

**Sunday, February 7, 2021**  
**Sermon: God and the Problem of Suffering**  
**Rev. Adam Ericksen**  
**Clackamas United Church of Christ**



Friends, our passage today (Mark 1:29-39) confronts us with one of the most difficult questions when it comes to God. It's a question that I have had to deal with throughout my life and it's a question that you have had to deal with throughout your life. That is the question of suffering. It is probably the question that our atheist siblings ask that is the most difficult question when it comes to the existence of God. Which is this question – if God is all-powerful and all-loving then why is there so much suffering in the world? I want you to know that this is a question that people have asked almost from the very beginning. The question is thousands of years old. In fact, it might be one of the major questions that the Bible is wrestling with. And it is a wrestle. I don't know about you but, for me, there are very few, if any, good answers to this question.

You have dealt with suffering in your life and there are times when you may have cried out to God, “If you were real you would not have allowed this to happen!” I want you to know that if you have asked those kinds of questions, you are not alone. You're not alone. I've asked those questions too and I continue to ask those kinds of questions as well. It's a wrestling with God about the fundamental reality of our existence which is, as our Buddhist friends tell us, a life full of suffering. It's also full of joy and love but we cannot deny that there is so much suffering in our world.

During the last eight months we have seen worldwide more than two million people died suffering from the coronavirus. Where is God? Members of our congregation suffer from coronavirus and others have been impacted by this. We heard today our dear sister, Patti's, ex-husband died just yesterday from complications of covid and we scream out, “Where are you, God?” The Bible is full of these kinds of questions. When you read the psalms they ask these questions too. In fact, there's a man in the Bible named Jacob who while on a journey meets the Angel of God, which is God here on earth. And he wrestles with God here on earth. Jacob wrestles with God. That's what faith is. After he wrestles with God, God changes Jacob's name to Israel. Israel is a name that means “one who wrestles with God.” This is part of our faith. Asking these questions is not a sign of doubt it's a sign of faith it's rooted in our scriptures.

There's a man named Job who has everything that the world could offer. In that book, God makes a deal with the devil. This is in the Bible - Satan comes to God and says, “Hey, the only reason that Job is worshipping you and doesn't turn his back on you is because you've given him all of these great things.” And God says, “Well, I bet that if you take everything away Job will still worship me.” Really? I thought that God was all-knowing. Why does God have to do this? I thought God was all-powerful. Couldn't God just know that Job wouldn't turn Job's back on God? And God would just know? Maybe. These are asking big questions about the nature of God. Maybe God isn't all-knowing. Maybe God isn't all-powerful. Those words are actually not in the scriptures. Maybe when it comes to God and suffering and death that if God is all-powerful, maybe that's not the right starting point. Maybe as Job continues in his life, things

are taken away from him. He has these three friends who come to him and try to answer his suffering for him. They say, "Job, you must have done something wrong to deserve this. You're suffering so clearly you must have sinned against God and God is causing this to happen to you." And do you know what Job says? He says, "That's garbage." He says, "I don't deserve this." He says that he's not completely innocent but he doesn't deserve this amount of suffering. He doesn't deserve his friends to come to him and add on to his suffering by blaming him. Isn't this one of the things that we tend to do in our lives? We tend to blame the victim. We tend to blame people who are sick like you must have done something wrong, it's your own fault. In religious language, we might say you need to repent and then God will love you again. Job says no, that's not fair. Job struggles and wrestles with this idea that God punishes us because we have sinned. He wrestles against that and as the story continues, Job demands that God come to him and answer his questions.

I don't like the God character in the book of Job very much because God comes to Job and basically has a power game. God is on a power trip and says job where were you when I created the heavens and the earth God basically says to Job, "I'm this powerful entity and you question me?" And here's what happens at the end of Job. Job continues to proclaim his innocence. God comes to Job and his friends and God says that Job was right. Job didn't deserve this. Job was innocent and he didn't deserve this kind of suffering. So in our lives there are times when we have this suffering or when our friends or family members are suffering and we ask, "Where is God?" God seems so distant. God might even seem to have a power trip in not answering our questions. Job is an example of someone with faith who questions God.

