



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Where Were You?" (Part 1) — Job 38:1-7

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**M**onths ago, when we were planning this sermon series, it seemed like such a great idea to preach a sermon from the Book of Job. It's often like that when it's me alone with my Bible and my computer. But as soon as I start to work on a sermon based on the Book of Job, it starts to feel like one of the dumbest ideas I've had in a long time. I guess it's too late to change the scripture reading for today!

Over the next two weeks, (that's right, I'm going to prolong your suffering beyond today), we're going to take a look at the story of a man in the Bible by the name of Job who had a wonderful life until the day it started to unravel. His life collapses in on him and his initial reaction is to respond with amazing confidence in the goodness and generosity of God.

But as things continue to get worse for Job, he eventually ends up sitting in silence for an extended period of time until all of a sudden he erupts in anger and frustration. Job cries out to God. He demands that God come down and explain Himself. Job wants to know what in the world is going on in his life and why all these terrible things are happening to him. Job is not going to get an answer to those questions. But what he is going to receive is the gift of God's presence—and God's presence will eventually be more than enough for Job.

God will not answer Job's questions. What God will do is come and talk with him. God will ask Job a lot of questions. It will not be a tender conversation but in the end, it will be God's presence in Job's life and not the answers to his questions that will ultimately bring Job peace.

It's guaranteed that one day, all of us will experience suffering, suffering that we won't really understand. It's true that we can sometimes figure out why we're experiencing pain and difficulty in our lives, but sometimes our suffering is simply inexplicable.

For the next two weeks we are going to touch on this very tender and often vexing question of human suffering. Where is God when we're in pain? If God is all-powerful and if He loves us with a love that has no boundaries, why doesn't He do something about all the pain in our lives—let alone all the pain and injustice and poverty and suffering in the world?

Chapters 38 to 41 of the Book of Job are some of the most amazing passages in one of the most challenging books in the Bible. This book is a literary masterpiece. But here's what you and I need to understand: Job is a book for grown-ups. There are no easy answers in this book. In fact, there are no easy answers to our questions about human suffering

in the Bible. Job's friends demand that he give them simple, straightforward explanations for why he's suffering. "Come on Job, what did you do? You had to do something really bad to deserve all this!"

God will eventually confront Job's friends for pursuing such a simplistic line of thinking. There are no easy answers to the question of human suffering. But here's what is absolutely clear, straightforward and simple: the scriptures clearly teach that God promises to be present with us in the midst of our pain and suffering. God wants us to be absolutely confident of that. God is with us when life comes crashing in on us. Whatever the source of our suffering is, whether it's known to us or not, God promises to be with us in the middle of it all.

Job is a book for grown-ups. I did a little online search to see if I could find the Book of Job for kids. I wanted to see if someone had been able to boil this epic story down to its kernel of truth and make it understandable to children. I did a Google search. I typed in the words "Book of Job and kids" and found "Dora the Explorer's Big Book About Jobs". I finally found one book on Amazon.com called, "Tried and True, Job". (That would make a good title for this sermon). There was one person who reviewed that book on Amazon and they gave it one star.

**T**hat's probably the correct rating for a book like this. You can't write a simplified version of the Book of Job. This is a book for adults. It is the story of a good man, an ethical man, who lost nearly everything that he had. He lost everything he owned and he was a wealthy guy. All ten of his children were killed in a windstorm that knocked down the house where they were having a party. It's the story of a man who does not understand why he's suffering and because he doesn't understand, he cries out to God for an explanation.

It's the story of a man who sought to do good things with his life, but one day his life comes crashing down. And Job demands that God give him an explanation. He's done nothing to deserve what's happened to him. In fact, the good life he's lived should have protected him...or so he thought. The Book of Job is the story of a man who had to endure the horribly unhelpful advice of his friends and the totally unsupportive counsel of his wife. Job experiences a series of catastrophes that would cause most of us to curl up on the kitchen floor in the fetal position. But the Book of Job is about more than suffering. It's fundamentally an epic story about the fight to believe. It's the story of a man who struggles to trust that God is indeed the good God we are told that He is.

Here's what I'm coming to know and trust about the God we meet in Jesus Christ. We have a God who is not like the impassible deities of human history. He's not like the unsympathetic gods of the Roman and Greek pantheon. We have a God who weeps with those who weep. We have a God who knows from personal experience in Jesus Christ, what it is like to suffer

unjustly and without explanation. Jesus Christ cried out from the cross to God the Father, "Why have You forsaken me?" God, in Jesus Christ, knows from personal experience what it is like to suffer. I'm convinced that God wants you and me to know that He is with us and loves us—even in the middle of the most terrible and painful moments in our lives.

