

The message given by Rev. Dr. Thomas E. Zoelzer on Sunday, September 27, 2009
based on Job 1:1; 2:1-10.

Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen

Solo - "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" –
*Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Nobody knows my sorrow
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Glory hallelujah*

*Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down
Oh, yes Lord
Sometimes I'm almost to the ground
Oh, yes Lord*

Every time I read the story of Job in the Hebrew Scriptures, I hear the song, "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" in my head. Job is the story of a man who had it all until tragedy and suffering tests his integrity and faithfulness. Does anyone know the trouble Job has seen? Does anyone know his sorrow?

Now the first thing I need to say today is that Job is not about a real person. I know this because I find the Book of Job in the literature section of the Hebrew Scriptures along with Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The book of Job is short story written as a parable. It is a fictional story with a purpose that explores the mysteries of life. It would be like the short story *Gift of the Magi* by O. Henry. *The Gift of the Magi* is a fictional story based on the religious truths of the Christmas story. The Book of Job is such a story.

Job is the story about the perfect Jew whose world is turned upside down by a cosmic event – a contest between God and Satan. Now in our

reading today, you heard the word "Satan" read. In this story, Satan is part of God's heavenly court, and a better word to describe this character is "the accuser."

In this story, Job was a model Jewish person because he was pious and devout and practiced all the laws and rituals of the Jewish faith. In those days, the dominant theology of life was one of reward and punishment – obey all the rules and commandments of God and be rewarded – do not obey and be punished and suffer. This was the dominant theology of the time.

The story of Job begins with the statement, "*There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.*" In this story, Job had 7 sons and 3 daughters. He had 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 donkeys, and very many servants. He was a very wealthy man. He is also describes as one who walked with integrity - meaning perfection - with God. He engaged in prayer and devotion, and he would pray for his sons and daughters in case they sinned against God. The idea here is that because he was so righteous, he was abundantly rewarded by God.

Then the story shifts from Job to heaven where one day God and all the heavenly beings meet together. At the time that this story was written, it was a popular opinion that just as kings had palaces and courts of nobles and servants, in heaven there was a celestial court with "heavenly beings" (literally "sons of God") gathered around the divine throne. The accuser was part of the court.

Here the accuser is not an opponent of God like in the Book of Revelation, but as a kind of prosecuting attorney for the Lord. In our story in Job, the accuser is a heavenly being who convicts humans of wrongdoing, but always under God's control.

So according to the story the heavenly beings gather in the celestial palace with God and the accuser comes along, and God asked him what he's been doing. The accuser says, "*From going to and fro on the earth and from walking up and down on it.*" So then God asked if the accuser had considered his servant Job, and God starts bragging on Job by saying, "*There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.*"

But then the accuser asked, "*Well, maybe Job is so faithful because you protect him. You've put a fence around him and his house and all that he has. You've blessed the works of his hands and his possessions have increased.*" The accuser continues, "*But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.*" So God and the accuser agree to discover whether Job would stay faithful when he is not so blessed.

So one day, a messenger comes running to tell Job that all his oxen and donkeys were taken away by a foreign tribe, and all the servants with them were killed by the sword except for that servant.

While that servant was still speaking another one came and said that fire fell down from the sky and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them all, and that he alone escaped to tell Job.

While he was still speaking another came and said that another foreign tribe of people had formed 3 columns and made a raid on the camels and carried them off and killed all the servants except for him.

And while he was still speaking another came and said. "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brothers house, and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the 4 corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, they are all dead. I alone have escaped to tell you."

Then the story says, "*Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped.*" He said, "*Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.*" In all this, Job did not sin or charge God with wrong doing. Could you do that?

That was chapter one. Now we come to chapter 2 where the heavenly beings once again come before the Lord and the accuser came among them to present himself before the Lord. You heard the conversation between God and the accuser and what happened to Job this time - He was inflicted with loathsome sores from his foot to the crown of his head. Job sits among the ashes for relief.

Still Job does not curse God. When his wife became angry with him and said, "*Do you still persist in your perfection? Curse God and die.*"

Job does not curse God, but after sitting in agony and pain for 7 days, he does curse the day he was born, loathes his life, and complains in bitterness in conversation with 3 of his friends who come to sit with him.

His 3 friends turn out to not be much help. Over the course of the next 36 chapters of the book, they try to convince him that he must have sinned, he should repent, and he deserves punishment because after all their theology of reward and punishment must be right. Job refutes all their arguments and complains about how the wicked are not punished but seem to prosper.

The story of Job addresses some critical questions that we all ask—
“Why is there suffering and evil?”

How do human beings survive in the midst of such suffering?

How do we respond to evil?

What role does God play in the production and implementation of suffering?

How can human life have any significance or at least meaning when the world throws us such horror?

The answer to these questions comes to Job beginning at the 38th chapter and following where God talks to Job in a whirlwind. In those chapters, the belief that the universe is based on a simple mechanical model of reward and punishment is rejected completely. What is affirmed is that the universe of God is mysterious, holy, and not easily graspable, but that God is the creator and sustainer of it all. In the end, God criticizes Job for losing heart during suffering but compliments him for holding on to his faith. The story ends with Job once again having 7 sons and 3 daughters and twice as many sheep, donkeys, camels, and ox than he had before.

