

Sermon Title: Pains and Gains  
Text: Job 2:1-10; Hebrews 2:5-12

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Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton WI  
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Some weeks, God seems to be just a little bit more in the news than other weeks. Unfortunately, it's not normally when something extraordinarily good transpires, but when tragedy strikes. So, oddly enough, this week's invocations of the divine did not accompany news that the Dow had reached an all time high, or the fact that the glory of Fall had been unleashed in the trees, reminding us of the wondrous circle of the seasons that is set in motion by God's hand. Talk about God swirled around a vortex of tragedy in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Ten precious children, senselessly shot by a man who drove a milk truck to the neighboring farms, but had apparently buried a lifetime's anger and hate until it flared out on a community that could hardly have been more innocent. Five funerals punctuated the week, as the austere buggies that are a trademark of the Amish community gathered around hand dug graves, and in hand hewn caskets, their children were laid to rest. And the question, shouted through the media, was, "How could God allow such a thing to happen?"

How could God allow such a thing to happen? And my mind jumps to the wisdom of William Sloane Coffin, which I know I've shared from this pulpit before, but I think bears repeating. It's a fact of history, Coffin said, that "almost every square inch of the Earth's surface is soaked with the tears and blood of the innocent, and it's not God's doing, it's our doing. That's human malpractice. Don't chalk it up to God. Every time people lift their eyes to heaven and say, when they see the innocent suffering, "God, how could you let this happen?" it is well to remember at that exact moment God is asking exactly that same question of us: "How could you let it happen?"<sup>1</sup> If there's a text for this week, it is that shortest verse in the Gospel of John, as Jesus stood at the tomb of his friend, Lazarus. "Jesus wept." (John 11:35)

But I think the image that will linger in my mind when all this is replaced by the next news cycle, was an interview with another resident of Lancaster County, not a member of the Amish community, but of one of its sister churches born of the separatist and pacifist roots in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. How, the interviewer wanted to know, would this community respond to the tragedy? Would there be calls for greater security in their schools, perhaps telephone lines or cell phones to allow immediate contact with the police? No, the speaker answered. Revenge, or heightened security, or retribution would not be on the minds of the Amish in a situation like this. They would be praying for *forgiveness*.

It was a glimpse into an alternative reality, really. One which takes the model of Jesus' life in the most daunting of ways—that views Jesus' prayer in the garden before his death, not as a dramatic pause, but as a paradigm for Christian living: "Lord, if it be your will, take this cup from me. But not my will, but thine be done." While reaction to the killings in Wisconsin have ranged from reviews of security plans to calls to arm elementary teachers with hand guns, the true victims of this week's events have embraced the tragedy in a completely different way, with words, and images that ring so true to all we know of Jesus, but are *so* foreign to the reflex of the world in which we live.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week752/interview1.html>.

And it is into this precise time, this exact world, that the lectionary has directed our hearts and minds to Job—literally the poster child of innocent suffering in Hebrew scripture. His name alone is sufficient to call up one of the core mysteries of this faith to which we try to cling: a faith in a God of all creation who wills and wants the Good. You know the story. He was a good and righteous man, who had prospered because of his virtue and hard work. But a little wager between God and Satan changed all that. He was good, Satan argued, because he'd not tasted suffering. But give him a *real* challenge and he'll curse you as quickly as he blesses.

The problem I think we have with all this, when we strip away the trouble our minds have with mythic language in general—the very notion that there might be some heavenly court in which God and Satan might have the opportunity to make such deals—we have a tendency to let this story stand first of all as an explanation for how evil finds its way into our world. “O God how could you?” And the answer is, it's there to test your metal. It is, in short, a way of chalking up everything that's wrong in this world to something of a test flight, in which we'll be put through the worst paces to make sure we're everything promised on the package.

But I'm with Bill Coffin on this one. I'm not willing to grant that the terrible things that happen in this world are a manifestation of some cosmic chess game between a loving creator and a cynical force of evil. I'm far more inclined to think that the roots of evil reside inside us, and are not imposed from without, and that the most meaningful reflections on Job will not come when the story explains why bad things happen to good people, but rather when it provides an opportunity for us to reflect on what any human might do when the intractable mystery of evil and suffering reveals itself, as it most certainly will, in our lives.

