

Why Everything (Does Not) “Stink”: A Sermon on Suffering Delivered to New Seminarrians

Job 1

Acts 8: 26-40



There are certain questions that people ask generation in and generation out. They are the “greatest hits” of the generations. Who am I, and what should I do with my life? She (or he) loves me or loves me not? Did I forget to turn off the light or lock the door or did I remember to unplug the iron?

One of the oldest of these questions is “Why do bad things happen to good people?” There’s a guy on Youtube who just put out a video entitled “Why everything stinks” (except that he doesn’t say “stink”), and you would imagine listening to him that he seems to think that he’s the first person to have ever noticed that life just isn’t fair. But of course this is not a new observation. There are religions and philosophies (like Buddhism and Stoicism) whose whole starting point begins with the observation that “Life is hard.”

I am always somewhat amused at people like the guy in the Youtube video who seem to assume that Christians are naïve or polyannish about suffering, that somehow Christians do not recognize that there is any tension between believing in a

good God who created a good world, and yet sometimes life stinks. Have these people never heard gospel spirituals like one of my old favorites that has the lines "Talk about suffering here below, and talk about loving Jesus, Talk about suffering here below, and let's keep following Jesus."

Have these people never read the Bible? (Well, of course they haven't.)

This morning's lectionary readings begin with the story of Job, and we will continue to hear Job's story for the next several weeks. The whole point of the story about Job is to ask the question "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

The first thing we notice about Job is that he is not an Israelite. There are no references in Job to God's covenant with Israel, to Moses, to the Jewish law. Job is a pious "pagan," yet Job worships the God who is the one God of traditional Hebrew faith.

Job is also the classic biblical example of undeserved suffering. Throughout the book the question Job asks is "Why is this happening to me when I haven't done anything wrong?" A related theme of the book of Job concerns character: the character of God, the character of Job, the character of Job's wife and his friends. Concerning God, the key question is whether God can be trusted. Concerning Job, the key question is whether he will continue to trust God. Notice how the chapter ends, "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong." (Job 1:22)

Concerning Job's wife and his friends, the question has to do with their presumption to know not only what God is about – that God is about punishing wrong-doing – but that Job's suffering indicates something about his character. Contrary to what the narrator has already told us, Job's friends believe that he must have sinned, or he would not be suffering.

Job receives his answer at the end of the book. The answer is

given in terms of God's character as Creator. Because God has created the world, God knows what he is doing, and God can be trusted. At the same time, note that God never answers Job's question as to why he is suffering. Instead Job is told that he should not presume to have insight into God's workings. Concerning Job's friends, we are told that they are wrong – wrong concerning both God's character and Job's character. Job had not sinned, so God did not punish him. And yet, Job still suffered. Job's question is: "Why is this happening to me when I have done nothing wrong?," and the final appeal is to mystery. We do not know, but we can trust God who is the Creator. It is perhaps as far as one can go with a solution to the problem of evil that focuses only on creation and God as Creator.

There is another Job figure in the literature of the Old Testament, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. The Ethiopian eunuch in the Acts reading might well ask, "Is the writer speaking of himself or someone else?" because the historical identity of this character is not clear from the book of Isaiah itself. As does Philip in his conversation with the eunuch, Christians look to this passage as a prophecy or typology of Jesus Christ, but before we get in too much of a hurry, we should ask who the Servant of the Lord is in the original context of the second half of Isaiah. In this second section of the book, the prophet is addressing a nation that has gone through exile because of their sin. In Isaiah 41:8, the Servant is identified with the nation of Israel: "But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen . . ." Yet at other times, the Servant seems to be identified with an individual distinct from Israel. In Isaiah 53, the Servant is depicted as a kind of martyr, who has suffered on behalf of Israel. The Acts passage quotes the Isaiah passage to depict the Servant as like a sacrificial or Passover lamb: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his

generation for his life is taken away from the earth.” (Acts 8:32-33; Is. 53:7-8) At the same time, not only does the Servant suffer, but a new perspective is introduced. The Servant suffers for sins, but not for his own sins. Rather, the Servant suffers because of the sins of others, and specifically for our sins, which in the context certainly means the sins of Israel: “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Is. 53:4-6)

In comparison to the book of Job, two new factors enter into the question of why the innocent suffer in Isaiah. First, there is the special role that Israel plays in God’s plan. The God who is described in Isaiah is not simply the Creator God who has created the world, but the God who has made a covenant with Israel, and Israel has a special role in God’s plan. Israel is God’s servant. Second a new notion is introduced into the question of innocent suffering, the notion of *vicarious* suffering. Suffering because of sin, yes, but suffering not for one’s own sins, but to bear the sins of another. So if the key question in Job is “Why am I suffering when I have done nothing wrong?,” the key question in Isaiah 53 is, “Why is God’s Servant suffering?,” and the answer is “Not for his own sins, but to somehow carry the consequences of *my* wrong doing”: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

When we turn to the New Testament, we see that the New Testament writers address the issue of innocent suffering in a way that goes beyond the book of Job, but also goes beyond the figure of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah in a way that brings

the themes of both Job and Isaiah together. First, in the New Testament, Jesus is described as a Job-like figure. Jesus is the innocent person who suffers, but in Jesus' case, he truly is innocent because, unlike even the righteous figure of Job, Jesus has engaged in no wrongdoing whatsoever. The apostle Paul writes of Jesus, "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21). The writer of Hebrews says of Jesus that he is "one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Heb. 4:15) 1 John 3:5 states "You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin." Like Job, Jesus continued to trust in God even in the midst of his suffering. In 1 Peter, we hear, "He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth." (1 Pet. 2:22) On the cross, Jesus cries like Job, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46) But Jesus also commits himself to God. Jesus' last words on the cross are: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46)

