***NEVER MIND!***

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Texts: Job38:1-13, 16-18; 42:1-6, 9b-10 and 2 Corinthians 6;1-13

 Some years ago on *Saturday Night Live* Gilda Radner played a character by the name of Emily Litella who would offer commentary on some issue of the day which she inevitably got wrong. “What’s all this I hear about cracking down on violins on television?” she exclaimed. “Violins are wonderful instruments. Why should children have to wait until after 10:00 to see violins on television?” As she worked herself up into a frenzy over the injustice of it all, somehow concluding that this would all lead to children not drinking milk, Chevy Chase interrupted to whisper, “Miss Litella, it’s not *violins*; the topic was *violence* on television.” “Oh,” she said with a slightly embarrassed expression, “That’s different.” Then she smiled sweetly and said, “Never mind!” And so it went. Each week she expressed outrage at some current issue – the “eagle rights amendment” or “the busting of school children” (I suppose today she would be upset about all the talk about pandemics; after all why shouldn’t pandas be allowed to mix with other animals) – only to be corrected and offer her disclaimer: a sweet smile and “Never mind!”

 We’ve all had those moments at one time or another, times when we wish we had just stayed silent, moments when we’ve overstepped our bounds or been dead wrong or spoken hastily and wish we could wipe the slate clean with: never mind! For many folks this pandemic year falls into that category. With its disruption of daily life, enforced absences from loved ones, lingering sickness, 600,000 deaths in our country alone, and long shadow cast over our community, nation, and world, wouldn’t it be nice to erase it all with a simple: “Never mind”? Could God not just push the UNDO button on the divine computer and reset our world to a pre-COVID time and let us get rid of the virus and these masks and vaccines and all the angst that comes with them?

 Perhaps that is what Job had in mind with his tirade against God – a plea for God to reset all the wrongs that had been done to him – the loss of his fortune, family, and health through no fault of his own. Perhaps he hoped that by challenging the justice of God he might convince God to utter a divine “never mind” and return Job to his pre-disaster life. But if that was his hope, he was sorely disappointed. For as he stood in the presence of God and bore the brunt of God’s rebuke, Job realized that it might be too late for his own “never mind”. Early in the story Job endured his suffering with exemplary faith and faithfulness, resisting even his wife’s encouragement to curse God and die. But in the course of dialogue with three friends who came to visit him in his distress, Job vented his anger with a tirade that challenged God to prove the case against him. If Job was suffering justly, then what was his offense? And if not suffering justly, then what was God thinking in imposing unjust suffering? In essence, Job was demanding a rationale for his sorry state. And he is not alone.

 Every time that we read of one more child suffering from some awful disease or a saint injured in a bizarre accident or a church leveled by a tornado or a village buried by an earthquake or the pandemic running rampant in a refugee camp or find ourselves in some dire dilemma not of our own making, we turn to God and ask, “Why? What kind of God allows innocent people to suffer like this? What kind of just God allows unjust suffering?” Those questions have been raised by men, women, and children for thousands of years. They are the logical consequence of faith in a just God amid the reality of innocent human suffering, and they lie at the heart of the story of Job. The human question is: Why do bad things happen to good people? The divine question is whether human faith and faithfulness will survive when disaster strikes and suffering abounds.

 How would you answer that divine question? Has your faith and faithfulness survived this pandemic? There is no doubt that it has tested us just as Job’s trials and tribulations tested his faith and faithfulness. But the writer in Job does not suggest that such testing explains all innocent human suffering. Why bad things happen to good people remains a mystery; bad things do happen and do test the faith of those good people. The divine question remains: Will faith and faithfulness withstand a pandemic of unjust suffering? Might Job’s story help us in the midst of this viral whirlwind?

 It was out of the whirlwind that God spoke to Job: “*Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me if you know!*” As Job questions the wisdom and justice of God in the aftermath of a seemingly unjust series of disasters, the LORD reminds Job who is God and who is not. Do we really think that we know better than God how the world should work? Do you really think that you can sort out the good and the bad, the just and the unjust, the innocent and the guilty, better than God? Garth Brooks’ song “*Unanswered Prayers*” seems to make God’s point:

*Just the other night, at a hometown football game
My wife and I ran into, my old high school flame
And as I introduced them, the past came back to me
And I couldn’t help but think of, the way things used to be.
She was the one, that I’d wanted for all times
And each night I’d spend prayin’, that God would make her mine
And if he’d only grant me, this wish I wished back then
I’d never ask for anything again.
Sometimes I thank God, for unanswered prayers…*

 We are bold to think that we know better than God, for the foolishness of God is greater than our wisdom. God’s reprimand of Job is a reminder of the power of God rooted in the wonder of creation. The images are wonderful, the poetry magnificent, the words a divine rebuke to Job and to us. The LORD alone is God, Creator of all things, the One who

 scattered stars in distant galaxies

 and shaped the delicate wings of butterflies,

 and knit together your fingertips.

