

Two Texts: Same Question

The two texts that we have before us this morning seem very different on the surface. They come from very different times in the history of the relationship of God with this world that God created, but do reflect the very basic issue that exists of the very deep difference that exists between the one who created and the ones which were created. In the narrative given to us through the eyes of Job we have raised a question often asked throughout many centuries and answered in many cultures in various ways by philosophers as well as theologians. When this text from Job came up again, it reminded me of a book by a Jewish Rabbi that I had read many years ago, but since the book was here at Olney and I was working on this sermon at home, I went to the internet to check my reference. Much to my surprise, I found that although I remembered the subject correctly I had the title wrong. Rabbi Harold S. Kushner's title in 2007 was "When Bad Things Happen to Good People". The question he was asking was the one Job raised, however, which is the one we often are confronted with: Why do bad things happen to good people? I was surprised to find that there are at least a dozen other books using similar titles to that of Rabbi Kushner listed on Amazon, including one titled *Bad Things Don't Happen to Good People*. If you read what the Apostle Paul and John Calvin have to say about the human race, you might ascribe to that as concept as well because you clearly have scripture telling us that there are no truly good people in Romans 23: 3 "since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God". But the Biblical narrative is not truly about people, but about the interaction between people and God. So when we come to try to understand what the narrative is trying to tell us, we are trying to understand what God is trying to reveal to us. The Biblical narrative is a record of God's interactions with God's creation as recorded by one of God's creations: humanity. That means that it is a flawed record, but it is the best and only one that we have. But because it is God's revelation, it is one that God works through to enlighten us; and to give us the sustaining nourishment that we need. So what does this narrative about the man Job tell us? The passage we have comes rather late in the narrative which began telling us that Job is a righteous man who was living a life obedient to all that he knows is pleasing to God. Yet disaster strikes him. He does not know why. Some friends arrive to offer comfort, but their comfort is that he must repent of his sin. Yet Job's conscience is clear. He knows of no sin, so he refuses to repent. Instead, the moment we enter the text is a climactic one in which Job decides to challenge God, "to argue his case", the case that what is happening to him is unjust. Job's anger at what has happened to him is clear in the challenge which he issues. Our text opens: "Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:" which is a strong image of power but is not to be confused with a tornado or hurricane or some other natural phenomena. It is instead a sign of God's own appearing in human affairs—a creative, life-changing force that is undefined, perhaps not one that can be understood. God is dynamic, in motion, while we have definitions that are static, which are always trying to put God in a box which can be defined and placed somewhere so we can say God is this or that. God does appear and speak to Job, but it is not clear that Job exactly gets the answer for which he was looking. The speeches which God gives to Job are adversarial and contentious. At the end of them, Job leaves this encounter with a reoriented view of creation and the creator of the universe. Job finds he lives in a world that he cannot control and one in which he is not the center. In this world, the forces of chaos have a place among God's creatures. And they serve

as a reminder that human power is not unlimited. Job leaves this encounter with a reoriented view of the world which is expressed in his decision to start a family again, despite its many dangers and risks. God is not bothered with all the earlier rantings and arguments that have gone on. God just wants Job to realize that he is not God. Job does not really receive an answer to his question of why he, or for that matter any human as to suffer, God instead reminds Job of the incredible Presence and Providence of God. Essentially God gives no answers to this question. When the church, like Job's friends, tries to give definitive answers, they often do more harm than good. What allows for the transformation in Job's understanding is the presence of God who responds, even if the response is not what was desired. It is God's presence with us that heals and restores, even when the why of much around us eludes us. So when we come to the text from Mark, where do we find this same question? The text from Mark continues describing the results of a very busy day of teaching by the shore of the Sea of Galilee. As evening approaches, in order to leave the crowd behind, Jesus asks the disciples to go "to the other side" and evidently since he was tired he goes to the stern of the boat and promptly falls asleep. Galilee is a long and narrow body of water and it is not unusual for there to be windstorms on it in the evening with high waves which is what is described as happening here. The storm here is a natural phenomenon, unlike the whirlwind from which God spoke in Job. Here the boat they are in is being swamped with water. The disciples were frightened and they woke Jesus with this question: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" It is not clear what they were expecting to happen. They have seen him do acts of healing and casting out demons, so obviously they were waking him in expectation of his doing something to help them. They obviously expect Jesus to care. But they obviously don't expect what happens. The storm in Mark ends because Jesus commands it to end. "Be silent! Be still! Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm." Jesus has solved their problem. The storm is no longer raging, but are they giving thanks? No. Instead they are terrified. They are now more terrified of Jesus than they were of the storm according to the verbs used in the Greek documents. Its actual translation for the Greek that we see as "awe" is that the disciples "feared with a great fear". Which probably explains why Jesus says to them: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" The storm has not been severe enough to awaken Jesus, but the water coming into the boat has caused them to seek his help, expecting him to care for them. Many of these disciples were fishermen and ostensibly accustomed to being out on the water—presumably in all kinds of weather—but they had panicked here. So although they knew that Jesus possessed power to heal, when they saw him calmly exert this power over even the wind and the sea—the demonstration of this amount of power more than panicked them—it terrorized them. They are not filled with wonder or joy at their salvation. They do not offer thanks or praise but question each other: "Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" The question is why are they terrified? Probably it is because at this moment they see the extent of the power which Jesus can so easily exert. This was a power that they cannot comprehend which can control the forces of nature. To be in the presence of one who could exert that much power was indeed terrifying. So they asked, "Who is this?" This power is much like the power which Job began to understand belonged to the God he challenged controlled. So the connection between these two texts lies in how we come to understand and trust in the one who both speaks to Job out of the whirlwind and answers the disciples question about caring by quieting the storm. We desire to be in the presence of God

knowing that God is sovereign and all-powerful. It's what we want, and yet it is what terrifies us too. We can only feel safe about it when we are convinced that the God in whose presence we are is finally a good and gracious God, a God who loves us despite our foibles and sins, despite the things God can see going on in the parts of our hearts and minds we like to hide not only from God but often from ourselves at any given moment. We have the consistent revelation of our scripture to tell us that God is that gracious and loving God...that the invitation to us is always there for our redemption. What we need to remember is that because God is gracious and loving, we are not facing any storm that comes in this life alone...God's presence is with us on the journey, this may not prevent the storm but it will guide us to the other side. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.