



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

August 11, 2013

"Where Were You?" (Part 2) — Job 30:16-31

The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw

God asks people a lot of questions in the Bible. I think you're beginning to realize that. It's certainly true that you and I have lots of questions for God, but it's also true that God has some important questions to ask you and me.

One of the reasons God asks questions is simply because He wants to invite us into a deeper relationship with Himself. That should not be surprising since our God is all about being in community. That is who He is at the core of His being. Christians believe that our one God is a community of persons—Father, Son, and Spirit. One of the ways God invites us into a deeper experience of that community of immeasurable love is to ask us questions.

God wants to have a relationship with you and me. Think of that. The One who made us and knows us the best wants to talk with us! This summer we're talking a look at 12 questions that God asks people in the Bible in the hope that these 12 questions will be an invitation into a deeper relationship between you and this One who loves you with a love that knows no end.

Since I'm prolonging your suffering today, we're actually going to end up looking at only 11 questions this summer. We're still

working on the question God asked Job last week. "Where were you, Job, when I was creating the world?" God not only asked Job that one question, He asked him 63 questions over four chapters beginning in Job 38.

Job is a good man who has experienced tremendous suffering and Job wants to know why. He demands that God come down and explain Himself. Job does not get an answer to his questions. What he does receive is something even better than answers to his questions. He gets the gift of God's presence in his life and, in the end, God's presence will be enough for Job. Going through a grieving process never returns us to the person we were before we went through the loss. Job is not the same man he was at the beginning of his story. At the end, he is a man at peace.

What was just read for us from Job chapter 30 is Job's final and most painful lament. He pours out his heart to God. He demands answers and he demands vindication. Some would call that "lack of faith". I call that "faith in action". You don't make demands of a God you don't believe in.

In the midst of his terrible suffering, Job does not take the easier path and become an atheist or a cynic. He presses God with

his questions. God has allowed terrible things to come into Job's life but God will not tell him why. God can't explain to Job why he is suffering, if Job is to become a truly great man who will learn to trust God for the good and faithful God that he is.

We know why Job is suffering, if we've read the opening chapter of the book of Job. God has allowed the evil one to wreak havoc in Job's life. God does so for reasons that are known only to God. What Job discovers is what you and I need to discover. And many of us here today have some very important knowledge that Job did not have. Many of us know Jesus Christ and because we know the heart and character of God by seeing God in Jesus, we know that God is with us in the middle of our pain and suffering. God shows up when we're hurting. He is not an unfeeling God. Our God is a God who weeps with those who weep.

We have a God who knows from personal experience what it is like to suffer unjustly. He knows that because God Incarnate suffered on the cross. Jesus Christ suffered not so we would never suffer, but that when we do suffer, we know that God is at work in us to make us more like Christ.

Here's what I want to do today. I want to help you think through a set of ideas that I'm finding helpful as I look at the pain and suffering in the world and as I experience pain and loss and disappointment in my own life and in the lives of those I love.

I've thought about writing a book called "Ten Greek Words That Will Change Your Life". If I wrote a book like that, one of the ten words would have to be this one. It's the Greek word "peirasmos".

After one sermon at First Pres. Berkeley when I talked about this fascinating word, a man from Greece came up to me and challenged my pronunciation of this word. He said, quite forcefully, "It's pronounced 'piresMOS'".

Greek speakers can sometimes sound like they're yelling at you even when they're just trying to say "thank you!" The Greek word for "thank you" is pronounced in modern Greece as "Ef-charis-STO", with the emphasis on the last syllable. "Ef-charis-STO". But here's what really interested me about the way the word for "thank you" is pronounced in Athens today.

"Ef-charis-STO" is spelled "e-U-c-h-a-r-i-s-t-o", which is the word from which we get the English word "Eucharist" which is the term many in the Christian community use to describe the Lord's Table. Because it is at the Lord's Table that we give thanks. The Greek letter "phi" is not in the word for "thank you." There is an "upsilon" in that word. So why do they pronounce that word "ef-charis -STO"?

That's just the way language works. Languages evolve. The way words are pronounced changes.

Okay, I know this is a bit of a detour but it has bugged me ever since that guy got in my grill in Berkeley and told me that this Greek word is pronounced "pires-MOS!" Well, that might be how you pronounce this word on the streets of Athens in 2013, but no one knows how first century Greek was pronounced.

So this word might be pronounced "pires-MOS" in 2013 Athens, but we're going to pronounce it "pie-ras-mos" because that's the way my learned seminary professor pronounced it. So let's learn how to pronounce it my way. Pie-Ros-Mos.

Peirasmos has two meanings. It can mean to tempt and it can mean to test. Peirasmos can refer to a test that is given for the purpose of making someone fall flat on their face. That kind of a test is really a temptation and it is designed to destroy us.

Peirasmos can also refer to a test that is given for the purpose of determining the true nature or character of the one being tested. The testing process not only reveals the true nature and character of the person being tested, but this kind of test also shapes the character of the person going through the trial. A test is used by God to improve a person's character and strengthen their faith.

The word peirasmos appears in the prayer that we said together last week at the end of the Communion service. The word peirasmos shows up in the sixth petition where Jesus encourages us to pray when we're praying the Lord's Prayer.