So here's the challenge of the Book of Job. Will we learn to love God for the good God that He is—even when we do not receive an answer to the question, "Why am I suffering?" or "Why are they suffering?" Will we trust God? Will we continue to love God even if we don't get an explanation for why God has allowed us to experience the loss of a loved one, the loss of our health, the loss of a career, a job, a marriage?

Recently, ABC news had a story about Rick and Kay Warren. On July 14<sup>th</sup>, Pastor Rick Warren from Saddleback Church in southern California returned to the pulpit, with his wife, for the first time since their 27-year old son committed suicide earlier this year. Some of you know from personal experience what it's like to lose a child or a friend or a grandchild or a parent in this way. What struck me is what Rick and Kay Warren said about their struggle to trust, their struggle to believe that God did not abandon their son and has not abandoned them. This is the same lesson that Job eventually learns. Here's what Rick and Kay said in the news report.

Kay Warren: *"Not for one second did God forsake my son and not for one moment has God forsaken me."*

Rick Warren: *"For 27 years I prayed every day of my life for God to heal my son's mental*

*illness. It just didn't make sense as to why this prayer was not being answered. But I would rather walk with God and have my questions unanswered than to have all my questions answered and not walk with God."*

"I would rather walk with God and have my questions unanswered than to have all my questions answered and not walk with God." How do you grow a faith like that? How do you believe that God is indeed a good and powerful and loving God when something like that happens in your life? Most of us grow a faith like that in the middle of very difficult and challenging circumstances.

Once again, here is the main issue posed to us by the Book of Job: Will we learn to love God for the good God that He is, even when we do not understand what is happening in our lives and we do not receive an answer to the question, "Why am I suffering?" or "Why are they suffering?" Will we trust God? Will we continue to love God even if we don't get an explanation for why God has allowed us to suffer? Job learns this lesson in the most unexpected way. He learns this as he cries out to God for an answer.

If you go back and read chapters 30 and 31 you'll meet a man who is lost in despair and grief. Chapter 30 has what is perhaps the most painful of Job's laments. It shows him in his greatest state of weakness. His wife and his friends have abandoned him, so he pours out his heart. In chapter 31 he once again claims his innocence. He makes one final attempt to prove to God, and to anyone else who will give him a hearing, that he is not guilty. He has done *nothing* to deserve what has happened to him.

In chapter 31 Job makes a list. He asserts that he has never abused his servants and has had compassion on the poor and the weak. He has been zealous in his devotion to God. His motives have always been pure. He has not lusted after younger women or coveted the property of others. He has always told the truth and has never concealed any wrong. And when he is done making his list, Job swears an oath of innocence and demands that God agree with him. This is the desperate cry of a man who needs to meet with his God and to hear from Him.

These amazing chapters show how a human being can struggle in the face of tremendous suffering that is physical, emotional, social and spiritual and still be a person of faith—a person who is able to sustain a quest for God. Job's complaint itself is an act of faith and the ability to continue to act in faith, even in this way, enables him to face the deepest tragedies of his life. Job keeps his focus on God and continues to demand that God show up and talk with him. That is an act of faith. Job is crying out to a God whom he continues to believe is real. His complaints are an expression of his faith in God. He has not chosen the easy route. He has not abandoned his faith and become a cynic or an atheist. He cries out to God for an answer.

Job learns to trust that God is indeed a good and trustworthy God and he learns this lesson when God shows up and asks him not one question, but 63 questions. Here are a few of those questions. Job chapter 38, verse 1. *"Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: '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 determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?'"*

That is not a comforting response. That is not the response Job was hoping for. That's not the kind of response most of us would want to get. But that is the response God knows that Job needs. Job is struggling to trust that God is indeed the loving and powerful God we are told that He is. How do these 63 questions bring Job to a place of peace and deeper trust in God?

The History Channel's has a great documentary called, "The Most Extreme Airports." The History channel has come up with the ten most challenging airports in the world. I've flown in and out of three of them. Not bad. The fourth most extreme airport is St. Maarten in the Caribbean. The main challenge that makes it an extreme airport is on departure. The pilot must make a steep climb out on takeoff to clear the mountains that are on the departure end of the runway. That's one of the main goals you have as a pilot: don't hit the mountain in front of you.

On the other side of the runway, the approach to the airport takes place directly over the beach. Hundreds of people hang out on that beach directly under the final approach to the airport. The wheels of these massive airplanes pass mere feet over the heads of the people on the beach. It's awesome! This airport is definitely on my to do list. This beach is probably the

greatest airplane viewing spot in the world. The owners of a bar on the beach stick a surfboard in the sand, tail first. And every day they write on that surfboard the arrival and departure times of every flight in and out of that airport.

