

## Faith in the Midst of Suffering

### Psalm 23

Our second scripture lesson this morning is the book of Job. Let me give you some context for the reading. One day, God encounters Satan and points out to him a righteous and blameless and faithful man named Job. "Of course Job is faithful," Satan says, "you shower him with blessings. I bet that if you take away everything from him, he will not remain faithful." So God allows Satan to take away everything from Job: his livestock, his family, his home and his health. Job cries out to God in anger and frustration, but God doesn't seem to answer. So Job cries out and again and again and continues to cry out until God answers him.

### Job 38:1-18

Job was suffering. He had lost everything. Now we may not know what it's like to lose everything, but we are certainly no strangers to suffering. We suffer from the loss of a friend or family member, we suffer from the frailness of our bodies, we suffer from addictions and mental illness, we suffer from broken relationships, and we suffer from stress. Jesus suffered. He was known as the man of sorrow. Suffering is pretty much guaranteed. So where does this green pastures and still waters thing come in? Where's the belly deep alfalfa and glacier streams when we're hurting? That doesn't seem very realistic. And you know what, if we read the Psalm like that, it's not.

But let's put it in context. The Israelites lived in, well, the desert. There are no alfalfa pastures in the desert or glacier streams. A shepherd's job was to find places where small patches of grass grew next to rocks to take care of the flock's immediate needs. And the sheep would work at getting the grass from beside the rocks. The sheep didn't have it easy, but their immediate needs were met. That's how it is with us. God doesn't promise us an easy life, but he promises to take care of us.

Then we get to the valley of the shadow of death. This is where Job was and where we sometimes find ourselves. Death and darkness were all around him. Job was angry and frustrated. And it's okay to be angry. For the man of patience, Job sure had a lot of angry outbursts. But God doesn't criticize him for that. Suffering for no apparent reason doesn't seem fair. And maybe it isn't. But God does criticize Job for one thing: his limited understanding. Job wasn't there when the foundations of the earth were laid. He didn't command the mornings or enter into the springs of the sea. God reminds Job that He is God and Job only has the vision of a man. As we know, there is somewhat of a spiritual wager going on about Job's faith. God wasn't causing Job's suffering, but he was allowing it to happen. But Job couldn't see this. Job's understanding was limited.

And so, like Job, we bombard God with a lot of questions. How could a good and just God allow this kind of suffering? Does God not care? I can't feel God taking care of me when I'm suffering; where is He? I wonder if maybe these are the wrong questions. Let's look back to the Psalm. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." God doesn't promise that our enemies – whatever they may be – will be taken away. No, instead He promises to take care of us in the presence of them.

Perhaps we should be asking how God is taking care of us even when we're struggling. Perhaps we should be asking what we learn from the book of Job.

So how does God take care of us when we're struggling? Well I think He works in subtle ways. We're likely not going to have an angel come cook for us or have a fish swallow us, but that doesn't mean He's not looking after our needs. Often it seems God works through other people. When Job has lost everything and fallen ill, His friends came and sat with him in silence for seven days. God used Job's friends in that instance. Who have been the hands and feet of God in our times of grief? Maybe our family has looked after us. Maybe our friends and mentors have supported us. Maybe our suffering has brought out the very best in those around us as they have risen to help us. God works in mysterious and sometimes unnoticed ways, but He doesn't stop working.

Now what do we learn from the story of Job? This story is about suffering – no doubt about that. But it is about more than suffering, it's about faith. As we learn at the beginning of the story, Job's faith is important to God. So important, in fact, that He's willing to engage with Satan to prove it. One person's faith is enormously important to God. How extraordinary is that? But as we learn, faith isn't about believing and trusting when things are easy and it makes sense to do so; faith is about believing and trusting when everything else says not to. Faith isn't easy. It's hard to hold let go and trust God, but it is hugely rewarding and freeing. So is there some great cosmic wager going on about your faith? I don't know; that's beyond what we can see. But what I do know is this: we are not alone and forgotten in our suffering. God does take care of us. And although our understanding is limited, our faith, no matter how unimportant it might seem, is greatly important to God. Amen.