

Cashmere Presbyterian Church
Worship for Sunday 3 May 2020 - Rev Hamish Galloway

Call to worship

We come to worship today with joyful praise to God and humble acknowledgement of our need
Healing and Restoring God, touch our lives and bring us deeper understanding of you and your merciful love.

Prayer

For the beauty of the autumn leaves

We praise you Lord for sight

For the coolness of a the new mornings

We praise you Lord for touch

For birdsong at dawn and dusk

We praise you Lord for sound

For the taste of fresh feijoas and apples from out trees

We praise you Lord for taste

Almighty God, as we remember your faithfulness

So we are made more conscious of our unfaithfulness

Forgive us, O Lord

Forgive our faults and failings.

For the things we take for granted,

For our failure to learn from our past mistakes,

For our preferring of our own way to yours,

For the times we ignore the nudging of your Spirit

Forgive us, O Lord

Through Jesus Christ who taught us to pray singing together:

Our Father in Heaven, Hallowed be your name

Your Kingdom come, Your will be done

On earth as in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

Forgive us our sins

As we forgive those who sin against us

Do not put us to the test

But deliver us from evil

For the Kingdom, the power and the glory are yours

Now and for ever. Amen

Hymn; O God our Help in Ages Past

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| 1. God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home: | 4. A thousand ages in thy sight
Are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun. |
| 2. Under the shadow of thy throne,
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is thine arm alone,
And our defence is sure. | 5. Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly, forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day. |
| 3. Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting thou art God,
To endless years the same. | 6. O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be thou our guide while troubles last,
And our eternal home! |

The Word

The sermon today is part of a trilogy drawn from the timeless Wisdom books of the bible. Over the next 3 Sundays we will look back to the thinking of the ancients and ask what they can teach us in this current crisis.

"Humanity is so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature."

David Hume

And as it says in the book of Ecclesiastes:

*⁹ What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun. (1:9)*

So over the next 3 weeks we will draw on the wisdom in the books of Job, Ecclesiastes and Proverbs. We begin today with Job, exploring maintaining faith in the face of suffering.



"Those who don't study history are doomed to repeat it. Yet those who *do* study history are doomed to stand by helplessly while everyone else repeats it."

Sermon:

Resilient Faith in the Face of Suffering

I encountered real anger the other day! It was from someone who is angry about the unfair distribution of suffering caused by COVID 19. Why is it that good people are losing jobs or businesses while for others life goes on as normal or even worse, the crisis has provided them with an opportunity to thrive? This is part of a big and universal question of the ages. Have you ever wondered why good people end up suffering when the ratbags of life can get through largely unscathed? Don't we constantly come up against sad news of lovely friends or family who are struck down with cancer, or severe reversals of fortune. Right now we are facing the fact that many hard working small business people are going to the wall. And many hard working, highly skilled employees are facing redundancy!

This question was heightened some years ago when I was working with 2 families who lost children to cancer. One family lost faith and totally rejected the idea that there was a God, the other family drew close to God in their personal tragedy experienced a deepening of faith! I understand both outcomes, but why are they so different?

The book of Job addresses these kinds of questions. I would like to reflect its relevance for today.

First, let me tell you about the book of Job:

The book of Job is fascinating. It is an ancient book of wisdom, probably written around the 6th century BC. It stands out as unique in the time it was written. And it is widely acclaimed for a multitude of reasons.

It has been widely praised for its literary qualities, with Alfred Lord Tennyson calling it *"the greatest poem of ancient and modern times"*

Commentator Francis L Anderson puts it this way:

Job stands far above its nearest competitors, in the coherence of its sustained treatment of the theme of human misery, in the scope of its many-sided examination of the problem, in the strength and clarity of its defiant moral monotheism, in the characterization of the protagonists,

in the heights of its lyrical poetry, in its dramatic impact and the intellectual integrity with which it faces the 'unintelligible burden' of human existence. In all this Job stands alone. Nothing we know before it provided a model and nothing since, including its numerous imitations, has risen to the same heights. Comparison only serves to enhance the solitary greatness of the book of Job.

