

“Suffering 101,”  
a sermon giving by the Rev. Susan Moran  
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill  
on November 15, 2009

Reading: from the book of Job, Chapter 2:

When Job’s three friends heard about all these calamities that had befallen him,  
each came from his own house—

Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuite and  
Zophar the Naamathite.

They met together to go and console and comfort him.

When they saw him from a distance,

they could not recognize him,

and they broke into loud weeping; each one tore his robe and threw dust into the air  
onto his head.

They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights. No one spoke a word  
to him for they saw how very great was his suffering.

Good morning and welcome. It is good to be here. I hope everyone is feeling well today but I know that this time of year, with the increased cold and the darkness that descends so early can be very hard for some people. Not to mention the near epidemic of flu that is going around. Even if we are physically healthy, as I pray everyone is, many of us are suffering and sad. So, I thought we would face it head on and talk about Suffering.

Suffering is such a huge topic, we can only talk about a few related issues this morning: First, and perhaps most importantly, what is helpful and what is not helpful when a loved one is suffering? Are there ways to experience suffering that includes some kind of faith in God, or ourselves, or others? Are there ways to make suffering less dreadful?

I feel like a beginner when it comes to *understanding* suffering; hence my title. But, like every person in this sanctuary, I have suffered. I have gone far and wide in my research, and I have learned some lessons worth sharing. So, let us begin.

There are certain things that should *never ever* be said aloud to anyone who happens to be sad, suffering and/or in the midst of deep grief. These include, in no particular order:

-I am sure you’re feeling better by now, and its close cousin, --You *should* be feeling better by now.

-When one door closes, another one opens.

-God has a special plan for you—you just don’t know what it is

- There must be some lesson you need to learn from this illness.
- You're not very lucky, are you?
- Nothing happens by accident—there is a reason for everything.
- Pain is inevitable—suffering is optional.

Suffering is part of being alive. Suffering comes with being human. I am sorry about this. I really am. I wish it were different. For myself and for my children, for everyone I love. But suffering is intrinsic to life, it is here to stay. It is as constant and consistent as breathing in and breathing out.

Our reading this morning is one of my favorite parts of the Book of Job, and many scholars agree that it ends a standalone story that was later added to by another author entirely. Three friends hear that their friend Job is suffering terribly and go to see him. Having been the richest man in the land, Job has lost all his livestock. His children have all been killed in a freak accident and his entire body is covered with sores and boils. Basically, he is a wreck. The friends come and visit Job and they sit in silence for a week. They need not say anything; their presence is comfort enough.

Had the book ended there, it would have been a short but effective lesson on how to be with someone in grief. I would add that the friends should bring Job lots of water and take him on long walks, particularly walks that include looking at the ocean or the forest or beautiful flowers. Our Earth can be a soothing balm.

So, just to review, when someone you love is feeling lost and sad and in despair, silence is a pure gift. Water and walking are blessings. If you feel the urgent need to say something, say “I am sorry”. If you are feeling especially talkative, say “I am so sorry.” These words go a long way. These words are enough. The Buddhists remind us, enough is a feast.

But the book of Job wasn't written by a Buddhist so enough wasn't enough. From Chapter 3 to chapter 37, Job and his friends argue about the causes of Job's suffering. Our main character is no longer the meek, despairing father of the first 2 chapters. For the next 30 odd chapters, Job becomes every and any man or woman who has ever suffered. : Why me? Why now? How could this happen? What did I do? He speaks for all of us when he laments, “What is my strength, that I should wait? And what is the end, that I should be patient? In truth, I have no help in me, and my resource is driven from me” (Ch 6 11-13—all translations are by Stephen Levine.

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Job frequently speaks to God directly, “Why have you made me your target? Why have I become a burden to you?” God is silent while Job's so-called friends offer him a multitude of reasons for his suffering: Bildad assures Job that “if you are pure and upright, surely then He will rouse himself for you” He adds, “Such are the paths who forget God; the hope of the Godless shall perish. Their confidence is gossamer, a spider's house their trust. If one leans against its house, it will not stand. If one lays hold of it, it will not endure.” Beautiful language, Yes. Kind and loving response, No.

