**Caught in the Field of Play**

**Text: Job 2:3**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Charlie Brown’s baseball team is getting hammered, and the pitcher calls his catcher to the mound. “We’re getting slaughtered again, Schroeder,” Charlie Brown says, “I don’t know what to do…Why do we have to suffer like this?”

Schroeder replies, “’Man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward.’”

“What?” Charlie Brown says.

Enter Linus. “He’s quoting from the Book of Job,” Charlie Brown…7th verse, 5th chapter. Actually, the problem of suffering is a very profound one, and…”

Lucy comes in from the outfield. “If a person has bad luck, it’s because he’s done something wrong, that’s what I always say!”

Schroeder returns. “That’s what Job’s friends told him, but I doubt if…

“What about Job’s wife? I don’t think she gets enough credit!”

And now the whole team is at it.

“I think a person who never suffers, never matures…Suffering is actually very important…

“Who wants to suffer? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“But pain is a part of life, and…”

“A person who speaks only of the ‘patience’ of Job reveals that he knows very little of the book! Now, the way I see it…”

And Charlie Brown says, “I don’t have a baseball team...I have a theological seminary!”

Today we begin a four-part series on the Book of Job. In my nearly 40 years of ministry I don’t think I’ve preached even once on Job, let alone a whole series. I haven’t even read it that much. You can tell from looking at my Bible the books that I’ve studied the most. The edges of the pages are somewhat dark around Isaiah and the Psalms, and darker still around the gospels and selected epistles. But the edges of the pages of Job? Pristine! So when I looked ahead in August to the scriptures that were coming-up in the fall, and I saw that Job was among them, I said, “Okay, Ervin, it’s time that you stopped avoiding this challenging book.”

And Job *is* challenging! We think of the Bible as good news, but Job is full of *bad* news. You probably know the basic story: Job is a good man, a *righteous* man, but he suffers greatly at the hands of Satan. He loses his house, his property, his children, his income…everything! *Through no fault of his own*. But this is not just Satan’s doing. Job is the ball in a peculiar game that Satan plays with *God*! Satan and God have this contest going on, and Job is caught in the field of play. Satan wants to prove that everyone – even the most faithful, even the most righteous – *everyone* has a point where they’ll turn away from God and abandon their faith. But God is sure that Job will remain faithful, no matter how much he suffers. So God and Satan say to each other, “Game on, bro!” And the contest ensues, with Job caught in the middle.

So the book implicates not just Satan in the suffering of the innocent, but God as well. That’s part of what makes this book so difficult. God contributes to the suffering of Job. Not directly, but at least indirectly, by stepping back and not interfering as Satan does one dirty deed after another. Satan is so sure that if Job suffers enough, he will abandon his faith and curse God. God is sure that Job will remain faithful *but*, God is quite willing to sit back and watch him suffer in the meantime.

I’m not making this up. That’s what the book says.

Let me give you a little more background on Job, and then let’s dive in and see what conclusions we can draw, especially from these first two chapters of this challenging book.

Let’s be clear, first of all, that we’re not dealing with history here. The Book of Job comes not from the part of the Old Testament that purports to tell of the mighty acts of God in history. That would be especially Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings and Ezra-Nehemiah. No; that’s not where we’re at. Job is part of the *wisdom* literature, which includes the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. These are Hebrew writings that offer guidance and comfort and wisdom to God’s people in good times and especially bad times. It’s not history, it’s literature. It seeks not to be literally true, but to *point* to Truth. Job is, in all likelihood, a fictitious character. But his story is nevertheless a means through which God’s Word can be revealed to us.

And you need to know, secondly, that Satan in Job may not be the character that you think he is. The Hebrew text – and remember, the Old Testament was written in Hebrew – the Hebrew text says “*the* satan.” In Hebrew it’s *ha-satan*. The literal translation would be “the Accuser.” The Old Testament does not have a figure comparable to the crafty character who tempts Jesus as he prepares for ministry; the nasty fellow who is described elsewhere in the New Testament as “the Evil One.” The Accuser of Job appears to be a member of God’s heavenly court; one of God’s advisors, if you will. Which is a reminder that it’s always good to have a troublemaker on any board or committee or task force; someone who will ask the tough questions and say the things that no one else has the guts to say. Sometimes we even call that person the “devil’s advocate.” But this Accuser in Job is not yet the Devil of the New Testament.

However, he’s getting *close* to being that trouble maker. God asks the Accuser where he’s been and he rather nonchalantly replies, “Oh, going to and fro on the earth.” And we’re inclined to think, “Yeah, right; and spreading mischief and confusion and suffering everywhere you go.”

I mean, the world is a nasty place! All sorts of horrible things happens here, to saint and sinner alike. And if we’re inclined to think that there’s some kind of Trouble Maker or Evil One going to and fro and making everyone’s life miserable; well, there’s lots of data to suggest that that is indeed what’s going on!

