



“What’s the Point?”
Scripture – Job 1:1, 2:1-10
Sermon Preached by Randall T. Clayton
Sunday, October 11, 2015

It was a nice, solid, neighborhood. A neighborhood with good schools, little crime, and nice green spaces. The houses were large, sturdy, and the lawns around them were spacious and meticulously well-tended. And so, you felt fortunate – blessed really – to be living there. There was one house in particular that stood out in your mind when you thought about your street. That house was the most beautiful around, and maybe one of the most gorgeous you had ever encountered. While it was built of the most exquisite materials available, and it was large enough to accommodate the most amazing parties you had ever been to, it wasn’t ostentatious at all. Though it was the showplace of the neighborhood, it blended in beautifully. Yes, the architect who had designed the home had done a masterful job.

The beauty and grace of this home, however, was matched by the beauty and grace of its inhabitants. The family that lived there – the Job’s – were incredible people. They were always there when you needed them; somehow intuitively knowing when you needed a listening ear, a shoulder to lean on, or a hand to help. If you were going out of town, the Jobs offered to bring your mail in and take your trash to the street. And, they’d probably water your plants and feed the fish in your pond even if you forgot to ask them to do so. When your son earned his Eagle Scout badge, they were there to celebrate. When your daughter was born, they brought food. When you had surgery, it was the Jobs who drove you to the hospital and waited for you until the doctors said everything was OK.

And then there was that time when you had been laid off from work and you were having trouble finding another job. The financial pressures were horrible in your household. But during those months you kept finding envelopes with no return address containing cash pushed under your door. That cash kept food on your table. While you couldn’t say for sure who left it, there was really no doubt in your mind: the Jobs.

The Job family was large – there were 7 sons, and 3 daughters. “What a blessing,” you thought. It appeared, however, that they had been blessed not just with children, but with ample financial resources too. Reliable sources told you that the Jobs had 7000 sheep, 3000 camels, 500 donkeys, and a whole host of farm and household help to keep everything in tip top shape. Surely they had been blessed, and just as surely they were a blessing to you and your community with all they gave back.

But almost overnight a household that seemed to be blessed suddenly seemed like it was cursed. The evil Sabeans attacked and carried off the Job’s oxen and donkeys, and killed those guarding the animals. And then a great fire burned up the sheep and servants tending them. And as if that weren’t horrible enough, then the Chaldeans came en masse, and carried off all the camels. Adding insult to injury, and surely the most devastating of all their losses,

something like a hurricane struck the house where their children were having dinner and all of them died as the house collapsed on top of them. The pain must have been excruciating for Mr. and Mrs. Job. Your heart literally bled for your neighbors and their losses.

Late one afternoon, the sudden shrill sound of your doorbell woke up the dogs and sent you scurrying to the door to see what the commotion was all about. When you opened your door, it was none other than Mrs. Job standing there, and she was holding a cake plate in her hands. You thought immediately, “How like the Jobs this was...unspeakable tragedy had struck their household, and here she was, offering you homemade food from her kitchen.” But as she stepped into your house, you couldn’t help but notice her drooping shoulders, her tear stained face, that slow way she moved as she stepped inside.

Even though you needed to get back to the garden weeding before sundown, nonetheless you invited her to join you for a cup of coffee and a piece of cake and she said, “Yes.” As you sat at your kitchen table sipping coffee together, your conversation started like so many others over the years: She asked about your children, your health. And the two of you discussed your concerns about the elderly couple down the street who everyone knew shouldn’t be living on their own anymore.

Sometime before her cup of coffee was empty, you began to realize there was an edge to her voice that you had never heard before; and then almost suddenly the conversation stopped as if she had totally run out of words. As she sat there you saw trickle of tears begin to run down her face, a trickle that soon turned into a flood. And as she sobbed she began to say. “What’s the point? What’s the point? What’s the point?” Over and over and over again she said, “What’s the point?”

“Mr. Job was as faithful and as ethical and as devoted to God as anyone on the face of the earth,” she said. “You couldn’t find a more honorable man, a more upright man anywhere. And yet, the Sabeans, the Chaldeans, fire and windstorm have wrecked our lives. What’s the point of following God,” she said, “if it doesn’t protect you from evil? What’s the point of religion, and worship, and service, and prayer, if it doesn’t get you good things?”

“And now,” Mrs. Job said, “I don’t know if you’ve heard, but now poor Mr. Job has sores all over his body...sores from head to toe. Nothing the CVS sells does any good at all. The best doctors offer nothing that helps. So now grief stricken Mr. Job is reduced to using a piece of pottery that he found in the top of the city dump to scratch the wounds as he himself sits in that dump’s ash heap. So what’s the point?” she sobbed. “What’s the point? If you follow God and you get this, why follow God?”

“What’s the point of coming to church? What’s the point of praying to God? What’s the point of tireless service on committees? What’s the point of turning the other cheek and offering forgiveness to those we really don’t want to forgive? What’s the point of any of this if in the end we find ourselves sitting in an ash heap, tethered to tubes on a hospital bed, turned away from the college of our choice or turned down for the job we desperately desired, failing the test we studied so hard for, hungry in the midst of a community of plenty, lonely and forgotten by the world because of age or disability or infirmity? What’s the point of faithful discipleship” she asked “when my husband ends up in an ash heap with his body covered in sores? What’s the point?”