"Our Father who are in Heaven, hallowed be Your Name. Your Kingdom come, Your will be

done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Here it comes: *"And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the Kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen!"*

Whenever we pray the Lord's Prayer we ask God to lead us not into temptation. That's a bad translation because God does not "tempt" us. James 1:13 tells us that, *"No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one."*

God does not tempt us but here's what is true. God does allow tests to come into our lives. But the tests that come from God are not designed to destroy us, although sometimes it feels like we're not going to survive those peirasmos moments. God brings these peirasmos moments into our lives, or allows them, to test us; to let us see what we're made out of; to improve what we're made out of; and to show us how trustworthy our God can be.

The issue of trust has been in play since chapter two of the Bible. In the Garden of Eden, the evil one convinces the first woman and man that God is holding out on them and that He can't be trusted. The evil one says to the woman, "Did God really say that you must not eat of any of the trees in the Garden?" God did say anything like that. God said the man and woman could eat from any tree in the Garden, except for one. And sadly, that one tree is the one the woman and the man fixate on. They stare at it. They walk around it. They reflect on its beauty as they sit on a grassy hill nearby.

They think about it. They wonder what the fruit would taste like. They wonder why they can't eat fruit from that one. They start to obsess about it.

It's at that point that the evil one says to the woman, "Don't be such a scaredy-cat. You're not going to die if you eat the fruit on that tree. God's keeping it from you because He doesn't want you to know what He knows. Go ahead, eat it, and you will become like God. You'll be able to live independently of Him. You can finally be free."

So, the evil one convinces the woman and the man that God cannot be trusted. He convinces them that God doesn't have their best interests at heart. The woman and the man fail to trust God and immediately their world is shattered. They are not set free. They become painfully aware of their inadequacies and how vulnerable they are. They start to cover themselves up and hide themselves...and we've been doing that ever since. Trust is at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. It's at the heart of what it means to be a human being.

Will we trust God that He is indeed the good God that Jesus tells us He is—even when we do not get answers to our questions about why we're suffering or why others are in pain?

To teach us deeper trust, God sometimes allows trials to come into our lives. God does not tempt us. He is not out to destroy us. But He does test us. I remember the time I was backcountry camping with some friends in the middle of winter. I love snow camping. It can get super cold but all your gear stays completely clean. We were up on Carson Pass in the Sierras

and we got caught in a huge blizzard and as we tried to find our way back to our camp one of the young adults who was on the trip turned to our experienced leader and asked, "What are we doing out here?" And my mountaineering friend calmly said, "We're seeing what we're made out of."

That's one of the reasons God allows peirasmos moments to come into our lives? He wants us to see what we're made out of and He wants to strengthen what we're made out of. God does not tempt us, but God does test us.

As we think about the tests that come into our lives it is really important for us to consider where these peirasmos moments come from. God allowed Job to be tested but where did Job's pain and suffering come from? It didn't come from God.

Every peirasmos moment is at least allowed by a good, loving and powerful God. He allows these peirasmos moments to come into our lives and some of them come directly from His hand. God allows other peirasmos moments to come into our lives, but they don't come from Him. They come directly from the hand of the evil one.

Some of these moments of suffering are the results of the wild processes of the planet we live on. In California, sometimes the earth shakes and sometimes the homes we build near the fault lines come crashing down on us. The same forces that created the mountains we love to ski on are the same forces that can knock down our houses. We live on a wild planet. Some of these moments of suffering are the telltale signs of the fact that this beautiful planet is broken. The

earth is not functioning as our God originally created it to function. On this broken planet, my friend's ten-year-old son gets cancer and dies. This is not the planet God originally created.

Now, buckle your seat belts. This is going to get rough. The source of much of the pain and suffering in the world comes directly from us. Our selfishness is a significant source of the pain and suffering in our own lives and in the lives of other people. There is a lot of suffering that happens in the world that is caused directly and indirectly by human selfishness. We discard our computers, not caring about how they are recycled. They are shipped to other countries and are collected in landfills and mountains of discarded computers leech toxic materials. The poor, who live nearby scavenge through our discarded equipment. Toxic materials leak into the ground water that pregnant women drink. They give birth to children with birth defects because of the contamination of food and water supplies. Vast amounts of human suffering has its source in us.

When we see people going through terrible suffering we cry out to God. "Why are You allowing such terrible things to happen?" I understand that cry. I join people in that cry. We wail and ask God for an answer. We question that if God were indeed a good and loving and powerful God, why does He allow such suffering to occur?

I think we have to grapple with the fact that God regularly says to us, "How can YOU live like you do and neglect people in need? How can you sit idly by and watch people live on less than one or two dollars a day?"

We probably spent half a trillion dollars on Christmas presents each year when for less than 10% of that amount, 45 million dollars, every person on the planet could have access to clean drinking water.

There is a video called, "God on Trial". It is a very important video about a group of victims of the holocaust who put God on trial. Job does something like that in chapter 30. But when we look at all the pain and suffering in the world, could it be that we are the ones who should be in the dock? The call of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is for you and me to stand with people who suffer and seek justice for them. We are called to stand with people in pain because that is where God stands.

