

Tracy Daub
6/20/21—University Presbyterian Church
Job 38:1-11; Mark 4:35-41

WHEN IN A TIME OF CHAOS

Bad things happen. Sad things happen. Distressing things happen. When in a time of chaos, how do we respond? One way we humans often respond to those events that upend our lives and create disorder is we try to make sense of it all. We attempt to find answers to explain why the chaos has befallen us or others. Why has this happened? Surely there must be an explanation or a purpose.

Another response we may have when suffering or pain descends upon our lives is that we may feel abandoned or betrayed by God. This may be particularly true if we understand ourselves to be good and faithful people. If we have been faithful to God, then when heartache or hardship descends upon us it can feel as if God has abandoned us or betrayed us. Where is God? And why has God given us up to the forces of chaos and darkness?

Our two scripture readings today address both of these common responses to chaos and turmoil. The Book of Job tells the story of a prosperous man who was faithful to God but who suddenly experiences great suffering and loss. Bandits kill or steal all his livestock and murder his servants. A windstorm causes the roof of the house to collapse, killing all his children. Then, Job is suddenly afflicted with painful sores that cover his entire body. He is in such misery and grief that his wife encourages him to “curse God and die.” While Job initially refuses to do so, eventually he succumbs to his misery and does indeed curse God, wishing that he had never been born.

The trouble is, even though Job does curse God, he doesn't die. Instead, something worse happens. He is visited by three well-intentioned friends. Beware of people with good intentions! They have been known to cause great harm. And that is what Job's three friends do. For all their good intentions, they end up heaping more suffering upon Job. They tell Job that surely he must have done something wrong to have brought about all this suffering. They tell Job he needs to admit his fault, to confess his wrong doing, and that God would then forgive him and end all his suffering.

We have all met people like Job's friends—people who in the face of suffering say things like, "Everything happens for a reason," or "It must be part of God's plan." These are insensitive things to say to someone in pain. But they also reveal a desire to make order out of chaos, to find a satisfactory explanation for suffering. In the minds of Job's three friends, the world is an ordered place where bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people. There had to be a reason, an explanation for Job's suffering because God's world is ordered. Thus, these friends believed that the hardships Job was experiencing had to be his fault.

But Job won't buy that explanation. He knows he was a good person. He won't accept the blame. And so he rails at God and at the injustice of it all. Job wants to plead his case before God and he cries out for God to come and face off with him. And in today's reading from the Book of Job, God finally shows up. And God has some things to say to Job and some things to say to Job's friends.

What God has to say to Job's three friends was not included in today's reading. But it is essential that we remember this part of the story. God is highly critical of their "everything happens for a reason," perspective on life and the chaos of life. God turns to the three friends and effectively says to them, "You are full of baloney!" God actually uses stronger language

than that because God says to them, “My wrath is kindled against you for you have not spoken of me what is right.” God exonerates Job and finds Job blameless. Job had not caused his sufferings as his friends had maintained. With their answers and explanations, Job’s friends thought they had God all figured out. They thought they understood the workings of God. But God tells them they were wrong.

So, if Job’s friends were wrong, what *is* the right answer? What is the answer for why suffering and chaos exist in our lives and in our world? I don’t know how satisfied we may be with God’s reply. Because, instead of giving Job a straightforward answer to the question “why,” God delivers a series of speeches that highlight humanity’s limited knowledge and power. God asks Job, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” Who laid the cornerstone of this world? Who stretched the stars in the sky? Now, this could come across as God being kind of braggy: look at how powerful I am. But I don’t think that is what God is intending here. Rather, I think God is expressing that as the architect of this universe, there is knowledge we humans cannot understand. There are mysteries we will not be able to grasp. We cannot expect to fully understand God or the workings of God. And when we try to construct explanations and answers for the chaos in life, we are in danger of becoming like Job’s friends—people who think they have God all figured out and deliver pat, shallow, and unhelpful answers to the world around us.

But in this speech to Job, God adds something else. In the ancient world, the sea was used as a metaphor for chaos. You might recall how in the Book of Genesis, when God created the world, the Spirit of God moved over the waters of chaos, calling forth life and bringing about order. So it was understood that God had the power to manage the chaos of the seas.

In our reading today, God talks to Job about God's power over the seas—in other words, over chaos. God says, “who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out of the womb?—when I made the clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther.’” This is a very interesting speech because it appears that God is describing the sea, or chaos, like it is a baby God gave birth to, and then wrapped in swaddling bands, and then set in a playpen saying to the baby, “you can go no farther than here.” And the message we seem to be given is that chaos is something God has permitted to exist in this world. God has created this world allowing for some degree of chaos to exist, maybe even birthing some degree of chaos, while at the same time setting some kind of limitations upon it.

That is as close to an answer for the “why suffering” question as we are to get in the Book of Job. We know what the answer is not: it is not the “everything happens for a reason” kind of certainty. Instead, the Book of Job emphasizes the mystery of God's created world which includes elements of chaos.

Now, I don't know how comforting that may be to many of us. And that thought may lead us to feeling as if we have been abandoned by God to this disorderly world, as if God has simply given us over to the chaos of life—as if God is saying to us, “Chaos exits. Good luck with that!”

But then we have the passage from the Gospel of Mark—the story of the stormy sea crossing, which serves to balance the Job reading. Understanding as we do that the sea stands as a metaphor for chaos, we know that this is more than simply a story about a boat on a stormy sea. This is a story about the chaos of life. This is the chaos we experience as individuals when the doctor delivers the frightening diagnosis, or when we are laid off from our job, or when our

spouse dies, or when our child is struggling in life. This is the chaos we experience when we have a sudden and devastating accident, or when our house catches on fire, or when a loved one is caught up in addiction.

But the stormy sea crossing also represents the chaos we experience as people in community. The gospel writer of Mark's original audience were early Jewish followers of Jesus who were going through tremendous chaos. After the Jewish uprising in 70 AD, Rome unleashed terror and destruction upon the Jewish people, destroying the city of Jerusalem, killing around a million people, and burning to the ground the beloved Temple. In addition, the Jewish followers of Jesus also experienced discrimination and hostility from within their own community. This is the context for Mark's story of the stormy sea crossing, where all the disciples, representing the Christian Church, are in this storm-tossed boat. And they are frightened. Jesus somehow remains asleep in the boat during this storm. So the disciples wake him up. Our reading says that Jesus "woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still.'" And at once everything became calm.

It is interesting to know that the word for when Jesus "woke up" can also be translated as "he rose up" and is derived from the same word used at the empty tomb on Easter morning when the angel proclaims, "he is risen." In other words, this story is a foreshadowing of the Resurrection—when Jesus will once again rise up to take on the forces of chaos on our behalf.

We may never know the "why" to suffering and chaos in this world. We know enough from scripture to avoid arriving at simplistic answers in an effort to explain away the chaos of life. The truth is, in this mysterious world God has created, chaos exists. We crave order and explanations, but those are not always possible. But what scripture also reveals to us is that we are not abandoned to the chaos. Christ is with us. Right there in the boat, right alongside us in

our own turmoil, Christ is with us, Christ is with you. Indeed, we claim that in Christ, God came to stand alongside us to show us that we are not alone. God is with us. And in the midst of the storm, God has the power and the desire to raise you to new life.