

“Challenging God, Challenging Us”

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Old Testament Lesson -- Habakkuk 1:2-6, 9-13, 2:1

²O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? ³Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. ⁴So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous— therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

⁵Look at the nations, and see! Be astonished! Be astounded! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told. ⁶For I am rousing the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own...

⁹They all come for violence, with faces pressing forward; they gather captives like sand. ¹⁰At kings they scoff, and of rulers they make sport. They laugh at every fortress, and heap up earth to take it. ¹¹Then they sweep by like the wind; they transgress and become guilty; their own might is their god!

¹²Are you not from of old, O Lord my God, my Holy One? You shall not die. O Lord, you have marked them for judgment; and you, O Rock, have established them for punishment. ¹³Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing; why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?

2 ¹I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint.

New Testament Lesson -- Luke 7:11-17

¹¹Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. ¹²As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. ¹³When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, “Do not weep.” ¹⁴Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” ¹⁵The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. ¹⁶Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen among us!” and “God has looked favorably on his people!” ¹⁷This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.



Most likely you have all seen or heard accounts of the earthquake in Haiti this week and the tragic aftermath in which thousands of men, women and children are dead, many more homeless and hungry and in need of critical medical care.

By now you’ve heard the reports and the estimates of the dead ranging from 50,000-100,000, but nobody really knows. You’ve heard the heartbreaking stories, the parents who were told their daughter was on a flight out of Haiti, only to find out she was still missing; the stories of children orphaned by the quake, the deep poverty of a nation compounded by total devastation.

One particularly heart wrenching story I watched unfold on CNN saw a 12 year-old girl rescued from the rubble of her home, her crushed leg pinned beneath the debris. She was awake and alert through the ordeal and when she was pulled from the rubble, it seemed that a hopeful note had been sounded in the midst of pain and despair.

But just hours later it was reported that she had died of her injuries. CNN correspondent Anderson Cooper, usually staid and professional, spoke bitterly of her passing. He said: "There's just stupid death happening right here now, and it doesn't have to happen.

"A little girl was dying because her leg was crushed. Somebody doesn't have to die of that. Her leg can be amputated if there's a doctor who can do it; if there's anti-biotics they can take, an infection can be treated. It doesn't have to spread through the body and kill somebody. It's really stupid. It's infuriating. It's very upsetting to a lot of people.

"People died today who did not need to die. People will die tonight, in the next hour who do not need to die. People will die tomorrow who do not need to die."¹

While listening to Cooper's report, I was struck by both his sense of anger and frustration at the senseless human loss and his struggle to grasp the overwhelming scope of the disaster. And I think that is a pretty common response: The individual stories of human loss evoke in us feelings of grief and anger and despair, while the enormity of the tragedy itself is simply beyond comprehension.

In the midst of that frustration and anger and profound sadness, it is natural to turn to God and ask "why?" When I heard Anderson Cooper's words, I immediately thought of the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk who questioned God in the midst of violence and devastation:

"O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?"²

Habakkuk wrote at a time when Israel was coming under ever increasing attacks from the Babylonians. Like most of his countrymen, Habakkuk could not understand how Israel, the land of God's promise, the people of God's righteousness could come under threat from evil foreign aggression.

Eugene Peterson's "The Message" translates part of Habakkuk's protest this way:

¹¹...Why Is God Silent Now? ¹² God, you're from eternity, aren't you? Holy God, we aren't going to die, are we? God, you chose Babylonians for your judgment work? Rock-Solid God, you gave them the job of discipline? ¹³ But you can't be serious! You can't condone evil! So why don't you do something about this? Why are you silent now?³

I think Habakkuk makes Christians nervous. We don't like to question God. Football coaches... politicians... parents... employers... we question their judgment all the time but God is a different matter... the belief in God's Sovereignty is basic to reformed theology; at the core of what we believe is

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/video/?/video/bestoftv/2010/01/15/kl.cooper.stupid.deaths.cnn&hpt=P1>

² Habakkuk. 1:2, NRSV

³ Peterson, Eugene, The Message, NavPress/Alive Communications Inc., Colorado Springs, Co, 2002, pg. 1287, Habakkuk 1:11-13

the idea that God can and will do whatever God decides to do. Neither we, nor anyone, nor anything else can prevent that.