I'm not satisfied with the answer that God gives in Job. I don't know if there's a satisfactory answer but I like the answer in our Gospel passage today much more. You see, Jesus comes to a woman, Simon Peter's mother-in-law and he sees that she is sick. And how does the God in Jesus respond? Not like Job's friends and doesn't say you must have done something wrong, you must have sinned and first you need to repent and then I'll heal you. No, Jesus says, "Oh my gosh, there's somebody here suffering. I'm going to alleviate that suffering. I'm going to do what I can to heal this woman." And he does. He serves her. He helps her. And then all the people from the town who are sick come to Jesus for healing. And what does Jesus say to them? He doesn't say he'll only help if you believe this about me or if you believe that I am the second person of the Trinity? Or only if you believe that I am God incarnate? He doesn't say that you did something to deserve this and that this is God's justice coming upon you. He doesn't say any of that. He says there's a need here that I can meet and so he heals them once again for free, not even charging the copay. He doesn't put anyone in debt for healing because he knows that God loves all people and all people should have this kind of healing in their lives of mind, body and soul. Because Jesus knows that physical bodies matter to God. Your physical body as much as your spirit matter to Jesus and to God. What's our role in this?

I don't have a good answer for why there is so much suffering in the world but I like what Jesus does about it. If you are like me when you first heard this passage, your inner feminist might have come out and protested. When Jesus heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law and then she gets up and she serves all of them. Is that really what this is about? A woman going back into the kitchen so that she can cook a meal for a bunch of men. Is that what this is about?

Pastors have abused this passage in so many ways preaching something similar to that and I don't want you to hear that in this passage because when Jesus heals this woman and she gets up to serve, what she is doing is enacting what Jesus has just done to her. What is she doing when Jesus is out in the wilderness? Do you know who serves him when he's tempted by the devil? The angels. This woman is doing what the angels do. When later on Jesus gives his definition of what it means to be a disciple, he says that you will go out and you will serve the people. You will not have power over others. You will go into the world and you will heal the world not with power over and against others, but with the power of service. This woman here at the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark is the definition of a disciple.

Primarily men have used stories like this in abusive ways to say that women are relegated to the sphere of service. Do you know who else is relegated to the sphere of service if you are a Christian? All of us. All of us. This woman is the first disciple of Jesus who understands what Jesus was about which is, if you are going to be a Christian, then your role in a world that is full of suffering might not be to have the intellectual answer to it because when my mom died of cancer 20 years ago I didn't want intellectual answers. The only answer that I wanted was somebody to be there with me and with my mother as she was suffering. As we were suffering.

The best answer that I know to suffering is when Jesus comes to this woman and he takes her by the hand and he says, "You are not alone. I am here with you." And God is here with you, too. We are with one another.

Friends, there's a lot of pain in the world. There's a lot of suffering and I don't have the best answers other than what I learned in seminary, which they called the Ministry of Presence. The best part of ministry is not to have the answers for why this happened. When I was a chaplain, intellectual answers missed the point all the time. The best answer was to be present. And it's so hard. I know, it's really, really hard to go into a place where people are suffering, to enter into that suffering with them as best you can. It is hard but it's also possible. It's also important.

There are statistics that show that some of the least visited places are hospitals because they confront us with our own mortality. The fact that we're all going to die someday. And it's so hard to come face-to-face with that reality. It's so hard. As Jesus goes to this woman who has a fever and she may die, for Jesus to enter into her space and take her by the hand and say, "You are loved." Maybe the greatest healing that we can do is to acknowledge our own mortality. Paul says in Romans that there is nothing in this world, neither life nor death, none of the powers of this world, none of the systems that oppress, nothing in this world can separate you from the love of God that Jesus Christ reveals. Because God's love is for you. It is for me. It is there for us to stop blaming one another when things go wrong and enter into our suffering together, knowing that you are not alone. The answer to suffering is not given by Jesus. Even Jesus goes to the cross in our suffering. Jesus meets us there when he goes to the cross and if you have ever felt abandoned or betrayed by God with this suffering, you're not alone because Jesus has been there, too. He cries from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus, God in the flesh according to Christian tradition, experienced everything that we humans go through, the pain and the suffering, to tell us that we are not alone. You're not alone. God is with you. May we be with one another, too. Amen