

1

“Why do I have to go to bed?” a child asked her father one night. “Why can’t I stay up late every night?”

“Your body needs rest,” her father replied, “So you can grow and stay healthy.”

“Why?”

“That’s the way our bodies work. While we rest and sleep, our muscles grow, and our brains need rest since we use them so much during the day.”

“Why?”

“That’s the way God made us—to play and have fun during the day and then to rest at night.”

“Why?”

You may have engaged in a similar dialogue at one time with a child in your life—the never ending “why?” questions. Through the years the questions get more difficult: Why is the sky blue? Why do we have imaginary numbers in calculus? Why do we have cancer? Why do we have to suffer?

The big question many are asking today is: Why do we have a coronavirus that creates such chaos in the world? During this pandemic, some are also

asking, “Why are you making me wear a mask?” while others ask, “Why aren’t you wearing a mask to help us all stay healthy?”

So many questions...why-why-why?

We’re not the first ones to ask such questions, for the author of the book of Job written thousands of years ago probes the same question: Why do good people suffer? It’s a unique book in the Bible with a mixture of styles of literature—a bit wisdom, mixed with much lament, along with poetry and drama. The book asks some difficult questions about life, and while several friends attempt to make sense of why Job suffers, their explanations leave us feeling unfulfilled, as we will explore in coming weeks when we hear their voices.

Some may suggest it seems somewhat odd to spend five weeks reflecting on the story of Job, pausing briefly among the 42 chapters of the book, but I think Job’s struggle to understand suffering applies to us especially today as we ponder a global pandemic. The story of Job asks a universal question, one that we humans have been asking for

2

countless generations. In five weeks we won't have all the answers, but together, we can struggle with the question.

So, let's begin. Once upon a time, in the land of Uz, there lived a man named Job. He had it all—lots of wealth, plenty of resources, and a loving wife and grown children. The narrator tells us that Job was a deeply religious man, even presenting offerings to God in case his children had sinned.

The scene suddenly shifts to a heavenly courtroom, with God as the presiding judge, gathered with the angels. If music underscored the scene, I imagine it would now become ominous with the entrance of *ha-satan*, the Hebrew word meaning “the Accuser” or “the Adversary.” In today's lingo, we might suggest he was the prosecuting attorney, the one who tries to make a case against the person on trial. He's the one who does investigative work for God, like a government agent running surveillance to protect a nation against terrorists. *Ha-satan* is not evil, though any of us who were

watched by him and have our mistakes revealed in public would feel angry at his accusations.

God proudly focuses on Job, a faithful follower who trusts God and avoids evil. The Accuser suggests, “That's only because you protect him, as though you have a fence around him, keeping him safe. Remove the fence, and when bad things happen, Job won't be so loving and faithful.”

God takes on the challenge and replied, “We'll see. Go ahead—do what you want with all that is his. Just don't hurt *him*.”¹

Soon four messengers arrive with the bad news that enemies have stolen his herds of animals, fire destroyed his sheep and shepherds, and his children were killed when their house collapsed in a freak windstorm while they were all together having a dinner party.

At this point, many listeners of the story may wonder, “Why? Why would God make such a deal with *ha-satan*? Why would God allow a good person to experience so much suffering?”

3

We may also be surprised at Job's response and wonder why Job would say:

We bring nothing at birth;
we take nothing
with us at death.
The Lord alone gives and takes.
Praise the name of the LORD!"²

We might wonder if Job was in a state of shock or if he was experiencing the first stage of grief: denial. When great tragedy happens, we begin coping by denying the severity of the event, as when a family faces the tragic discovery that their toddler had wandered into a swimming pool during a family party. No one noticed the child was missing right away, and when someone saw him lying at the bottom of the pool, they pulled him from the water and called 911. Paramedics administered CPR and rushed him to the hospital.

Although the doctors worked on the child for an extended period time, they finally knew their efforts would not revive the child. The mother pleaded with them to continue, and then she cradled the child in her arms and tells him that she loves him, brushing

the hair out of his eyes as though the child longed to see his mother's face.

As a chaplain in the hospital with this family years ago, a mixture of tears and silence surrounded us in this tragic loss. My few words of prayer pierced the air, but nothing I could say would help make sense of this trauma. Later the questions would begin to occur as the family wondered...*why?*

I've asked that question myself many times. In my mid-20s I lost my job due to someone lying about me, and I couldn't understand why such a thing happened. I remember one night after Bible study stomping into the sanctuary and yelling at God, "Why did you let this happen? I've done nothing wrong to deserve this!"

At that time in my life, I believed that if one trusted God and lived a good life, one could avoid tragedies. Bad things, I believed, happened to those who didn't follow God's ways. I was following an ancient theology outlined in the book of Deuteronomy: If you live a good life, you will prosper; but if you sin, you will suffer.

④

It was during this time I discovered the book of Job, a story about a good person who suffered. I also read the book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Rabbi Kushner, who suggested that rather than asking *why* bad things happen to us, we should instead ask: *When* bad things happen, how do I respond? He suggested that bad things happen to all of us, good and bad alike, and that our task is not to figure out *why*, but when it happens, to discern how to continue living our lives in the best way we can.

That's not to minimize the grief and pain that occur in our loss, but suggests that we will get

through the difficult times in life, for God continues to offer healing, even in the most devastating times of life. Maybe that's why Job offered his praise to God, trusting that life would continue even in his pain, which offers a word of hope to all of us. As you continue to wonder about this difficult time of life in which we find ourselves, may you continue to trust that God is with you in the depth of your questions, for when bad things happen, God is still moving within you, offering hope and new life.

¹ Job 1:12, *The Message Bible*

² Job 1:21, CEV