

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
The Rev. George Arceneaux
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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A couple weeks ago, after I'd first arrived at St. Mark's, I attended one of our Masses on the Grass, during which someone said, "Is it just me, or are there a lot more awful things going on in the world than usual?" And I think in asking the question that was channeling what I think a lot of folks have been feeling. It does seem like a lot of rather awful stuff has been happening in the world. And you may have already guessed that my thinking back to that mass on the grass can be attributed a little bit to our having read the book of Job for the past few weeks. And Job is, of course, the Bible's poster child for a life a story characterized by an unusually high frequency of awful stuff. Job is, by my reckoning basically the Bible's Charlie Brown. On Halloween, Lucy gets five pieces of candy, Pig-Pen gets a chocolate bar, and Charlie Brown gets a rock. Abraham and Sara are blessed with children, and Moses receives God's help in the Exodus from Egypt. Job gets boils from the soles of his feet to the top of his head and a lecture from God.

Job's is a story of a righteous man who tries to understand why over the course of his life he suffers in just about every arena possible, ranging from physical ailment to the very loss of his children. And his is a story that I guarantee is familiar to us.

There are people we know, those whom we love or see doing good, who have helped tend the sick, the friendless, and the needy yet who have clearly suffered more than they deserve. Like Job, so many endure the hurts of abusive relationships past, financial injustice and insecurity, the terror of diagnoses, the dehumanization that results from coming out or racism and sexism or ableism, our sufferings are vast and are so often confounding and confusing, that we don't know how to find answers or relief, and may have no idea where to find that grace. To suffer is in many ways chaotic.

So it's intriguing to me that this one book of the Bible that most grapples with that undue suffering, where a person cannot understand why he endures what he does, it's intriguing that this sort of book is one of, if not the most, erratic and strange books in the whole of scripture. And I'm not just referring to the fact that the book doesn't give us a straightforward answer as to why good people suffer, no, the whole thing down to its syntactical Hebrew structure as a story is crazier than a sack of cats.

If you dig into the literature and historical criticism of this thing, whoever wrote the book of Job was jumping all over the place. The whole book jumps from poetry to prose almost randomly, people who are noted to be dead and gone in one passage are alive again a few chapters later, the whole thing is different from literally every other book in the Bible not only because of its subject matter but down to how it so drastically differs in its structure as a piece of literature.

And I find comfort in that confusion if only because it feels so like my own confusion in suffering. To quote one biblical historian, Marc Zvi Brettler, "[Job's] editor may have structured the book so that no single answer wins the debate; instead, this work offers a variety of plausible

answer, each of which has some basis in experience. Perhaps it is appropriate that we cannot find a clear answer to our questions, given the very serious and personal issues that the Book of Job confront.”

I think the book of Job invites us into that complexity of how we grapple with hardship because our responses are often as complex as the struggles themselves. Perhaps frustratingly, the book of Job seems to tell us that there is no simple answer to that question of “why do good people suffer.” The answer is particular to each of us, forged through our own works which are assisted through friends, and family, and God.

If you find yourself suffering, I hope you are not dissuaded from owning your experience. Do not dismiss it. The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune hurt. And I suspect that owning of our misfortunes is part of our answer. May we be encouraged to encounter one another’s struggles with openness and love, so that as we question why we struggle, may we be part of one another’s answer.