Let me give you a Job story overview by reading some of the beginning and concluding text with a summary of the in-between.

And so we begin:

Job Prologue

1 In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. 2 He had seven sons and three daughters, 3 and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East.

6 One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them. 7 The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?"

Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it."

8 Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil."

9 "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. 10 "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. 11 But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face."

12 The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger."

And what follows is devastating suffering for Job as he loses his animals, servants and his children in successive disasters. Then we pick it up at verse 20

20 At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship 21 and said:

*"Naked I came from my mother's womb,
and naked I will depart.*

*The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;
may the name of the Lord be praised."*

22 In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

This is noble response from Job, but things get even worse for him. It is a bit like the way the news of pandemic has continued to assail us with bad news story after bad news story for weeks now:

On another day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them to present himself before him. 2 And the LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?"

Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it."

3 Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason."

⁴ “Skin for skin!” Satan replied. “A man will give all he has for his own life. ⁵ But now stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face.”

⁶ The LORD said to Satan, “Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life.”

⁷ So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. ⁸ Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes. (Job 2)

The story then goes into a long period of dialogue –

Job with his wife who tells him he might as well curse God and die

Job’s opening statement where he curses the day he was born

Interaction and debate about the meaning of all this with his friends

Job’s closing statement

And there is a very happy ending to the story – God blesses Job with abundance. We read in Job 42:

... the Lord restored his fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before ... He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys ... seven sons and three daughters ... And so Job died, an old man and full of years.

The main point of the book of Job is to examine the basic human question:

‘why do good people suffer?’

Job answers the question by the use of hyperbole or exaggeration. It was a common method in Jewish philosophical teaching and debate. Jesus used it often, for example when he said that it is harder for a rich man to get into the Kingdom of heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, he exaggerated to make his point.

The same is true here. There are things that are exaggerated in the first part of the story:

1. The blamelessness of Job – he is made out to be perfect, and we know that is not humanly possibly (unless he was the unique son of God, which he was not)
2. The extremity of his loss

This exaggeration is designed to challenge the conventional wisdom of the time, often outlined in biblical wisdom, that there is cause and effect at work when people suffer. That is if I suffer, then I must have done something wrong. The good will prosper, while evil doers will suffer ruin. Now there is some truth in this, some wisdom to it. To live a good life tends to lead to prospering. But the point of Job is that this is not the whole truth at all. To have an outlook on life that puts all suffering down to the consequences of individual wrongdoing just does not stack up on a number of levels:

1. It equates to a shallow prosperity style theology that can lead to a loss of faith in the face of undeserved, unfair and oppressive suffering.
2. It can lead to unnecessary and crippling soul searching and dysfunctional guilt as we search for the things we have done that might have caused this
3. And it does not stand up to the facts – good people do suffer. Coronavirus and the consequent economic meltdown have struck indiscriminately the good and the bad!

This is the main point that Job makes. But in doing so it also addresses a number of other key questions for us in the face of a time of suffering. Let me explore some of these with you:

1. Was it ok to have such a good life as outlined in 1:1-5?

It was idyllic indeed. Were there any downsides to such an idyllic life. Good question, because prior to COVID we had life pretty sweet here in NZ. What are the downsides to that, if it was the total picture of life:

- a. It does lead to a weak **fair-weather Christianity** that can become flabby with complacency! It can lead to a **weak theology** that is unable to accommodate suffering

when it comes. This was the basis of Satan's taunt to God re Job – his devotions to you is based on blessing. Let me bring suffering and you will see how quickly he folds. It is significant that Job understands this as shown in his retort to his wife in 2:10

⁹ His wife said to him, "Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!"

¹⁰ He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?"

Certainly over history times of suffering such as the persecution of the early church have led to the development of strong, robust and committed churches.

