

Sermon “Living with the Mystery”
Kirk of St James
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A number of years ago the movie *Shakespeare in Love* came out. It was an imagining of the life of Shakespeare and how he came to write some of his works. Throughout the movie whenever he came up against a difficult question of how these impossible situations he was facing would be resolved he answered, “I don’t know, it’s a mystery.” That line has come to define a good portion of my life, I often have no idea how things are going to turn it out—it is a mystery. Today in our Old Testament passage we have Job struggling with one of the biggest mysteries of all. The book of Job is the original episode of law and order where we essentially see Job put God on trial for perceived offences. For the last thirty seven chapters, Job, his friends and family have been debating and discussing, and our passage this morning is the culmination of that process. While Job was demanding an answer to the question of suffering, he was likely not expecting it to come in the form of poetry, yet here we have it—one of the most beautifully poetic passages in the Bible.

At the heart of the discussion is the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people.” It is a question all of us has wrestled with, and perhaps on more than one occasion. Now in my reading this week I came across a reflection by Andrew Foster Connors, who is a presbyterian minister in Baltimore, Maryland. He gives the illustration of a hospital room, where everything has a place. The chair in the corner, close enough for a visitor to sit and talk. The rolling table, holding the cup and straw. A white board on the wall with the name of the nurse or Dr. looking after our loved one. Maybe flowers on the windowsill, or a cell phone within easy reach. “Inside this room, the church and its messengers also have a place: comforting the afflicted, offering prayers to our God—we are mediators between the physical and spiritual

world...This is the place assigned to God's representatives: one foot inside the cold, sterile hospital room, one foot inside the mystery that governs our meaning. But by its definition, what is mystery cannot always be arranged in the place of our choosing. Try as we might, we cannot always bring order where there is chaos. We cannot always bring explanation to confusion, we cannot always arrange the rooms of our lives the way we want them. In these places of chaos, where our hearts deepest yearning shouts down our rational selves, we sometimes cry out to God."

For Job, the framework that held his entire life and belief system was one that was familiar to both ancient Israel and the surrounding cultures, and it may also sound familiar to us today. Job believed that if you did what you were supposed to—that if you lived a good life, were obedient to faith, and followed God's commands then you would be blessed with good things. You would have health, wealth, and everything you could possibly need. The flip side of this belief system was that if you were bad, if you sinned, if you were disobedient then bad things would happen—illness, poverty, and ruin. "This legalistic moral framework focused on right and wrong, and was considered the essence of justice. People get what they deserve and reap what they sow." The fact that Job had so many bad things befall him, including losing his home, his wealth and his children meant that he had done something wrong. It makes it far easier to live in the world if you believe that bad things happen to people because of something they have done.

Here is the crux of the matter. Job knows that he has been blameless—he has done nothing wrong and therefore in his belief system what is happening now is unjustified and undeserved. His friends on the other hand believe that he must have done something wrong to be suffering so much. Job demands an answer from God as to why all this is happening. How could

he go from such a blessed state of having everything he could ever want or need, to having nothing and living in absolute chaos. It is incredibly challenging when the framework from which we live our lives becomes upended. It is hard to shake the feeling that when bad things happen it must be because we deserve it, or because we are not good enough people. What Job demonstrates is that we need a new way of looking at the world, a bigger framework.

Unfortunately as in many lessons we learn in life, this one is particularly challenging because it is something that does not come up when things are good—it often strikes us when we are at our most broken or sorrowful.

Job is trying to make sense of the chaos, he is trying to sort his life back out and the only way he can see that happening is if God answers the question of why he is suffering, even though he has done nothing wrong. In this moment God bursts forth into poetry, reminding Job that he has made his world far too small. “Were you there when I laid the foundation of the earth...on what were its bases sunk or who laid the cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”

God is a God of the cosmos. Much like Job’s friends we do not like puzzling over questions that do not make sense. “But that is what the church does when it is at its best—it summons mysteries that are not easily explained; it invites people into these mysteries, never in control of where those mysteries will lead or of what will happen to the people caught up in them...mystery according to Job, is located primarily not in what is exceptional, but in what is natural, regular and known—the morning stars, the sea, the womb, the clouds. They invite Job, and us, to ponder the breadth of the depth of this God with whom we must struggle.”

We all experience chaos in our lives, and we are forced to face situations that feel unjust and unfair. We get sick, or someone we love gets sick. An accident, a loss of something

important like a loved one. It is perfectly natural that we struggle with that, and we wonder why it happens. I have gone periods where I was angry at God, where I blamed him for what was happening, or feeling like things were unfair. Being human is complicated. There are situations that happen that cannot be explained, justified, or easily labelled—they are simply chaos, and when we face chaos more than anything we want to bring order.

Often our faith will not give us the direct answers that we seek—and to be fair Job never received a clear answer when he asked. There is a statement that says, “Perhaps the churches vocation has less to do with explaining the root of that mystery and more to do with making space for that kind of mystery to be known and shared” and that is true .

We make space in our lives for mystery. When we see people struggle or undergo difficult things we sit with them, we support them, and we act as a reminder that even amongst chaos the world rests on the firm foundation of God’s love. “For ultimately the content of God’s answer to Job does not matter nearly enough as much as this: God answers. That is the miracle. The chaos is still there, but so is God. And that is enough.”

Friends, for whatever struggles, anxiety, and chaos that exists in your life, I pray you find, the support of friends and loved ones, and the knowledge that through whatever we face God walks alongside of us. I pray you find rest through this summer, a lifting of burdens, and peace in the mystery. Whenever it gets to be too much, that you find the loving arms of the people around you to help hold you. Together we live into the mystery and chaos of the world knowing we are loved by God and one another.