The friends spend verse upon verse telling Job that his suffering must be his fault because, like most of us, Job's friends believe that if we are good, we will be rewarded, and if we are bad, we will be punished.

Deep down, most of us really believe that if we are good, we will be healthy and happy and successful and if we are unhealthy or unlucky or unsuccessful, it is because we somehow deserve it. We believe this for ourselves and for our loved ones.

As a hospital chaplain I would meet patient after patient who would explain to me that the reason for their sepsis or their kidney failure or their lung cancer, was because God was testing them or punishing them for some sin, real or imagined that they had committed. Mary Gordon writes eloquently about our need for blame in her novel,

Pearl:

“Blame is a solid platform we can stand on, a still place in the whirlwind. It tells us: this happened because of that; it could have been avoided. Whereas the unbearable possibility is that nothing can be avoided, the wind bloweth where it listeth and becomes a whirlwind that takes everything up: indiscriminate, violent, incapable of turning or slowing down because of any human word or action.” (p. 165 Pearl).

Job's friends are afraid of this “unbearable possibility”. There MUST be a reasonable explanation for Job's losses or the world doesn't make sense. They can't bear to feel that out of control. They can't bear to consider that Job is suffering for *no good reason*.

Plus, as Stephen Levine reminds us in his introduction to his translation of Job, The friends are also scared of any real connection to Job's pain, afraid of being intimate with Job's grief, because that is too scary also. So they keep their distance from him by blaming him over and over and in different ways for his tragedy. We do the same thing. Afraid of our own grief, we find reasons for our suffering in what we DID or DIDN'T DO. This all-too human tendency to place blame on ourselves or the victims of suffering is as old as the hills. Blame gives us control, it gives the world order and reason and explanation. It makes us feel safe. But the fact is, the world is not controllable, it is disorderly and unreasonable and defies explanation every minute. Towards the end of this book, Job says “If only I could return to the days when God was my guardian; when his fire blazed above me and guided me through the dark—when he hadn't yet deserted me and my children sat at my side. When my feet were bathed in cream and oil gushed from the rock. As I walked to the square of the city and took my seat of honor, young men held their breath; old men rose to their feet.” Job has this notion that his good life is indicative of God's presence, and now that his life has been shattered God is missing entirely. Since he has amassed all these losses, he assumes God has abandoned him.

This theology, the belief that God rewards the virtuous and punishes the evil, is expressed in large swathes of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament. In the Torah and in the Prophets, we hear over and over again that success is a sign of God's love and

that exile, disease, infertility and death are God's punishment for our bad behavior. The Book of Job is the only text in the Hebrew Bible that describes God in a completely different way.

Towards the end of the Book of Job, we finally hear from God, translated as the Voice from the Whirlwind. This Voice sounds a bit frustrated with Job, and all his questions: "Do you dare deny my judgment? Am I wrong because you are right? Make the proud man grovel. Pluck the wicked from their perch. Push them into the grave. Throw them, screaming, to hell. Then I will admit that your own strength can save you."

God will not be bound by any human construct of justice. Our human labels of right and wrong, of what's fair, are just that, human. God is beyond any human construct of values or justice or *anything*. Here are a few other things that the Voice bellows:

"Who is this whose ignorant words smear my design with darkness? Stand up now like a man; I will question you: please instruct me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know!" (translated from the NRSV)

This is no gentle swaddling parent telling Job all is well. For four chapters, God answers none of Job's questions but basically asks, in a myriad of ways, who are you to question ME? God is curious about the breath and depth of Job's power:

"Do you show the hawk how to fly,  
Stretching his wings on the wind?  
Do you teach the vulture to soar and build his nest in the clouds?  
He makes his home on the mountaintop, on the unapproachable crag. He sits and scans for prey; from far off his eyes spot it; his little ones drink its blood. Where the unburied are, he is."

God creates the predator and the prey. God does not feel sorrow when the vulture attacks; that's its nature. Again, in God's reality there is no value judgment of good or bad, there is only what *is*.

If this is the case, perhaps we might believe that our suffering and pain are not a *consequence* of God's punishment. We might believe that pain and tragedy happen and that the important fact is *how* we cope with what happens to us rather than trying to determine *why* it happened, blaming ourselves or God.