Let's get back to the main issue the Book of Job poses. Will we learn to trust God when all of our questions are not answered about why we are suffering or why others are suffering? Here's a better translation of the sixth petition in the Lord's Prayer from my friend Darrell Johnson, who is the pastor of First Baptist Church in Vancouver, British Columbia. Jesus teaches us to pray:

"In our time of testing, as You lead us to the test, which is something You must do, deliver us from the evil one who wants to take that test, that peirasmos moment and turn the test into a temptation to get us to believe all the wrong things about ourselves and about You. Deliver us from the one who wants to destroy our trust in You and shatter our confidence that you are indeed the good and faithful God we meet in Jesus Christ."

As I close today, I want to tell you about Zachary Bunnell. Zach was the ten-year-old son of Doug

and Laurie Bunnell, who are good friends of mine. Zach died of cancer when he was ten years old. I had the honor of leading the memorial service for Zach at the church in Berkeley where Doug and I were associate pastors. Thirty to forty of Zach's friends gathered up on the chancel at the front of the church. I will never forget their faces illuminated by the hundreds of candles on the communion table.

During that memorial service most of the words that I had to speak were not mine but the words of Doug, Zachary's dad. I want to share with you the wisdom of a father who learned to trust God even when all his questions were not answered. About four months before Zach died, Doug wrote this in his journal. He wrote the entry at a camp for families caring for children with cancer and he titled the entry, "Future Hope".

"One of the good realizations for me at camp was the bedrock reminder of what I know to be true. I was able to get my early morning coffee, take one back to Laurie, and then go on a walk. On some walks I screamed, but not until I get a bit away from camp. On some I cried, and on most I just prayed and listened. During this time I spend time going down to the foundation of what I know to be true: we are loved by the creator of the universe who will never leave us nor forsakes us. In the vernacular, we'll all be okay.

"As much as I love Zach, that is nothing compared to how much God loves Zach. As simply horrible as this feels, God is still present, Jesus still loves us, and the Spirit will not leave us. As awful as it may get, God's promises are still there.

"The other bedrock I have been going back to is the promise of heaven. I was hoping the books I was reading would list some of them, but they just kept referring to the promises without mentioning them. I had forgotten my Bible, but on the last day found one in the desk drawer. As we spoke with Zach I wanted to be able to stand on what we know to be true about heaven. I was able to affirm to him that the thing we know for sure is that Jesus will be there waiting for him.

"We then read the stuff at the end of Revelation about the New Jerusalem where there will be no pain and no more tears. Zach liked all that part, but when I got to the part about there being all light and no night, he was worried. He mentioned how comfy his bed was and how much he enjoyed being in bed. We talked about how the light was from God's glory, and certainly there might be beds.

"We also spoke about the resurrection. That he would have a new body that wasn't in pain, wasn't tired, and could see. We all thought that was pretty cool. His worry then was getting there and missing us. We were able to answer what one of the couples at camp had mentioned to their daughter before she passed away. They told her that Jesus would pick her up, take her on a tour, and by the time she was done they would be there. I thought that was a pretty good answer.

"We can have hope in the midst of sorrow because we believe in something that is unchangeable no matter what happens to us. We have hope in the midst of our grief NOT because we hope that someday our lives will be the way we want them to be.

Our hope is in the unchanging promises of a God who loves us and has proven that love to us because He sent his Son to this broken planet. We live in a world that doesn't quite work right. It's broken. So our hope is in the One whose love for us never changes no matter what happens to us."

About six weeks before Zach died, Doug wrote this. "My last model is God Himself, who watched his son go to death. All I know is that God knows what it is like to watch a child suffer, and He knows what it is like to stand alongside completely out of control... Yet [God] also knows that great truth that death is not the final word, and the prospect of eternity is the real deal. As well, He is always right by us, closer than we would ever imagine. So we wait and we hope."

This is the lesson Job learned. Sometimes we don't have answers to all our questions. But the gospel of Jesus Christ enables us to affirm that God always loves us and cares for us. God is right there with us when bad things happen. God never leaves us. God is close to the broken-hearted. God's heart breaks when terrible things happen. It's okay to feel sad and scared. Jesus knew what it was like to be scared. When He was afraid He prayed for courage and strength.

Let me close with one final quote from my friend Doug. "One of the things that has been ringing through my head of late has been that Zach has been a gift since February 4th, 1994. He has never been an entitlement. He was a gift then, and he is a gift now. It is ripping my heart out to think of parting with the gift, but I am so

thankful for the gift...I have no regrets.

"I have been thinking back to all the heinous choices that have been a part of this whole adventure, beginning with the one Laurie and I made over 12 years ago to give this whole parenting thing a shot. If I had it to do all over again, sitting in that tacky hut in the Rainier RV park... knowing all that I know today, I would do it again. As much pain and hurt that has been a part of all this it has been completely overshadowed by the gift and joy that Zach is in our life."

Those are the words of a disciple of Jesus Christ, who is learning to trust the faithfulness and goodness of God even when all his questions are not answered. May that be said of all of us as well.