

PARTICIPATING IN THE DRAMA OF EXISTENCE

the Rev. Dr. DeWayne L. Davis

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Lead Minister

Text: Job 38:1–7

Something about us humans makes us determined to explain tragedy, misfortune, and injustice. We can easily get preoccupied with pursuing the answer to the “why” of bad things happening. Unfortunately, the risk of that pursuit for answers among the faithful is a reliance on often dangerous and destructive conventional religious wisdom to explain suffering. When the AIDS epidemic started claiming the lives of thousands of gay men, people receiving treatment for blood disorders, and those suffering from the impacts of homelessness and substance abuse disorders, the late Rev. Jerry Falwell, the televangelist and founder of the Moral Majority, was the most notable religious figure to weigh in, saying, “AIDS is the wrath of a just God against homosexuals.”

Lest we think that the only time such conventional religious wisdom was offered on a tragic phenomenon in the world, note that in 2005, Rev. Franklin Graham, son of the Rev. Billy Graham, said that God was using Hurricane Katrina to rid New Orleans of her sexual perversion and Satan worship. In 2010 when an earthquake devastated Haiti, televangelist Rev. Pat Robertson concluded on his popular television ministry broadcast that the quake was God’s curse on Haiti for swearing a pact with the devil during the Haitian Revolution that freed Haiti from French control. These are just the most famous religious people to say such things. But unfortunately, far too many people of faith subscribe to a logic of reward and punishment in the world that is governed by a divine cause-and-effect paradigm: God rewards the good and righteous person or nation with peace and prosperity and punishes the wicked and sinful person or nation with pain and suffering.

Israel was also beholden to this conventional religious wisdom. They looked upon the realities of the human condition, such as poverty, disease, and oppression, and the destructiveness of natural disasters, such as hurricanes and earthquakes, as punishment for sin. They were likely to point the finger at those suffering the most and blame them for their misfortune. Their wisdom writings reinforced this understanding. That is, until the book of Job, which ultimately calls into question the received conventional religious wisdom that favor or misfortune is an indication of your goodness or wickedness. In the story of Job, when God inexplicably removes the divine fence of protection from around Job, a blameless, upright, and prosperous man, with “seven sons and three daughters . . . [and] seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants” (Job 1:2); when Job loses all of his property, all of his children are killed in a great windstorm, and his body is afflicted with painful sores, everybody around Job is convinced they know the reason why. From Job’s wife to his friends, the reason for his pain and suffering is patently clear: Job must have messed up; Job must have sinned; Job must have done something to forfeit his right to security, success, and power; Job must be to blame for this misfortune. But we know that Job was innocent.

Job’s wife finds the situation hopeless and tells Job to “curse God, and die!” Job’s friend Eliphaz tells Job that God doesn’t punish the innocent, so Job must have sowed it somehow if he is reaping trouble and iniquity. Job’s friend Bildad tells him that God does not pervert justice so nakedly and viciously, so if Job

becomes pure and righteous, God will restore him. Job's friend Zophar exhorts Job to stretch out his hands in submission and repentance toward God and release any iniquity, and God will save him. Job's friend Elihu defends God against Job's contention with God's seeming unfairness and indifference to his suffering, declaring that God does not act wickedly nor perverts justice, so Job cannot insist that he is innocent. How often have we heard similar responses to the suffering in our world?

I want you to notice the impact of conventional religious wisdom that is more interested in easy answers and moral certitudes about God, nature, and the human condition than in loving and serving our neighbor. In all the words and arguments Job's friends make, they do not do anything. Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu had a lot to say but did nothing to address their friend's suffering. We do not see them acting to console him in his grief. They do not tend to his wounds and care for his health. They do not share their abundance with him to help him get back on his feet or call the community together for mutual aid and support. We do not see them affirmatively acting to relieve suffering or do justice. After all, the thrust of their argument is that he did something to deserve his misfortune.

And so, God finally responds. People usually think that God's response in chapter 38 of Job is a response to Job's demand to God to know why such suffering and misfortune befell him. But I submit that God's divine speech is a response to the conventional religious wisdom that Job's friends have been spouting to explain God and suffering. God breaks out of the whirlwind to respond: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? I will question you, and you shall declare to me." (Job 38:2-3) In other words, "Who are these people talking about stuff they don't understand? Let me ask you some questions." And in a series of rhetorical questions about divine control over the forces of nature, the constellations of the heavens, and the wisdom and understanding of the complexities of creation, God shows Job that some things are beyond humanity's ability to control, know, and predict—that creation is unfinished, contingent, untamed, unknowable, and unpredictable, so the question of guilt or innocence is often beside the point amid suffering—that the answer to the why of suffering may be a futile endeavor for human hands and minds and a waste of our time in trying to make sense of it—that the question about the justice to be done amid the suffering of a present moment is less about why God caused the injustice and more about how we can do justice with whatever power and knowledge we possess. As one theologian maintains so eloquently, bookending the human experience between the creation narratives and the suffering of Job, "humankind is given its dreadful freedom, and its fateful invitation to participate in the drama of existence."¹ Perhaps that is what we are called to do with our God-given freedom when the world turns, moves, and convulses beyond our control. We participate together in the drama, holding each other, providing help and support where we can, and doing justice in all that we do.

This is not an attempt to defend God or let God off the hook. This is not an attempt to safely place God in the realm of a theoretical or theological problem requiring deep dives into philosophy or phenomenology. This is not a debate about how to keep score to see if we are entitled to reward or rescue from suffering. Rather, this is an invitation to move beyond cause-and-effect thinking or apportioning blame in response to suffering and inexplicable tragedy. This is a call to use what we have been given to act, to do what we can to relieve suffering and do justice.

Recently, when a global pandemic fell over the world, killing millions, shutting down the world economy, and disrupting the ways we lived, played, worshipped, traveled, and interacted, our assumptions about control, fairness, and justice were frustrated. Many assumed that our piety, faithfulness, wealth, or success would inoculate us from the whims and vagaries of nature and the human condition. Our vaunted choice and individualism were futile in the face of a virus that found fertile incubation in the warmest parts of the human anatomy, regardless of our status, wealth, or background. All of our creativity and ingenuity,

¹J. Gerald Janzen, *Job: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985), 227.

our ability to build, create, and develop paled in comparison to the effectiveness of an infectious microbe with the ability to produce a disease that subverted our control, our achievements, and our conventional religious wisdom. Maybe we don't know everything. Perhaps we can't control everything.

Our confrontation with the coronavirus, the persistence of war and poverty, and our ongoing denialism about climate change and ecological devastation highlight that we cannot achieve creation. Perhaps we are called to respect it, show humility in the face of it, and join God in respecting the wonder of it all rather than trying to control it all. Perhaps we remind ourselves, especially when the world seems to have slipped our grasp and control, that we are a part of something much bigger, the logic of whose movement and machinery are simply beyond our comprehension, that a cause-and-effect logic is an unsolvable puzzle distracting us from seeing that we are interconnected and preventing us from coming together in beloved community. In God's divine speech in the book of Job, we must face that God will not answer our questions about suffering and justice. But in God's non-answer may just be an answer. Our participation in the drama of existence is less about *why* than it is about *what*: What are we going to do about suffering and injustice in our time?