But the New Testament also identifies Jesus as the one whose death fulfills the role of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. In the Acts reading from the lectionary, after the Ethiopian eunuch asks to whom the Isaiah passage is referring. We read, "Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus." (Acts 8:35). Not only in this passage, but in the resurrection story of the two disciples traveling on the Emmaus road after Jesus' death by crucifixion, Luke has the story of the risen Jesus opening up the meaning of the Scriptures: "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (Luke 24: 25). Other New Testament passages interpret Jesus' death through this Suffering Servant passage in Isaiah. In 1 Peter, we read: "Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." (1 Peter 2:21-24)

There is one final way in which the suffering of Jesus ties together these two Old Testament images of the Innocent Sufferer. As I said earlier, Job focuses on God as the Creator, while Isaiah focuses on God's special relationship to Israel. In the New Testament, it becomes clear that Jesus is not just another Israelite, but that Jesus is himself One with the God the Creator. In Colossians 1, Paul writes that Jesus is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him." (Col. 1:15-16) In Philippians 2, Paul brings together the creation imagery from Job with the Suffering Servant imagery of Isaiah: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Phil. 2:5-8)

So in this final step, the question of the Ethiopian eunuch becomes heightened. Is the prophet writing about himself or about another? If the key question in Job is "Why am I suffering if I have done nothing wrong?," and the key question in Isaiah is "Why is God's Servant suffering?," then the key question in the New Testament is "Who is this Servant who is suffering?" And the answer is something completely unheard of before now. The New Testament goes beyond Job's answer to say that in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, the Creator of

the universe has himself become Job. In the cross of Jesus Christ, God has become one of us and has taken on all of the suffering of creation. As it goes beyond Job, the New Testament imagery goes beyond what Isaiah says about the Suffering Servant. If the Servant somehow bore the burden of Israel's sins, because Jesus Christ is the very Creator become a human being, he is able to bear the sins and suffering of all creation, of everyone who has ever lived. In John's gospel, Jesus refers to his crucifixion, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (John 12:32) And, finally, on top of that, Jesus' resurrection means that death and suffering do not have the last word. In Jesus Christ, God has overcome death through life. Paul contrasts the death that we all have inherited from Adam's sin, with the life that comes from Jesus Christ's death and resurrection: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." (1 Cor. 15:22) In light of Jesus' resurrection, Paul goes on to write, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 15:24-27)

So the answer to the guy on YouTube is "No, you're wrong. It is not *everything* that stinks, but suffering and death." (Again, he doesn't say "stinks.") And life has overcome death through Jesus' resurrection!

Jesus is the Job who has trusted in God and has been vindicated. Jesus is the Suffering Servant who has borne the burdens of our suffering and even of our own sin so that we do not have to suffer even the burden of our guilt for the wrongdoing in which we may have caused others to suffer. Jesus is the Creator who has become one of us and has conquered death through the life of his resurrection! At this point, the preacher is supposed to ask "Can I hear an Amen?"

I would be remiss if I did not conclude with some final

practical application, especially since you are new seminarians, so here are three, the first of which will be kind of discouraging, but we are talking about suffering after all.

So first. Coming to seminary does not mean that you will not suffer. Seminary is part of life, and God does not promise you any more than he promised Job that everything will be "hunky dory," just fine. This is my twelfth year teaching at seminary, and in that time, I have seen two students die of cancer before they finished their program, and one die a few years after graduating. One of the most beloved faculty members on the campus died of cancer over a one year period. The brother in law of a faculty member died of cancer and the brother of another was killed in a car accident. There have been students who have experienced deaths in their families, suicides of housemates and close friends, and struggles with depression and physical illness. We have many international students, and I have heard them talk of their anxiety when their families experienced tragedy and they were not able to help because they were halfway across the world. And, on top of that, there are the normal relationship struggles, difficulties in marriages, and broken hearts when people fall in love and it does not work out. I could say more, but these kinds of events are not unusual because we are a seminary. They happen everywhere and to everyone all of the time.

If I were to leave you there, I would not be telling the whole story. You have come to a place where people care about you, and you will not be alone. This is a place of prayer, and I would encourage you to get to know your fellow students, and the faculty, and to pray for each other's needs. We know that in the cross, Jesus Christ has borne our burdens. In 1 Peter, the apostle tell us to "Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7) But we also know what this enables us to bear one another's burdens. Paul tells us in Galatians to "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill

the law of Christ," (Gal. 6:2) and the apostle continues to write in 1 Peter, "And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you." (1 Peter 5:10)

I would add one final point. You have come to study at a seminary, and for many, perhaps most of you, that means that you have come to pursue some sort of ministry. A major part of that ministry will mean being with and comforting those who are suffering. You will find yourself counseling people through broken marriages, visiting people in hospital, praying with people at their death beds, burying their loved ones. And you will do this over and over and over again. When you minister to the flock of Jesus Christ that God has sent you to serve as shepherds, you will not be Job's friends; rather, you will be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ, helping those you serve to bear their burdens, helping to carry them through their sorrows.

The Roman Catholic priest Henry Nouwen wrote in a book entitled *The Wounded Healer* that it is only those who are consciously aware of their own struggles with suffering, sadness, and inadequacy who can emphasize with and comfort those who are suffering. As we in our own way have come to share in Christ's sufferings, so with God's help and only through his grace, can we bring comfort to others who suffer. I conclude with the words of the apostle Paul:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too." (2 Cor. 1:3-5)

So, no. *Everything* does not "stink." Certainly suffering and

death stink. But Jesus Christ has kicked their butts through the power of his resurrection! In the apostle Paul's words, "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:37-39)