So to question God may feel like an invitation for lightening bolts to come crashing down.

But Habakkuk is not alone in his questioning of God...

Job, having lost all that he owned and all that he loved, turned to God and asked “why have you made me your target? Why have I become a burden to you?”⁴

The Psalmist turns to God from the pit of despair and cries out “why have you forsaken me?”⁵ A cry later repeated by Jesus at the moment of his greatest pain on the cross.⁶

But what is most profound about these questions from the history of Israel is that while they may strike us as **bold or arrogant and even inappropriate, they were also honest and faithful.**

In the 55th Psalm, the Psalmist writes these words: ²² Cast your burden <http://www.biblestudytools.com/nrs/psalms/55.html - fn-descriptionAnchor-c#fn-descriptionAnchor-c> on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.⁷

The translation in The Message reads this way: ²² Pile your troubles on God's shoulders - he'll carry your load, he'll help you out. He'll never let good people topple into ruin.⁸

Either way, the point is that God invites us to bring our heaviest burdens to God; and not just the pretty ones or the easy ones, but our deepest loss and anger and frustration.

“The Lord moves in mysterious ways.” Those famous words were penned by William Cowper more than 2 centuries ago, and while they may be true, that has never stopped us from trying to understand God’s ways.

When tragedy strikes and we begin to struggle with how a good God can allow evil to happen. We usually come back to one of three answers:

1. God caused it for God’s own purposes. Deal with it. Or,
2. God didn’t directly cause it, but allowed it to happen; probably as punishment for something. Or,
3. God didn’t want this to happen and is weeping right along side the victims. God is right there in the aftermath, suffering with the victims, moving in and through the doctors and rescuers and aid workers.

But as we struggle to understand God’s role in all of this, we must inevitably come to the conclusion that we do not know, nor can we ever know. We can only pray and cry and protest to God. But we take some comfort in the knowledge that the God that we are worshipping is bigger than the God that we are worshipping. And the God that we worship is big enough to take our anger and our fear and our anguish.

⁴ Job 7:20, NRSV

⁵ Psalm 22, NRSV

⁶ Matthew 27:46 & Mark 15:34

⁷ Psalm 55:22, NRSV

⁸ Peterson, Eugene, The Message, NavPress/Alive Communications Inc., Colorado Springs, Co, 2002, pg. 741, Psalm 55:22

But sometimes I wonder, while we are asking why God allows such terrible things to happen, if God isn't asking us the same thing?

Why, when we have the capability to do so much, do we do so little? Why do we wait until such a tragedy occurs to help the helpless, and pour out ourselves for the needy?

We know what we're called to do here. We've seen the calls for help, we've heard the pleas to give money to agencies who can get material and personnel to the scene. There's an insert in your bulletins this morning with information about how you can support the work of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and International Water Missions, you can donate to the Red Cross by text, you can go to any number of websites and give.

But when we see pictures of the devastation, it is easy to become overwhelmed. Like a dog finding an elephant bone, the task is daunting and we wonder where to start. We look at the situation in Haiti, and we remember that there are still people in Darfur and New Orleans and Indonesia and Rwanda and Malawi and a hundred other places in desperate straits, and we wonder, what can we; what can I possibly do to make a difference?

In a few minutes we will commission the Fort Hill Medical Missions team to go to Haiti. And we will send with them our prayers and good wishes and support. But we can't all do what Bob and Susan do. We can't all just drop everything and go to Haiti. The problems of the world are so big and you and I are so small. How can we look upon the millions of suffering people in this world and ever hope to make a difference?

In the same way that Jesus did... one person at a time.

I love the old story of the man who was walking down the beach picking up starfish stranded by the falling tide, and gently tossing them back into the ocean. A passer-by watched him for a minute before approaching and inquiring of the man just what he was doing.

The old man looked up and explained that if he did not return these starfish to the seas, they would die.