Tears don’t last forever. The well in our eyes does run dry, and when that happened for Mrs. Job that day at the kitchen table and she was able to say something more than, “What’s the point”, she told you that she had a terrible secret that was weighing on her: she simply couldn’t stand to watch her husband suffer. She loved him dearly, and couldn’t bear to see his agony go on. So, out of her deep love she finally said to him one day, “Husband, why don’t you curse God and get it over with? Husband whom I love with all my heart, why don’t you shout at God so God will strike you dead so that your suffering will end?” She took a deep breath, and almost whispered, “Mr. Job said to me,” she said, “Wife, shall we receive good at the hand of God and not also receive the bad?” [Job 2:10]

Mrs. Job paused again. She dried a tear in her eye, and quickly said she had to be going because she needed to go back by the ash pile to check on Mr. Job. She thanked you for the coffee and for listening. She embraced you as you said your goodbyes. You assured her you'd keep them both in your prayers.

When she left, you quickly went out back and started pulling the mugwort out of the garden that was threatening to take over. You worked like a fiend to tame the pachysandra which was now expanding to parts of the garden where it didn't belong. Yes, you toiled tirelessly in your garden after Mrs. Job left, partly because you needed to get your garden weeded, but mostly because your own emotions were raw and your own heart was heavy after your conversation with your neighbor. Pulling weeds seemed like a good way to release some tension and get some perspective.

Your evening that followed was busy, and you felt dog-tired when you finally went to bed that night. But as soon as you snuffed out the candle, you felt wide awake. In the quiet darkness of your bedroom, you couldn't escape the conversation you had over coffee that afternoon with Mrs. Job. And you kept thinking not just about the tragedies that your neighbors were going through, but you kept hearing her voice ask, "What's the point?" What's the point of religion or spirituality, or the point of coming to church or studying the Bible or praying to God if it doesn't result in good things happening or at least warding off the bad?

You finally fell asleep after tossing and turning for an hour or so, but somewhere before sunrise that morning, you woke up and thought, "Doesn't our God love us, care for us, and want the best for us?" "Surely, yes, our Creator must love us," you thought.

"And isn't the story of God's dealings with humanity one that assures us all that love is indeed stronger than hate, that good will in the end wins over bad?" "Yes, surely it is," you realized.

Now fully awake, you arose from bed, put on the coffee and before the pot finished brewing in the pre-dawn darkness it hit you: maybe Mr. Job didn't curse God as he sat in the ash pit because he knew he wasn't alone there. Maybe his great faith provided an assurance that his God was there beside him even during those days of terrible devastation.

As you prepared for your day, you found yourself offering prayers to God for Mr. and Mrs. Job, and as you did you also found yourself thinking about the times in your own life when you had struggled with painful decisions, feared an unknown future. You recalled those days when your mother had been diagnosed with cancer, and those months when they couldn't figure out what was wrong with your father. And you remembered those months of unemployment and the terrible financial pressures you faced. But God was with you then, you realized. And those envelopes of cash that we kept finding? Maybe it was the Jobs who left them, but most certainly it was really God who provided it.

Over lunch in a nearby diner that day you continued to ponder Mrs. Job's question, "What's the point?" As you ate your lunch-time salad, you began to realize that the point of faithful discipleship isn't to get God to do something; the point of faithful discipleship is nothing more, and nothing less, than a response that we humans make to the God who loved us long before we loved God.

By the time you had consumed the last carrot in the salad and eaten the last morsel of bread that came with it, you began to grasp something else: responding to the God by faithful discipleship had helped your own faith to grow; it helped deepen your spiritual roots; and it was a strong faith that had helped you make it through those times when you found yourself sitting in a metaphorical ash pit, world crumbling around you.

As you walked away from the restaurant after eating your lunch and paying your bill that afternoon, you decided that the things you needed to do at the office could wait a while. It was important to make a detour between the restaurant and the office – a detour by an ash pit. You needed to make a detour by an ash pit so that so that you could sit for a while beside Mr. Job. After all, you wanted to make sure he knew he wasn't alone, that he knew he was loved. You wanted to reach out to him as God had reached out to you. Amen.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Gracious God, make us mindful this day that you have given us the most precious gift – the gift of life. Thanks to this unmerited gift, we can see and delight in the beauty of your wondrous creation. We can think and discover ideas that open whole new worlds. We can pursue meaningful work that gives us purpose. We can laugh and love, and build affectionate bonds with others that spawn close friendships and feelings too deep for words. We can enjoy the freedom to follow the path Jesus has shown us – the path that leads to a fulfilling life and generates joy.

Yet, God, life is not all goodness and light. This generous gift is quite fragile. Peaceful skies can turn menacing in a moment. We can make terrible mistakes and take foolish risks. Ignorance or innocence can land us in a raging torrent. Other times, through no fault of our own, it seems that darkness hunts us down. Our body betrays us or our family splinters or a disaster strikes.

Help us to know, Good Shepherd, that you are at our side even in the most frightening places. Although we may feel terrified and our confidence may evaporate, you can help us muster courage to face the crisis we encounter.

Help us to know, O God, that you never forsake us, and in you we can find the determination to contend with whatever forces threaten to destroy us.

Help us to know, faithful God, that we can find in you wisdom for handling whatever suffering life deals us. You inspire us to bind ourselves to others in this family of faith, knowing that it is better to face adversity united, than to attempt to face the turmoil alone.

Help us to know that you come to us in family and friends

who will listen to us when we must pour out our sorrows,
who will not flee when we must spout our anger and distress,
and who will stick with us through our feelings of desperation.

Everlasting God, remind us that life is tenuous and our time on earth is limited. Motivate us to make the most of our days by sharing love, spreading peace and embracing the hope you give us for eternal life.

Now, hear us as we pray together the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, saying, “Our Father, who art in heaven...”