

Even Better than an Answer
Job 38:1-12
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
October 22, 2006
Dr. Brent Beasley

Gerald Mann is a pastor in Texas. I went to college with his son. I'm not sure if he still does it, but for several years Gerald Mann had a live call in TV show where people would call in asking questions about Christianity and life issues. I think he called it "Common Sense Christianity."

Dr. Mann says that one time he was sitting in front of two cameras in his study and the director came out during a break and said, "We have a call from Florida. It is a child nine years old." Sarah was her name. This was live, interactive television. He never knew what was coming.

He says he'll never forget her quavering, small voice. She said, *Dr. Mann, why does God allow grown-ups to kill kids? They told me at Sunday School that if I prayed, God would protect us, but God did not protect my cousin, Suzanne. She was seven years old and someone killed her.*

Mann was absolutely stumped. Live television. How do you talk to a nine year old? She had asked the question that everyone of us who dares to believe will ask sooner or later. If God is powerful and God is good, why do the innocent suffer?

That was the question on the lips of the woman whose husband was shot on Sanderlin the other night: Why?

Maybe that is the question that God hears most often. All the theology eventually makes its way to theodicy. Theodicy is the word given to the effort to explain why God won't or can't protect innocent people. If God is powerful and God is good, why do the innocent suffer?

The first response to the "Why?" question is this: that is a fair question.

Somehow we got this idea that it is a sign of unbelief or is a challenge, a rebellion against God, if we ask the question, *Why do the innocent suffer?* Maybe in some places, you would ask that kind of question and people would say, *If you had strong enough faith, you wouldn't ask that kind of question.*

Well, the Bible asks that question often. In the 22nd Psalm, the Psalmist says, *My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? I call to you day and night, and you do not answer. You saved my ancestors. You don't save me. My friends all mock me. They say, 'You believe in God. Why hasn't he delivered you?'*

Jesus quoted that Psalm from the cross.

Jeremiah and the prophets cry out the "Why?" question. The whole book of Job is about why God, if God is powerful and good, allows a good man like Job to suffer.

It is a fair question.

The great preacher John Claypool lost his daughter, Laura, at age 11 to leukemia. Another great preacher, Carlyle Marney, who was a good friend of Claypool's, wrote him a short note that said, *John, I do not understand why leukemia kills*

children, but I do know that God has a lot to account for some day.

Someone asked Carlyle Marney one time about that statement, wondering if it was a kind of irreverent statement. He said, *Oh, no. It is a statement of reverent faith. If I am a person, if God is a person, then questions are in order. I believe that God is the kind of God who will allow us to question Him, challenge Him, be angry at Him.*

["The Question God Hears Most", Dr. Gerald Mann, 30 Good Minutes, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, 1993]

I hope that is a relief to you as it is to me.

But still the question: If God is powerful and God is good, why do the innocent suffer?

My second response to that question is this: I do not know.

I think Frederick Buechner is right. If you take three facts, God is good, God is powerful, and the innocent suffer, you can only reconcile two of those. You can never, ever reconcile all three in your mind.

Why do the innocent suffer? I do not know.

If I can't answer the question about suffering, then maybe God will answer it. Job asked God that question, and in our text today, we get to hear God's response.

Surely you can understand why Job asked "Why?" If anyone ever deserved the right to ask that question, Job did.

You and I have the advantage when we read his story. We can take a peek at the beginning. Job's story is like one of those TV shows where the crime is committed right after the opening credits and the rest of the movie is spent watching the lead character struggle to discover what the audience already knows.

Satan, having just returned from a stroll around the earth, has an audience with God who takes on the role of the proud father. *When you were there on earth, did you notice my boy, Job?* the Lord asks.

Job was, indeed, the fair-haired boy. He was the wealthiest man in his part of the world and had been blessed with 10 children, seven boys and three girls.

Success like that can easily go to your head, but Job maintained a sense of humility and remained faithful to God. To top it all off, he would even offer extra sacrifices to God on the off chance that his children might have become careless in their own relationships with God.

As far as Satan was concerned, Job was just too good to be true. He says to the Lord, *Well sure this guy, Job, is faithful as long as the breaks are falling his way. I'd like to see what happens when the storybook life comes to an end. Throw a little adversity his way and let's see how faithful he is.*

So in this story God accepts the challenge—easy for him. Job is the one who is put to the test. The Lord says, *Give it your best shot*, but the sights are trained on Job.

At any rate, the Lord gives Satan permission to do anything he wishes to Job's family and possessions, but forbids Satan to curse Job directly. Remember, now, Job is aware of none of this. All Job knows is that one day everything just started falling apart. In quick succession he loses all his livestock and his family. In spite of that, he refuses to blame God.

So Satan decides to get a bit more personal. With God's permission, he afflicts Job with sores which cover the poor man's body. Again, in spite of this and his wife's urging, Job refuses to blame God. Job's situation is so dire that, when three of his friends come to see him, they can think of nothing to do or say; they simply sit with Job for an entire week. Eventually Job is worn down and asks, *Why?*

One writer says that Job is a walking Rorschach blot on the theme of suffering. We look into the drama of Job's suffering, and we find the shape of our own suffering staring back at us. We recognize our own worst terrors, fears, losses and tragedies in the contours and silhouettes of Job's story.