- b. And a life without suffering leads to a lack of **empathy** with those who suffer. This is a thread of reasoning that is woven through the speeches of Job. And you will know, that when you are in a time of suffering that the comfort offered by those who have been through the same thing counts highly. I know some folk from years back whose son was killed in a climbing accident on Mount Cook. For years afterwards, they would make contact with the families of others who died in a similar way in order to empathise with their loss.
- c. Ultimately this is about **character development** – suffering has the potential to shape us. In biblical terms it is a refining fire. So often with suffering we do what Job's friends did and look back for causes. There is benefit in looking forward to the good fruit that comes from a period of suffering. Was Job a better man at the end of all this? I would say yes. There is also hyperbole and exaggeration at the end of the story! Not just are his fortunes restored but multiplied! I think the point being made was that he was a better man at the end of it. You see I don't think the scars from the terrible skin disease would have healed. I can imagine him at the end, thoughtfully rubbing the scars on his arms as he reflected with his new family on the lessons of life; a faith that can withstand undeserved suffering and the need for empathy for the suffering of others.

2. Was it ok for God and Satan to do a deal like this?

There are some disturbing ideas at work here – the story depicts God and Satan as being like coaches of 2 opposing sides chatting before the big game!

There is much that you could say about this. But I think the underlying idea is a consistent theme of scripture; that there are things at a spiritual level that we not fully comprehend from our earthly, physical existence. There are other forces at work. The classic scripture on this is from Paul in Ephesians 6:12

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms"

Now I do not profess to understand these things. But I have a deep sense that our lives are touched by the spiritual dimension and we would be foolish to ignore that.

And, it is a recurring theme of Job's struggle with God that all his questions are not answered. He and his friends search for answers and understanding. Ultimately Job comes to the conclusion that we can never understand everything about God and how God works. In actual fact to do so would be to reduce God to our own level, and God is God because he is qualitatively and quantitatively so much more that we can imagine. I like to think of it this way – our perspective on life is like the view we get through a knot hole in the fence; what we see is limited, it is not the whole picture. God has the whole picture. 1 Corinthians 13 puts it this way:

¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

3. How did Job's friends do in comforting their suffering friend?

They went to him as soon as they heard – this is great

They sat with him in silence – this also is wise

They let him speak first – and again good work

They then defaulted to a generalized theological answer that there must have been something he had done to cause his suffering... and they repeated this time and again without listening to what his specific situation was – no on a number of levels:

It lacks emotional intelligence

Their argument did not stack up – there was nothing he did to cause it. They missed the point that sometimes suffering is unfair

They admonish Job for his lamenting anger and questioning of God – this also is bad practice; in fact Job's honesty here is specifically commended by God in the story at 42:7

4. Is the ending ok? Or is too happy to a point of being cheesy.

Shakespearian tragedies are just that! But God is not in them. In God's economy endings are eventually filled with hope and redemption. The exaggerated positivity of the ending is designed to make this redemptive point. In this case while the scars remain, at the end of the day we see a deeper more empathetic person, with tested and resilient faith in God.

And ultimately this is a story of one who understands that. Through this whole story Job remains faithful to God. Yes, he is angry and exasperated with God. Yes, he is frustrated that there is much that is beyond his understanding. Yet there is one impressive statement that rings out above all his despair

I know that my redeemer lives,

and that in the end he will stand on the earth (19:26)

That is the resilient faith that stands us in good stead in times of calamity

Closing prayer:

In our closing prayer we will dedicate our offerings. Thank you for all those who have continued to give online by automatic payment and to those who have been putting their giving envelopes aside at home for us to pick up in due course.

Let us pray to the God of ages,

Who has been there for generation upon generation

Who is our refuge and stronghold in times of trouble.

As we think of the health and well-being of our nation,

We are thankful for the huge team effort of the last weeks

We are thankful for strong, clear and compassionate leadership

We are thankful for frontline workers who served sacrificially

We pray that all who are fearful and anxious
may be at peace and free from worry:

We pray for the isolated and housebound,
that we may be alert to their needs,
and care for them in their vulnerability:

We pray for our homes and families,
our schools and young people,
and all in any kind of need or distress:

For a blessing on our church and our community,
that our neighbourhood may be places of trust and friendship,
where all are known and cared for. Thanks for the people of Cashmere Presbyterian

And we commend ourselves and our offering given this week, for the advancement of your Kingdom.

Merciful Father,
accept these prayers for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.