There's a pastime on that beach that's called "riding the fence." Check this out. The end of the runway is only about 100 feet from the beach. So when a 747 taxis into position for takeoff and throttles its four huge Rolls Royce jet engines up to full power, it creates a jet blast with the force of a hurricane. And that jet blast is pointed directly at the beach. A pilot has to get 740,000 pounds of airplane, people, luggage, fuel and cargo from zero to 180 miles an hour in a very short amount of time. And once she gets that plane in the air, the pilot has to clear the mountains on the departure end of the airport. So like any pilot does on a short runway with an obstacle to clear, she stands on the brakes and throttles the engines up at full power. Doing this creates an unbelievable blast of air out the back of that plane.

There's a warning sign on the beach that has a drawing of an airplane taking off with a person being blown into the air by the jet blast. Locals call it "Riding the Fence." Here's what they do. They get a tight grip on the chain link fence between the beach and the runway and hold on for the ride of their life. (Okay, who wants to do this with me?) Sometimes cars on the road between the beach and the fence have been blown off their wheels.

In this documentary, they interviewed one guy who had his eye on a 747 taxiing into position. He turns to the camera and says, "It's going to be interesting to feel the jet blast of a 747 against my body."

**W**e'll see what happens." So as the camera records it all we watch as 740,000 pounds goes from 0 to 180 mph. And we watch people holding onto that fence with all they've got. The camera-man can barely keep the camera steady. Afterwards this same guy comes off the fence, pulls down his little homemade face mask, rubs his bleary-eyes and says, "That was kind of fun. It kind of hurt at first but it was amazing."

An experience like that can remind you how small we actually are. Some of us might think it should remind us of how stupid we can be. But being in the presence of something that powerful can be humbling and that is often a very good and helpful experience for us to have.

In Job chapter 38, continuing into chapter 39, and chapters 40 and 41, Job rides the fence as God throttles up on him. Reading these four chapters is like watching God stand on the brakes as He unloads not one question, not two questions, but 63 different questions on Job. Job's been demanding an audience with God and an explanation for why his life is such a mess. He doesn't get an explanation from God. What he gets is 63 questions and a speech that goes on for four chapters.

The first question God asks him is, "Where were you Job when I laid the foundations of the earth? Where were you?" (Wasn't there! Nope! I wasn't there when you laid the foundations of the earth.)

*"Job! Have you commanded the morning since your days began and caused the dawn to know its place? Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and where is the place of darkness? Surely you know, for you were born then, and the number of your days is great!"*

In the middle of this amazing speech Job basically says, "Okay, I get it, God."

But God stands on the brakes and keeps going at full power. *"Job, can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion? Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars and spreads its wings toward the south? Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified, Job?"*

One of my favorite questions comes in verse 35 of chapter 38. I hope none of you have been struck by lightning since this will create a complicated pastoral moment for me. God says to Job, *"Do the lightening bolts check in with you? Do they report for duty to you Job before they hit the ground?"*

Wow! Job comes to God with a demand for an explanation for his suffering. Why is this happening to me? What he gets is an epic speech that goes on for four chapters! God doesn't answer his questions or offer him anything that would appear on the surface as comfort.

He asks 63 questions that fundamentally remind Job that he is a finite human being who will not fully understand how God is at work in the world. It's a humbling experience for Job. God has lots to say about Job that is extremely affirming. God does not rebuke Job for making his complaints.

But neither will God answer all of Job's questions. The only answer Job will receive from God is God's presence with him and for Job, that will be enough. What changes Job is God's presence in his life. At one point Job says, "I had heard about you, God, but

now I see you with my eyes." God showed up in Job's life, in the middle of his pain and suffering, and that made all the difference.

Job is a man who has struggled to maintain his integrity. He has honestly expressed his frustrations and anger. He is a man who continues to pursue God even when he does not understand why he's going through these terrible experiences. Even his demand that God come down and explain Himself reflects that he has not lost his faith in God—although he has lost nearly everything else. Ultimately, this incredible, personal encounter with God changes Job profoundly. He's humbled by it. At the end of the story Job is a man at peace, even though he did not have his questions answered.

How do you grow a faith like that? The reason I think Rick and Kay Warren can say what they said is because they know that the God they worship is a God of love and a God who can be trusted. They don't just know that as a set of intellectual convictions, though they are that. They know Him personally. They have come to trust that the God they meet in Jesus Christ, the God who emptied Himself of everything but love, who suffered and died on a cross that we might have life, is the true and living God.

This communion table tells all of us about the God we meet in Jesus Christ. We have a God who shares our suffering. He has suffered so that when we suffer, our suffering will end up making us more like Jesus Christ.

There is much more I want to say about Job, but that will have to wait until next week.