This book makes us struggle with the reality of suffering and discomfort in the world and the God who seems to allow all of that. This summer, my wife and I vacationed in the Napa Valley area of California. One of the things I learned about growing grapes is that the producers keep the vines slightly under stress – just a little bit less water and other things they need. The stress causes the vines to produce more fruit. Sometimes, I wonder if the universe keeps us just a little bit under stress so that we are forced to produce and achieve.

Life is about blessings and opportunities, and life is about struggles and heartaches and setbacks and disappointments. Sometimes we discover that those heartaches and disappointments are self inflicted by our attitudes, our actions, and our deeds – These are always opportunities for awareness, growth and change. Sometimes, other people and events just dumps on us, and we are caught up in tragedy and heartache. This too is part of life's reality. The good news is that even in those moments we are not alone. God is with us.

In 2002, my wife and I were invited to attend a seminar in Florida with a nationally known Old Testament scholar. In preparation of the seminar, we were asked to read the book, *Between Cross and Resurrection -- A Theology of Holy Saturday*. It is a theology book written by Professor Alan E. Lewis of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. It was one of the most boring books I have ever read!

It is a book about the theological implications of the day between Good Friday and Easter. I had never thought much about the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It is a book about the 36 to 40 hours that

Jesus was in the tomb, and Dr. Lewis' book was not helping my attitude about it. He went on and on about his understanding of this day, what other theologians thought about this day, and what he thought about the insights of other theologians about this day.

He writes about Holy Saturday as an in between time, as a time of emptiness and waiting, as an eternal darkness that never seems to end. He describes it as "the abyss" -- a time of nothingness and despair. It is time of hopelessness and darkness. Perhaps, you can think of times that you felt empty and alone and in the abyss - in the tomb. For 400 pages, he goes on and on about Holy Saturday.

All of a sudden on page 403, Dr. Lewis shifts into the first person. He reveals that while writing the book, he was diagnosed with lung cancer. His health required that he take time off from his profession and deal with a personal condition. He writes about losing a lung, chemotherapy, the loss of his hair and bodily functions, the indignity of being so helpless, and walking through the valley of the shadow of death. He writes about the utter despair and pain he felt.

Eventually, it occurred to him that he was having his own "Holy Saturday" experience. He lost almost everything he held dear, and his life was altered because of this experience. He was trapped in the abyss of emptiness and despair and wondered "where is God?"

Yet in the midst of his despair, it came to him that God was with him that he was not alone. God was in the abyss with him just as God was with Jesus in the tomb. He was not alone. The same God that was at the cross and at the empty tomb was also in the tomb with him. He was not

alone, and he had a revelation about the meaning of God. He writes that in his book he started out writing *about* God and that through his distress he *experienced* God. His understanding of life, himself, and God was transformed because of his Holy Saturday experience.

Job had a similar experience. At the end of the book of Job, Job encounters God. God does not directly answer his laments, but God transforms his understanding and experience of his concept of the divine and humanity's place in it. Job's faith is transformed and deepened because he understands that God is with him even during times of pain. Somebody knows the trouble he's seem!

The faith of Job was to experience God and to trust in God's presence and help. Job was not only a religious person at the end of the story but a person of faith. The faith of Job is discovering a deeper presence of God, no matter what.

There are times in life that we find ourselves in the abyss -- a personal tragedy, a traumatic situation, a death, and it feels like we are in the tomb -- emptiness and hopelessness. Perhaps you are experiencing a time of Holy Saturday right now. You're not alone! The same God that was with you yesterday is with you today and will be with you tomorrow. The question is - "Are we going to stay there in the abyss?"

There once was a surgeon who sat beside a boy's bed. The boy's parents sat across from him. "Tomorrow morning," the surgeon began, "I'll open up your heart..."

"You'll find Jesus there," the boy interpreted.

The surgeon looked up, annoyed. "I'll cut your heart open," he continued, "to see how much damage has been done..."

"But when you open up my heart, you'll find Jesus in there."

The surgeon looked to the parents, who sat quietly. "When I see how much damage has been done, I'll sew your heart and chest back up and I'll plan what to do next."

"But you'll find Jesus in my heart. The Bible says he lives there. The hymns all say he lives there. You'll find him in my heart."

The surgeon had had enough. "I'll tell you what I'll find in your heart. I'll find damaged muscle, low blood supply, and weakened vessels, and I'll find out if I can make you well."

"You'll find Jesus there too. He lives there." The surgeon left.

The surgeon sat in his office recording his notes from the surgery. "...damaged aorta, damaged pulmonary vein, widespread muscle deterioration. No hope for transplant, no hope for cure. Therapy: painkillers and bed rest. Prognosis: here he paused, "death within one year." He stopped the recorder but there was more to be said. "Why?" he asked aloud. "Why did you do this?" And he had a long conversation with God about the death of a child and why one so young has to suffer.

In his conversation with God it came to him that God does not promise how long life will be, and God does not promise what the condition our life will be. God promises us life and gives us the courage to live it abundantly no matter how limited, and the surgeon wept.

The surgeon sat beside the boy's bed. The boy's parents sat across from him. The boy awoke and whispered, "Did you cut open my heart?"

"Yes," said the surgeon.

"What did you find?" asked the boy.

"I found Jesus there," said the surgeon.

*Somebody knows the trouble I've seen
Somebody knows my sorrow
Somebody knows the trouble I've seen
Glory hallelujah*

AMEN.