

Pawtucket Congregational Church, UCC
15 Mammoth Road, Lowell MA

Date: October 21, 2012, 10 AM – 21st after Pentecost
Scripture: Job 38: 1 – 11, 22-33 and Mark 10:35-35
Sermon: When God Shows Up
Preacher: Ruth Richards

Have you ever felt that life just couldn't get any worse? And then it did. Have you ever felt that you couldn't take one more piece of bad news, another friend or family member in difficulty, another tragedy, either personal, close by or happening to people far away, and then there was yet another?

We know that sometimes it's just one darn thing after another. Life is like that. We even have sayings that reflect our sense that bad things are in some way inevitable do not come singly. Troubles come in threes. I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.

If you resonate with this, then you will recognize that the book of Job in the Bible, from which that last saying also comes, by the way, contains a lot of truth. The book is named after its main character, Job who has all the bad luck, all the tragedy, although not at first. So who is this Job?

I think it is important to understand that Job is not supposed to be a real person. Job's story begins with the words "There once was a man who lived in the Land of Uz." We don't know where Uz is, or was –there is no archeological or historical record of Uz, so I think the people who originally heard and told this story thought of as a "Once upon a time." story. However, it certainly contains a lot of reality, a lot of truth.

So let me introduce Job. He was a devout and God-fearing man, and God blessed him exceedingly. He was very wealthy. He owned large herds of camels, donkeys, cattle and flocks of sheep. He had a great many servants to take care of all his livestock. He had a wife and a fine family - seven grown up sons and three daughters. Everything was going his way, he held a high position in his community as a judge and an elder. But Job was also a good man. His judgments were righteous. He took care of the poor and vulnerable people in the town, the widows and orphans, just as the law commanded.

And then suddenly one day, everything fell apart. A combination of natural disasters and enemy raiders killed or carried off his animals and servants. And worse of all, a great wind blew across the desert and struck the house in which his children were dining together causing it to collapse and all of them were killed. Only his wife was left, who advised him to curse God and die. However, with almost nauseating piety, he refused to curse God.

Then added to his emotional suffering and loss he endured physical suffering. As a final blow, Job himself was afflicted with a disease and his skin became covered with boils that were horribly disfiguring and painful. Once an important person, one of the top men in town, rich, powerful and respected, he is now on the scrap heap, sneered at by his neighbors.

He stands up for himself against God. He insists that God is being completely unjust to him. Much of the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament states clearly that if you are faithful and upright you will be blessed by God with good fortune, and if you are not, then God will punish you. Very simple. Job says, and he make his case very clearly – that all this misfortune should not be happening to him and God owes him an explanation.

Job doesn't pull his punches. He bawls God out. He tells God that he, Job, is completely blameless. He has led a perfect life. Without sin, even. He has kept the commandments. He has been completely faithful to God. He has not only made sacrifices to God on his own behalf, but has made regular sacrifices on behalf of his children just in case any of them have sinned and he doesn't know about it. When it comes to righteousness, Job is a complete over-achiever!

He is visited by three friends, who come to commiserate with him – Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. But as he complains and continues to state his innocence and the unfairness of God, they all insist that his troubles must be punishment and it is just a case of recognizing or owning up to his sin. He's being punished, so he must have sinned – no other explanation.

Maybe the sin is so terrible that he refuses to acknowledge it or own it, say his friends. But God knows everything, so it's no use Job whining about being blameless. It may be deeply buried but Job must have been found out for something really bad, and is getting what was coming to him. Maybe Job is a kind of 5th Century BCE Jimmy Savile, the British disc jockey and entertainer who was famous for his TV shows in the sixties and seventies. As he grew older and rather less of a swinger he devoted himself to charity work, raising enormous sums of money for hospitals and other worthy organizations. He died about a year ago, and now scandals are rocking the press because a number of women are coming forward claiming to have been victims of his sexual abuse as teenagers. Who would believe that such a seemingly good person was so corrupt?

But Job continues to state that he is blameless. He has not sinned. He is virtuous and faithful. And he challenges God to tell him what he has done wrong! As the ultimate example of bad things happening to a good person, Job calls God on God's behavior. He is angry with God and says so in no uncertain terms. In so many ways, Job speaks to God for us.

When bad things happen we want to know why.

We want to shake our fist at God and demand an explanation.

We want to tell God that he is being unfair and unjust.
 We want to pound on the door of heaven demanding reasons.
 And that is exactly what Job does on our behalf, on behalf of human beings in every time and every place.

And finally, in Job's story God shows up. God speaks, from out of the whirlwind. And instead of giving Job an explanation, God challenges Job to know what God knows and what God does. Can you do what I do? God counters. Do you know how to build planets? Did you hear the stars sing in the sky? Did you cradle the ocean like a mother cradles a baby? Can you keep all the planets and stars in their place with just the right balance of energy? Make weather systems and ecosystems that work together to make life possible? Can you do what I am able to do?

Job gets taken on a sort of magic carpet ride through the wonders of creation, majestic storms and desert flowers that no human will see. And, it is enough for him. Faced with the splendor of God, the awesome-ness of God, he backs down. And is vindicated by God for daring to speak a bold truth, unlike his friends.

Job has half an answer to our questions about being human and suffering. God is God and we can have almost no idea of what that means.

But – it's not enough, is it? When tragedy strikes, we want to make meaning of it. We want to be sure that it is not random and we are not alone. We want God to show up.

And, I think that is where our Gospel reading, the passage from Mark connects here.

John and James, the fishermen, the sons of Zebedee, ask Jesus to let them have a special share in his glory. When the time comes, when all the work is done and the bad things have finished happening to the good people and the good things start, they want to be honored with Jesus, one on his right and one on his left. They are often castigated for their maneuvering; sneakily going behind the backs of the other disciples to plea for special treatment, and indeed the others are angry. but perhaps it shows quite a step of faith that the others were not yet ready to make. You see, they were still in denial about the bad stuff that Jesus was predicting. Whenever he spoke of his impending arrest, torture, death and resurrection, they have failed to accept its truth.

Jesus has told them plainly that, innocent as he is, obedient to God as he is, without sin as he is, he will suffer and die. He won't have deserved it. But he will join us human beings in suffering and experience death himself, followed by resurrection to new life.

And, maybe James and John are groping their way towards getting it.

And Jesus replies: "Can you drink the cup that I will drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

And, they say, "Yes." And instead of saying something along the lines of "You pair of idiots, have you any idea of what you're talking about. Are you really saying that you can do what I do? Were you there when I created the earth? When the morning stars sang in chorus? Can you suffer and die for all human beings?"

He just says that yes, they will drink his cup and be baptized with his baptism. I think – I think, he is turning the idea around. It is not so much that James and John take on Jesus work. It is that Jesus as God incarnate, which means, God showing up, in the flesh, can do all that we will do. And is willing to do it. Jesus is able to be human and frail. Jesus is able to suffer, both physically and mentally. Jesus is with us and for us. Baptized into our sinful humanity. Drinking the cup of human sorrow and suffering. The one who creates the universe is able to do that.

We will suffer because, like animals, we are mortal creatures with physical bodies. We get sick and experience pain. We will suffer because, like God, we love, and we will lose people that we love. And Jesus walks in love with us in that suffering and comes out on the other side, so that we can share his glory. We will not sit one on his right and one on his left, but we can be certain that we have a place somewhere at the table.