One of the hardest parts of this story that's overwhelmed us from Lancaster County is that the perpetrator was not some dark lurking figure who swept into the world. As is so often the case, he was not the one everyone knew would go off some day. On the very morning that he bound and shot ten young girls, he'd kissed his own children good-bye, and sent them to school on the bus. His wife wanted the media to know that the man who pulled that trigger was not the man she'd known as a father and a husband.

But of course, he was, because evil for the most part does not rain down from heaven upon us. It seeps out, often when we least expect it, from places we wouldn't imagine, and in ways we cannot predict. When the stories get told, we'll search for explanations—childhood tragedy, mental illness that went untreated or unchecked—but none of the explanations, at the end of the day, will suffice anymore than that God and Satan had a bet. The question to be answered may not be “where does evil and suffering come from.” The question *may* be how do we respond to its reality.

One answer is the one we heard from Job this morning, as he sat among the ashes and scraped at the sores that had mysteriously covered his body. “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?” I hasten to note that it's only the *first* answer that the book of Job will offer, and it may not even be the *best*, but it's certainly one that works, at least to a point.

One of the truly formative moments in my ministry was when it crossed paths with a couple whose toddler daughter was diagnosed with cancer, and died before her third birthday. No one

needed to explain the tragedy to anyone, but what that couple taught me as they cared for their dying daughter was that they would never have traded the grief if it meant they would have to forfeit the gift, as well. Her life might have been short, but it bore a sweetness that to this day takes my breath away. And for whatever reason, which by the way God has *not* chosen to let us in on as yet, it's always that way. Good and bad, great joy and deep suffering, flow from the same well of life. We don't get to choose, even from day to day or from hour to hour, which we will get. We cannot insulate ourselves from the one without denying ourselves of the other.

It was expressed, I think in that same news story, as the interviewer spoke with a young woman from that Lancaster County community, though not, I suppose, in precisely this language, or in language I might use. Sure, the woman said, what happened in that schoolhouse was heartbreaking, but if it hadn't been this it might have been something else. In any case it was in God's hands, and even now, so are we.

That's the real wonder of the story of Job: that evil and suffering are not things that happen when God's back is turned, but even in the darkest of it all, these are moments when God stands with us. "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them?" And yet it is so. Not just when our lives are great, and everything's going our way, but precisely at those moments when we might imagine ourselves to be forsaken, helpless, lost in this world.

And the letter to the Hebrews goes just a step further. It's a hard step, but precisely what I saw in the Amish response to the events of this week that so confound the culture that's tried to put this event in context. It's not merely that good and bad happens and you can't take the one without the other. It's not that no matter how bad it gets, we can be assured that God is with us. It's that somehow, in the intractable mystery of evil and suffering in this world, we are being "made perfect."

This is *so* out of tune in a world where "God has truly blessed me" means that I've got wealth, and health, and family and friends. What might it mean if our humanity is perfected, not when we count up all the coins, and number all the blessings, but when we find in Jesus' words from the cross the true core and fulfillment of our humanity? "Father, forgive them..."? It suggests that what we long for will not be ours by putting metal detectors in the doorways of all the schools, or we have the right to a concealed handgun, or build a wall high enough to keep anyone from crossing our borders, or when we find that forsaken cave in the mountains of Afghanistan where the architects of terror are hiding and rein down the full force of the American military. Our world won't be made perfect when we somehow manage to insulate ourselves from all evil.

Because if bravado and strength and justice of the sword were the way of salvation, then the Jesus we profess to worship is more pitiful than Job, scraping his scabs in the ash heap. But the Gospel, whispered in our midst today not only in the words of Job and Hebrews, but in the quaintly out of place features of a kindly, bearded man, speaking on behalf of those who look like us to be stuck in history, is not "vengeance is *mine*." It is, "Father forgive!"

The gain of this deep pain will not come when we manage to destroy it with might and power. The gain will come when we learn that it does not embrace us, but we, and it, are embraced, we

are *perfected* and made whole, redeemed through it all, by the One who shaped us, and named us, who holds us and has held us, since before time began, and on into eternity.

“O God, how could you allow this all to happen?” That’s the question shouted in the world this week, and the answer, if we listen carefully, god’s answer is “I love you!”

To this One and Holy God, let us pray, understanding that our question, and God’s answer don’t really line up straight, not because God’s answer is not sure, but because our questions are yet to be perfected by the hand of that God whose presence, in greatest joy, and in deepest sorrow, is promised, and certain.