Which brings us to our first point: in this sometimes awful world, innocent people really do suffer, through no fault of their own. Bad things really do happen to good people. And the Book of Job makes this very clear. Right there in Job 1:1 it says the “man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.” Yet Job was hit by one disaster after another. First his work animals were stolen, leaving him unable to farm his fields. Then he lost his sheep and servants, leaving him unable to generate any kind of income. And all that happened in just the first inning of this peculiar ballgame. By the time we joint the story in the second inning, a lot of damage had already been done. Job loses his work animals, his flocks and his servants. And then, “a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house” where his sons and daughters were gathered, and killed them all (Job 1:19).

One cannot hear of that last calamity without thinking of the great winds of Hurricane Michael that slammed into the Florida Panhandle on Wednesday. Homes and businesses have been destroyed, lives have been lost, trauma inflicted on hundreds of thousands of innocent people.

Bad things happen to good people. The innocent suffer, through no fault of their own. And maybe not because of any plan put together by God or Satan or whoever. It seems that there’s a certain randomness in the universe, a certain amount of chaos floating around, and when it crashes into us, all hell breaks lose. Some physicist even talk about chaos theory as a way of explaining reality. Some theologians say that this is what’s left of the chaos that God confronted on the first day of creation; the lingering remnant of the dark and formless void which God faced when the Creator first rolled up his sleeves and got to work. And since God isn’t through creating, some of that chaos remains.

Maybe so. But that’s a theologian talking, not Job. The Book of Job does not explain why bad things happen to good people. It just states the reality that they do.

Innocent people really do suffer. Yet we try to explain this away. And that’s our second point. Like Lucy, we want to believe that people suffer because they’ve done something wrong. And yes, when we read further into the Book of Job, we find Job’s friends accusing him of this very thing. “Surely, Job, you did something in the past to deserve this. You’re just too proud or stubborn or forgetful or something to admit it.” And this is actually the standard Old Testament explanation for things. The good are rewarded and the evil suffer. Of all the books in the Old Testament, only Job and perhaps Ecclesiastes challenge this notion.

And there will be folks who will try to blame the victims of this most recent disaster in Florida. Voices on the left may say that this is divine retribution for denying the realities of climate change. Just like some voices on the right said that 9/11 was God’s judgment on the United States for catering to gay and lesbian folks. We humans desperately want to believe that the universe has a strict moral order. We want to believe that everything happens for a reason, that we deserve our fate, that the good are rewarded and the evil are punished and the moral calculus of creation is summed-up in a perfectly balanced equation.

But the Book of Job screams out, “No!” The book says emphatically that Job was *blameless*! And if we miss this point in the Old Testament, then Jesus brings it up in the New when he says that God “makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). The reality is that bad things happen to good people: whether we’re talking about the victims of hurricanes or earthquakes or child abuse or whatever the tragedy may be. Bad things happen to good people, and there’s no fair or just or truthful way to make sense out of it or explain it away.

And yet, faith remains. People remain faithful to God, and God remains faithful to them. Indeed, sometimes, in the very midst of tragedy, faith is *strengthened*. I’m not going to tell you that’s *why* we suffer – Job doesn’t say that – but the strengthening of faith can sometimes be a *consequence* of suffering.

Like the person running down the stairs of the World Trade Center minutes before the building collapsed, and a voice out of nowhere told him to go this way instead of that, and he escaped; and he came to believe that it was the voice of an angel, or the voice of God.

Or Robert Kennedy, lying mortally wounded on the floor of the Ambassador Hotel, a peaceful countenance gracing his face as he said, “Everything is going to be okay;” as if he always knew that it would end this way, and he could already see through the darkness of death to the light beyond.

Or Thomas Dorsey learning of the death of his wife and infant daughter, and in his grief penning the words:

“Precious Lord, take my hand,

lead me on, let me stand,

I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;

through the storm, through the night,

lead me on to the light:

Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.”

In the face of tragedy, in the pathos of innocent suffering, faith remains. That doesn’t make it okay. That doesn’t somehow justify the suffering, or justify God in the midst of the suffering. It is simply to state the reality of the situation; a reality to which scripture and experience point.

The story tells us that Job remained faithful. He’d lost everything, yet the scripture says, “In all this Job did not sin, or charge God with wrongdoing” (Job 1:22). The Accuser said to God, “It’s easy to have faith when everything is going well. Of course Job is faithful so long as you’re protecting him and giving him all this good stuff. But I know that as soon as things go south, he’s going to curse you.”

But that’s not what happened. Job understood that all he had was a gift from God, but even when he no longer had those gifts, he continued to praise God. Because, you see, faith is not simply a good feeling when it seems like we’ve been blessed; faith is a deep and profound trust in the goodness of God, even when it seems like life is falling apart. Such faith not only perseveres through suffering; it is sometimes *strengthened* in suffering.

Job did not lose his faith in God, *and God did not lose his faith in Job*. God trusted that Job would remain faithful even in the face of suffering. Which perhaps indicates that God trusts *us*. Because it may be that Job here represents Everyman, and Everywoman. And even when it seems like the world is going to hell in a hand basket, God trusts that we’re going to hang in there. And if *God* thinks we’re not going to abandon ship, who are we to jump overboard? If God has such confidence in us, who are we to think otherwise? Even when the going gets so tough as to be almost unbearable.

The Greeks understood suffering, perhaps better than anyone else in history. It was the Greek play write Aeschylus who wrote:

“He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart; and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.”