We may rail at God about things that make no sense to us – unjust suffering and premature deaths and a global pandemic and the purpose of poison ivy – but when we are done getting it off our chests, we recall that the LORD is God, we are not, and that is a good thing. It is okay to sound off to God – God is big enough to handle it – but then remember who this God is to whom you voice your angst and anger. It is the God who created you and all the stars in the universe, the God who sustains your every breath, the God who loved you enough to die on the cross for you. Remember that the LORD is God in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, for better or worse, in the midst of blessing and suffering and in the middle of a pandemic. The LORD is no less God when a hurricane hits or cancer strikes or a virus runs wild. When we are most vulnerable, the LORD is there, persevering with us and encouraging us to persevere in faith and in faithfulness.

 When that reality dawned on Job, he repented of his rash words, saying: “*I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know*.” God did not explain to Job the purpose of his suffering; God simply reminded Job who was God and who was not, and that was enough to lead Job to repent. How tempting it is to lose sight of the big picture that spans time and space across eternity and think that we know better than God what should be at a particular moment in our particular situation! Then God asks:

 *Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?*

 *Have the gates of death been revealed to you?*

And we who question God mutter, “Never mind.” In Jesus’ questions too we are challenged:

 *Who do you say that I am?*

 *Will you take up your cross and follow me?*

We who question God may find our answers to God’s questions woefully inadequate. The African-American Spiritual says it well:

 *Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

 *Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?*

 *Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?*

 *Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.*

 *Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

We weren’t there, and like most of the disciples we are likely to have been somewhere else, anywhere else, lamenting our loss and predicament. And so we tremble –in awe, in recognition of who we’ve been and what we’ve done – we tremble at our unfaithfulness when we remember what God endured for us, what Christ suffered for us, and how often we take it for granted.

 In that portion of the letter to the Corinthians that we heard this morning, Paul urges them not to accept the grace of God in vain. In other words, live into that grace given to you even though that living may sometimes be marked by suffering or hardships, calamities or sleepless nights. Those tough times are not signs of the absence of God’s grace, but rather it is the grace of God that helps us to weather those storms - whatever the storms may be! We have not come through this last year with all its challenges, frustrations, and inequities foisted upon us by an unjust God; we have persevered through it all because God has persevered with us through it all – comforting us in our sorrow, patiently bearing with us in our frustration and impatience, strengthening us for new challenges, reassuring us that we do not face this virus alone. God is at work in our midst, and while we may prefer that God just say, “Never mind!” and erase it all, that is not the way of the world as God has created the world to be. And we do NOT know better than God!

But neither is it God’s way to leave us alone in our suffering. Throughout Job’s suffering God was in dialogue with him, there to hear his laments and his tirade, and after all was said and done, after all his trials and tribulations, Job was restored. That is what God does – restores lives, restores hope. God does not promise there will be no suffering, but God promises to be with us in it all, through it all, and assures us that in the end there will be restoration. Early in the story Job responds to his disasters with, “*The Lord gives, the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord*.” In the story’s ending, we find that the Lord gives yet again, and it is Job who is blessed. Job still must deal with the reality of his losses – including the death of his children – but he does receive new blessings, new gifts, new hope.

In his book *The Known World*, Edward P. Jones wonders:

*Was there a prayer Job offered to God after he put his servant back a million times better than Job had been before the devastation? Thank you, O Lord. I cannot forget what I once had, but I will not resent you so much when I think of those old days and my dead loved ones*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

New blessings do not necessarily erase the pain of the past, but perhaps they do ease the pain a bit. And the promise of blessings may help us bear the suffering we endure in the present. It is that promise we affirm in the resurrection of Jesus: no matter what we suffer, what we endure, what we lose, the Lord gives us hope for a heavenly future that, unlike earthly blessings, surpasses any loss we may have suffered. And it is that hope that helps us to persevere day to day, come what may.

 Job’s story ends with good news, and so will our stories, including this pandemic story. It will not erase the bad news along the way; there will be more trials and tribulations, joys and sorrows, times of sweet remembrance and humble repentance, some suffering. That is life. Like Job we are called to persevere in faith and in faithfulness through it all, knowing what Job did not know: in the end, when all is said and done, God will prevail, and we will be blessed, one and all, blessed! Brothers and sisters, believe that good news – and hang in there! Amen

1. Edward P. Jones, *The Known World*, Amistad Press:2003, p.371 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)