing traffic, said she ordered the driver to stop. She leaned into the car to talk to the woman, who told the officer she "didn't have freaking time for this" and hit the gas. Another officer chased the car down the road at about 75 mph before the woman pulled up at an elementary school. She was taking her children to school.<sup>2</sup>

Or how about this report of a New Jersey driver charged with ramming a Transit Bus. Police said the driver started hitting the bus when it stopped for a red light. As it continued on, the driver followed and continued ramming the bus. When the bus driver, who was the only person aboard, stopped and got out to see what was happening, the driver rammed the rear of the bus at least five more times. Officer Charlie Blanchard of Haddon Township said that when he arrived and parked 10 feet behind the driver's vehicle, (quote) "She looked in the rearview mirror, looked at me, then rammed my car."<sup>3</sup>

Not only do we not need to feel guilty or unworthy raising up our darkest emotions before God and the supportive people God puts in our lives, when we fail to do so, we get ourselves in trouble, our second trouble area as Christians: thinking we're supposed to have it better than others or when we don't, thinking we're still supposed to put on a good a good face or look on the brighter side of things; bottle it all up inside. When in fact, complaining about our lot in life is just a part of life – a healthy part of life. Access to the Devine often comes to us in our most troubling moments, if we approach them honestly and faithfulness.

For us to have God take away our pain and suffering, our stress and anxiety, our fears and doubts, we have to feel free to raise them up to God, to give them over to Christ, to shout them from the rooftops and lay them at the foot of the cross. And that's the Good News of the Gospel that Christians celebrate – the fact that we have God to rely on, at our worst and at our best.

What's the worst thing you could say or think about God, our world, your lot in life, or the evil and misguided ways that tempt you or entrap you? Go ahead, think of something, the worst thing you could possibly say to God can take it. We know that God can take it from what we read in the

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<sup>2</sup> Associated Press, September 17, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> "Stranger Than Fiction," The Fairfax Journal, May 9, 1999, A1.

Book of Job. And we know that God can take it from what we read in the Psalms.

One of the very worst things ever imaginable in the history of humankind was actually uttered by the Israelites – God’s chosen people, and recorded in Psalm. When all of Israel was captured and tortured by the Edomites in Babylon some 2,600 years ago, they cried out to God in the most unimaginable way. The Psalmist records the worst of their outcries, writing in Psalm 137, “Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites, the day of Jerusalem’s fall, how they said, ‘Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!’ O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!”

How can a people – or a person – who is properly aligned with God’s divine will say such a thing? Because it is an honest, human emotion, AND because it is addressed to the Lord, and not a call to action – not a call that babies actually be hurled against the rocks. “Remember, O Lord,” says the Psalmist, “against the Edomites, the day of Jerusalem’s fall.”

The Israelites are calling upon the Lord to do what the Lord would do. They express their anger and outrage in terms of God’s faithfulness to them – knowing that it is God who will avenge their devastation. And sure enough, just 50 years later, the Israelites are allowed to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the Temple. And the Babylonian empire? It’s brought down by the king of Persia. This is historical fact found in the Bible and elsewhere: God working in the lives of God’s people – in both the good times and the bad. Just as God is at work in your life, today, weather these be good times or bad.

And if times are bad for you right now, you do not need to be shy about crying out to God and telling it like it is. And not just to God, but to anybody in this family of faith – to anybody willing to hear your anguish, whenever it might strike you, and lift it up with you in prayer to God.

There’s nothing in the Christian faith that says that a churchgoer or any follower of Christ is supposed to have it better or experience more success than people who don’t go to church. But what our faith does tell us is that regardless of what life throws at us – good, bad or just boring – God is always faithful, and God is always there for us. Like the ancient Israelites, we are still just human beings, even if we’ve turned our lives over to the Lord. And human beings experience a full range of emotions.

And sometimes we do ache for divine vengeance – not human revenge, but divine vengeance and divine will – when faced with evil

and misguided forces that are just crushing us on the outside. But they can't crush our spirit, or strip us of our faith.

Because like the Israelites at those times, we do not have to be shy in giving voice to our emotions. We just have to follow their example by raising our voices to God – in prayer, in sobbing, in frustration, in whatever state we find ourselves – honestly and fervently raising our voices to God, while trusting our lives to God and aligning ourselves with God's will.

In their honest, heartfelt call for divine judgment and godly and even Christ-like vengeance, the Israelites acknowledged and embraced and exercised their human emotions while giving them over to the Lord. And so can we. We can raise up our deepest cries and our greatest outburst because we know that God is guaranteed to hear them, and respond to them, and – even in the midst of them – God is there, to bring us peace. Amen.

### **Pastoral prayer**

O Lord of Life, you have bestowed upon us the grace and the power to live risen lives, and so we praise you with all our heart and soul.

Help us to walk the way of the Servant of God, who came not to be ministered to but to minister unto others.

Fill our hearts with the assurance of eternal life. Make us confident that whether we live or whether we die, we are yours and yours alone.

Send us your Holy Spirit to rain down on us like Living Water. Quench our dry hearts. Refresh our tired spirits. Soak us with your wet and winsome power.

Flood our lives with your presence. Wash away our debris, and cleanse us from all of our wayward living.

Holy Spirit, Living Water, pour out like the waters of baptism that we would be united in Christ, whom you sent to heal and save the world.

We pray all this in His powerful name, and as he taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.