The details change from one story to the next, but we all share many of the questions voiced by Job and his friends: Why does God allow good people to suffer? Am I to blame for my suffering? How do I make the pain go away? Is there any comfort anywhere?

[Margaret B. Hess, *The Christian Century*, June 4, 1997]

Why?

For most of the rest of the book, Job has a kind of verbal sparring match with God, which is interrupted only by the three

friends who each offer their own explanation for why these things have happened to Job.

Primarily, they see the culprit as Job. They cannot fathom that such things can happen to a person unless that person has somehow turned against God. Job rejects their explanations and continues his debate with God. Eventually God, from out of a whirlwind, responds to Job. Our text for today is the beginning and the essence of God's response. The entire response goes on for a couple of chapters but the gist of it is stated right here at the beginning. God says, *Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding, who determined its measurements--surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?*

Well, that certainly clears things up doesn't it? Not exactly. Not much of an answer, really.

You ask, *Why did this person I love suffer and die?* and God responds with, *Where were you when I was busy creating this world?*

You ask, *Why does God allow some sick, disturbed person to kidnap and kill an innocent child?* and God says, *Who do you think stretched a tape measure around the equator?* You ask, *Why is this crisis happening to me?* and God says, *Can you guess what materials I used when I created this universe? Ah, I can still hear the angels singing in the background while I worked.*

Even God does not give an answer to the question, Why?

I already said I can't give you an answer. Now I'm telling you that God doesn't give an answer, either.

If an answer is what you want, I'm afraid this is all somewhat of a bitter disappointment. If an answer is all you want, this must all be a bitter disappointment. If an answer is all you're looking for, this must be a disappointment.

And yet... after God's speech, Job is a changed person.

Not because he got an answer. It's not the clever answer, the profound answer, that heals Job. What changes him, what heals, what makes all the difference in the world is something that is even better than an answer.

What could be better than an answer? God. What Job receives is the God whom he had only heard about has now come to him personally in his moment of suffering. Theological answers are not the source of Job's redemption, and they won't be the source of yours or mine.

There is an old, perhaps apocryphal story about two signs that appeared one day on the sweeping green of the Boston Common. One said, *This way to lectures about God*; the second said, *This way to God*.

What is it you really want? Do you want to know about God? Or do you want to know God?

Job seeks out God, evidently believing that he has followed the sign to "lectures about God." But Job must have become confused and misread the sign. Unwittingly he has followed the sign that says, *This way to God*.

It is an encounter with the living God that transforms the profound suffering. Job meets God.

And when Job actually meets God, he begins to see that the circuitous track of his life has led him through paths of joy and paths of suffering. But more than anything else, Job realizes that in all things his path was held in the hand of God who was there when the morning stars first sang together, God who has always been waiting to take him in his arms and wipe his tears away God who since the cornerstone of the world was laid has been there.

Two Sundays ago we dedicated the labyrinth that has been constructed on the north side of our property. It is a special place with a stone path and beautiful landscaping.

A labyrinth is a path that doubles back on itself several times and leads to a center. Walking a labyrinth is a tool that has been used by Christians for centuries as an aid to prayer and meditation.

Labyrinths and mazes are often mixed up. The difference is that a maze is designed to confuse, but a labyrinth has only one path. The way in is the way out. A labyrinth is actually a good metaphor for the Christian life: a meandering but purposeful journey.

The other day, a beautiful sunny day, I walked along that circuitous path. I stood in the center of the circle.

I thought to myself that I have journeyed 34 years so far to stand at the center. As I looked back over my life I thought of the losses and failures, the mistakes and brokenness that have

been on my path. I thought also of the joys and the gifts, the treasures of my life.

And through it all, it turns out, the path led all along to the center. It hasn't been a direct route, the shortest distance between two points, but it has led to the center, to a meeting place with God who has been there all along.

[Thanks to Margaret B. Hess for comparing Job's journey, and ours, to walking a labyrinth]

I began to imagine a dream-like scene:

It is dusk. I walk outside the church, and as my eyes adjust to the light I see people, lots of people, walking the ancient path of the labyrinth, and I join them.

That meandering path leads me through sufferings, through the shadows of my worst fears. It also leads me through my most poignant joys. Heartbreakingly painful and heartbreakingly wonderful moments.

I reach the center, the pulsing heart of it all. And suddenly a hand is on my shoulder. Two hands. And they are pulling me into an embrace. And I look up into the eyes of God.

How was I to know, during all the days of my life, how was I to know, as I walked along this labyrinthian path, how was I to know, as I turned this way and that, that I was all along stumbling and fumbling toward the embrace of God who has always been there—from the laying of the foundations of the world—in the center of it all?

I don't know all the "why's".

But the encounter with God, the presence of God, the embrace of God, is even better than an answer.