The stranger, looking around and seeing that that the beach was covered with starfish, remarked to the old man, "But there's too many. And don't you realize that there are probably thousands more on beaches all up and down the coast? Don't you see that you can't possibly make a difference?"

The old man smiled, gently tossed another starfish into the sea and replied "made a difference to that one!"

During his life and ministry, Jesus saw oppression, injustice, hunger, and poverty. Debt was common. People were frequently sold as slaves to pay off those debts. Those who controlled the land and the wealth controlled the means of justice. Those who were least able to protect themselves were the ones most likely to be taken advantage of: the old, the poor, orphans, widows, and the disabled.

It was into this world that Jesus came... but the stories that survive about the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth are interesting in that few show Jesus affecting large masses of people. In fact, outside of the feeding miracles when Jesus fed thousands of people with just a few loaves and fish, I'll bet you

can't think of another specific story of Jesus conducting mass miracles, affecting a crowd of people at the same time.

That's because most of the miracle stories that we find in the New Testament about Jesus, the healings and the resurrections, even in a crowd, involve intimate encounters between Jesus and one or two people.

Think about it... This is a Jesus who could feed 5000 with five fish and two loaves of bread. This is a man who can make the blind see, the lame walk and the dead come back to life.

But this Jesus does not seem interested in putting an end to the problems of hunger, and disability and physical death. In fact, none of the stories of Jesus' life and ministry show him acting in a miraculous way to change the social setting in which he lived and worked. In a historical sense, no one has done more to change the world than Jesus. But when we see Jesus at work, in the stories of the New Testament, we see him affecting individual lives.

We don't see him clap his hands and change the way widows are treated. We see him touch the life of a widow and return her son.

We don't see him snap his fingers and remove the stigma of being unclean. We see him stop on his journey to heal a woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years.

We don't see him wiggle his nose and erase all birth defects and handicaps. We see him turn aside to restore the sight of a blind man named Bartimaeus.

If this Jesus had so chosen, he could have waved his arm over entire towns and villages and healed all who were present; altering the systems that cause oppression and injustice and restored the broken lives of thousands of people in one fell swoop.

But like the starfish thrower, Jesus was one who healed the broken, one at a time.

You see, as much as we might want to snap our fingers and erase the problems of the world that is never going to happen. But each of us is given the ability to make a difference in the lives of people in very real and powerful ways.

Always remember that the best people in the world doing a lot will never change the world. But a lot of people doing their best can. And if we all do our best, God will take all of the best that we have to offer and make something truly extraordinary come from it.

This is our hope in the face of despair. This is what drives us to love and serve God by loving and serving God's people.

Elle Wiesel, a Jewish survivor of the holocaust, wrote a play based on an incident he witnessed in the concentration camp at Auschwitz. Three Rabbis convened a hearing to determine who was at fault for the atrocities of the holocaust.

First blame was placed on the soldiers, then on the officers who gave the orders. Eventually, blame was passed to Hitler and to his henchmen who dreamed up the awful schemes to start with and to the allied nations who had made no move to stop them.

But eventually, as their discussions grew in intensity, it became impossible to ignore God's role. If God was in fact all powerful and all knowing, how could God not have been able to stop it. The fact that it had continued, seemingly unabated for years seemed to suggest that though God knew, God had chosen not to act. The Rabbis found God guilty of the Holocaust.

Then they went out and worshipped God.⁹

Such is the nature of our own struggles with God. We freely admit that we do not understand and we cry out for justice and mercy, expressing the deepest anguish, fear, anger, confusion, and doubt that is within us. We rant and we rave. We lift our voices in great shouts and we press God for answers; for understanding of the mysteries of the world.

But in the end, God is still God, The great "I AM."

And when all is said and done, we bow our heads to worship, and we live our lives as living acts of worship, seeking to glorify God in all that we do.

"To God be all praise, honor, glory and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come." Amen.

⁹ This story was told by Dr. Carson Brisson during a lecture at Union Theological Seminary during the author's time of study there. The play written by Wiesel takes place during a 17th Century Pogrom, but is based on events witnessed by Wiesel during the Holocaust. Wiesel's play is cited as follows:
Wiesel, Elie, The Trial of God, Schocken, 1979