While the Book of Job stands out in the Hebrew Bible for its theology of suffering, it is not the only religious text which describes God as being the creator of all things, good bad, and everything in between. It is not the only text which depicts God as creative energy in all its forms.

The Hindu sacred scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita contains the following stanzas in which God is describing God's self; it is even more cosmic in scale than Job:

I am the ritual and the worship,  
The medicine and the mantra.  
The butter burnt in the fire,  
And I am the flames that consume it.  
I am the beginning and the end,  
Origin and dissolution,  
Refuge, home, true lover, womb and imperishable seed.  
I am death, and the deathless,  
And all that is or is not  
I am death, shatterer of worlds,  
Annihilating all things.” (trans by Stephen Levine)

Job's God and the God in the Hindu scriptures create all things—bright and beautiful yes, but also dark and deathly.

These scriptures remind us that our sense of what fits under the heading of divine is so limited. If we actually believe that God is in all things, ever present in creation and destruction, then perhaps God can be a companion in our suffering rather than a first cause.

Having experienced God's absence much more than God's presence last year, it is an appealing idea to believe that God was part of the suffering, even if I couldn't sense that.

If suffering isn't brought on by God, we can stop asking God to answer, Why Me? Or Why Her? God will never answer that question. Why is the wrong question. Stephen Mitchell writes “There is never an answer to the great question of life and death, unless it is my answer or yours. “ That is to say, when bad things happen to us, it is only we who can discern the meaning of it.

We must all come to our own conclusions about the meaning of our suffering, even if our answers take a long time. Even if we don't believe our suffering was redemptive or educational. If we are having trouble finding any meaning in our calamities and we can't blame God for them, is there anything that eases suffering; that makes it bearable?

Having lived through several bouts of grief and pain, I can assure you that the dark times are still very dark. Annie Lamott talks about grief bringing enlightenment and tenderness. I believe that. But I also know that grief can bring bitterness and frailty. How we suffer and what helps us feel better is a very personal matter. When my friend Max was widowed suddenly, she loved when people dropped in. When I was widowed suddenly, people needed to cross the moat to enter the fortress I created!

I do think that there are some responses that are universally well received. I have spoken about silence and water and walking. Last year I went through periods where I could not walk but still I was helped a great deal.

Poet Naomi Shihab Nye articulates so well why. The following poem is entitled “Kindness” and includes the following lines:

“Before you know what kindness really is  
You must lose things,  
Feel the future dissolve in a moment  
Like salt in a weakened broth.  
What you held in your hand,  
What you counted and carefully saved,  
All this must go  
so you know how desolate  
The landscape can be  
between the regions of kindness.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside  
You must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow  
You must speak to it till your voice  
Catches the thread of all sorrows  
And you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes any sense anymore,  
Only kindness that ties your shoes  
And sends you out into the day...”

In my suffering I have been shown how “miraculously kind” some people can be. I have been held by this love in action, and I have been consoled. Sometimes I can catch a glimpse of the whole cloth. Kindness explained nothing about *why* I was suffering, but it helped soften mine nonetheless. I cannot stress enough how much loving kindness can do for our loved ones. Kind actions, kind words. They are deeply powerful and enduring.

Kindness and mercy and water and walks help us. Kindness and mercy heal us. Kindness and mercy guide us to put one foot in front of the other and walk forward. The God that is described in the Book of Job is not without greatness. But the God that is described in a not necessarily a source of solace and comfort. Perhaps God expects *us* to do that for one another. Perhaps we suffer to learn how to be kind. After all this, I still don’t understand. But I do know this: It may be scary to have nothing to blame for our pain. It may be terrifying to feel totally out of control, to know that the wind blows where it will. But there are things we can do for each other to lessen the fear and the dread. We can accompany one another in silence and tenderness. We can trust that evening will come. We can let our beloved cry until they can cry no more

and then we can dry their tears and simply be with them and love them. We can assure them that when they are weary, feeling small, we're on their side. Our compassionate witness and presence is enough. May kindness and love ease your suffering, today and always.