

Approaching our Holy Bible is somewhat like visiting a family reunion. Now if you were to journey to the Bible Family Reunion you'd find 66 family members gathered (84 if you count the distant cousins in the apocrypha), and each family member has a different story. One does not get the fullest understanding of God from any one book of the Bible, any more than you could get at the complexities of a family by talking with just one family member. Now if you were to walk into the Bible Family Reunion you would probably find lots of folks hovering around Grandpa Samuel – off telling stories about King David – and the quadruplets: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Aunt Ruth would be regaling folks with stories of her courtship with Boaz. Along one wall you might find Jerry and Zeke talking heatedly about the land they lost. And off in a corner, all by himself, muttering away, occasionally bursting into tears, is old Uncle Job. He's the one participant of the Bible Family Reunion that everyone seems to avoid.

For the past three Sundays we have heard from Uncle Job, and at least in terms of my preaching I have kept him in his corner. But perhaps we might do well to pull up a chair and visit with the old guy. Over this past year our story seems to resemble his own.

As we heard two weeks ago the story of Job opens with the description of a righteous man, living in prosperity with a very large family. One day God gathers with the "heavenly beings," and God points out the righteousness of Job to one of them, ha-satan, whose name means literally "the adversary." God permits ha-satan to test Job's righteousness by taking away all that Job has. Job loses his children, his possessions, and eventually his health. Shortly after this Job's wife speaks her mind: "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." Next three of Job's friends come to be with him. They sit with him in his sorrow, holding their tongues for seven days. But eventually they open their mouths... Job starts, cursing the day he was born: "Let the day perish in which I was born,... Why is light given to one who cannot see the way, whom God has fenced in?" One of Job's friends – Eliphaz – pipes up: "You must have sinned. Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off?" Another friend, Bildad, recommends repentance, or else!!! "Such are the paths of all who forget God; the hope of the godless shall perish." Friend number 3 – Zophar – tells Job that his complaining deserves punishment. And finally some youngster named Elihu jumps in, saying God cannot be wicked, so it must be that Job is the wicked one. And in the midst of all this Job laments what has befallen him. "I loathe my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. I will say to God, ... you know that I am not guilty... Your hands fashioned and made me; and now you turn and destroy me." Later Job says of God: "If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him. God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!"

What we hear in all these voices are the human responses to what theologians call "theodicy," which is the apparent absence of God in the midst of suffering. The one lamenting cries out, "Why me?" And the typical responses – as we heard from Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar – are, "You have sinned. You are being punished. You are wicked." Now notice that each of the responses by Job, his wife, his friends, all define God in a certain light. By Job's wife's response God is contemptible, beyond loving relationship, one to simply be cursed. By the responses of Job's friends God is defined in terms of both judge and executioner. Job is being punished because in the courtroom of God he deserves it. By the language of Job God is defined as deaf and blind to Job's righteous life, and to his complaints. Indeed for Job God is capricious and

flighty and unreliable and plain gone. God is the abandoning parent. And for each individual their definition dictates their response to the suffering in their midst.

What is God's response to all these definitions? We heard this morning: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.... who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?... -- Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place... Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?" God shatters their definitions of God. For two chapters God responds to Job and his friends by redefining for them – in no uncertain terms – that God is master of all things, creator of life, orderer of the universe, source of all that is living and life-giving. God never addresses the issue of theodicy in the Book of Job. What we hear is God's definition of God.

In a way this powerful book asks us to consider WHO before asking "Why me?" in the face of suffering. We hear many definitions of God in the book of Job – including God's own definition, and they all are products of the community of faith that wrote this book. We know our scriptures to inspired by God, and yet as Anglicans we engage and embrace our scriptures with the knowledge that each book reflects the circumstances and understanding of a particular community of faith at a particular period of time attempting to articulate their life of faith through narrative and poetry. And what we hear from Uncle Job about God is going to be a bit different from what we hear from Great Aunt Genesis, cousin Acts, or one of the gospel siblings. Our task in our Christian walk is to listen to each of these voices and to integrate them (we cannot leave anyone in the corner – as much as we may want to) into our definition of God in all aspects of our lives. How we define God dictates our response to God. When things go wrong, a child's response to a punishing parent is very different from the child's response to a compassionate parent. This is especially true when we suffer.

And we know a little something about suffering. This has been an especially difficult year for us at St. Gabriel's. Right about now we may more than ever identify with Job on his ash-heap. When we got news of one of our parishioner's cancer earlier in the week I cannot tell you how many folks said to me, "What in the world??? What else? What have we done wrong? Why him? Why us?" This year has been extraordinarily challenging – and here I am speaking of our community of individuals and families. We have members who have lost their jobs. We have folks who have had to declare bankruptcy. We have folks who have lost their homes. We have lost precious members of our family to deaths too soon and too sudden. We have watched helplessly as some among us have been ravaged by ruthless and senseless disease. We cannot help but ask, "Why me? Why us?"

The book of Job does not try to answer that question for us. Instead it asks us to consider both definition [Who is God?] and our response to that definition. By God's grace we have a Bible-full of voices offering up an answer to that question, "Who is God?" Our God is indeed creator of all things. Our God is a lover of freedom, and of choice. Our God is a God of covenant, and therefore is all about relationship. Our God loves humankind so much that God became human in order to heal us of all strife and sin. Our God cares for humankind so deeply that God incarnate in Jesus Christ entered into the deepest pits of pain and suffering by dying on a cross, becoming our companion in our pain and loss. And by overcoming death Christ has given us the way of life and love in eternal relationship with God. The Christian definition of

God ultimately is that God is love. There can be no fuller understanding, and this holds for when we celebrate, and when we suffer.

What then are we to do with this definition of God as love? Well, perhaps as a community “why us?” becomes transformed from a question of self-pity into a question of self-identity. Perhaps because God is love, and there is pain and suffering in this world, the answer to “why us?” is that we are precisely why we are here, in this peculiar constellation that is St. Gabriel’s. If God is love then we are God’s loving response to the suffering of those amongst us. And let’s not kid ourselves; when one of us suffers, we ALL feel it. We know this. But in this community that is St. Gabe’s we are a constant reminder to one another that God has not abandoned us. In a sense we may be the response to the question of theodicy: God has not gone anywhere; we bear Christ within us, and so God sits beside you and across from you and sings in the choir and serves you at this table and others. “Why us?” is that we are precisely God’s graceful response to the suffering in our midst. And so yes we do walk for Melissa in the ALS walk, and we do clean out flooded basements, and we do call those who have recently lost loved ones, and we do tie knots of prayer into quilts, and we do pass on resumes to potential employers, and we do hold one another in our grief, and we do hold one another in our prayers. God IS love, and our response is God’s love given arms and legs and hands and breath and heartbeat. In this way we embody another kind of family reunion, one where we do not run from suffering but embrace the sufferer, where we do not turn away from or hide from the one in need but turn into them, where we see beyond the horizon of our own needs to attend to those amongst us with greater needs, where we come to know and make real the God who loves us and cares for us so much that he gave us... us. By my estimation there can be no more gracious gift for St. Gabriel’s than St. Gabriel’s. And there can be no finer family in which we can find union.