

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

Making Our Way Through the Center

Job 1.1; 2.1-10 and Romans 5.1-5

October 8, 2006

Amy Jacks Dean



We gather in worship this day celebrating new life. You've now formally met Tristan, and we've made commitments to his parents and to him that we would do our part that he might be "Raised Right" (to borrow Ferrol Sams' phrase). And we will end the service today celebrating faithful service. We will give thanks for Buck and the many ways he has lived and led in this place. And right in the smack dab middle of these bookend celebrations and thanksgivings, we meet good 'ole Job. He comes to us as he always does – complicated and troublesome, depressing and sad and perplexing. In order to understand the Job story, we have to get in touch with our own sufferings. We have to have at the very least, at one time or another, wondered: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" We have to have asked the question at least once in our lives: "Why me?" We have to have shed a tear or two (or a bucket or two) in our day while letting our minds race with those thoughts: "I've lived a good life. I've tried my best." Or perhaps the thoughts have been more like: "I haven't lived a good life, and I deserve exactly what I'm getting, but still – enough is enough – Somebody, make the pain go away." No one has walked in Job's shoes, but from time to time, we have tried them on. And that is how we hear the Job story. We hear the Job story from those moments when we have tried on his shoes of suffering – even if it's just that we have barely stuck our toes into one shoe.

Oh, sure, we come to this place especially, and we act like everything is fine. Better than fine, even. We are happy and everybody we know is happy and life is great. It

is a lie that we live because we do not want anyone to know our pain and our suffering. It makes us look weak. We hate pity. But the truth is there is brokenness in all of us and this sanctuary is supposed to be a place where we can put the broken pieces back together. At least until we fall apart again. But we never get a chance to do that because we never admit that we are broken in the first place. We certainly don't admit it to one another and sometimes we don't admit it to ourselves and we think we can even keep this little tidbit from God. And some of you hate hearing this. You live in some kind of ideal world where everything is ok, and we're supposed to come here each week for something uplifting. And you think that if we just don't talk about it, then maybe it's not so, or at least it may just go away on its own. That is called "denial," and it will get you in trouble every time. The truth is that we have, from time to time, tried on Job's shoes. As I read the Job story and the passage from Romans on one side of my desk, I opened up another book on the other side of my desk. It was our church directory. And I read through every single name listed there. And among all the joy and celebration and hope, and make no mistake, that is there, but the pages of our church directory were filled with: **grief, loneliness, old-age and all the illnesses that accompany that stage of life, failed surgeries, failed marriages, wayward children, debilitating treatment, mental illness, cancer, Parkinson's, stroke, paralysis, depression, loss of hopes and dreams, addiction, folks who have had to live their lives in seclusion for fear of harassment or worse, isolation, diabetes, financial struggles, miscarriages, heart attack, lung failure, those who want to have children and can't, those who desire a companion and mate, those who have been abused and those who are the abuser, those who**

cheat and those who have been cheated, loss of job, eating disorders, and shame.

And this is just what I know. What about all the unspoken suffering?

We must learn to talk about our sufferings – to admit our woundedness. Did you catch it in the text today? With all of the ranting and raving that Job did – go back and read it some time – it says that *in all this Job did not sin with his lips*. And did you hear the Romans passage? *And we boast in our sufferings . . .* [only then will we make our way to] *hope, and hope does not disappoint us*.

“In this life . . . there are wounds that do not heal. There are losses that are not recoverable. Life seems to give each of us, at one time or another, bowls of tears to drink. An old friend and I were talking once about the deep sorrows in our lives, some of which we have in common. I confessed to him that despite the passage of many years, I found resolution elusive: two or three wounds were so deep I feared they would never heal. My friend nodded gravely, compassionately. Then, ‘That’s actually pretty good . . . only three unhealed wounds? You are luckier than most.’ C. S. Lewis wrote A Grief Observed as a kind of journal after the death of his beloved wife. In its pages, Lewis speculates on the nature of devastating loss and the limits of recovery. It is one thing to ‘get over’ the flu or an appendectomy, but how does one ‘get over’ an amputation he wonders: ‘After that operation either the wounded stump heals or the man dies. If it heals, the fierce continuous pain will stop. Presently he’ll get back his strength and be able to stomp about on his wooden leg. He has ‘got over it.’ But he will probably have recurrent pains in the stump all his life, and perhaps pretty bad ones; and he will always be a one-legged man.’ There are some losses, Lewis reminds us, that change and diminish us forever, than can never be ‘got over.’ Even the consolations of our faith can go only so far . . . For Lewis,

the transforming insight in his own grief and loneliness was not a glib assurance that he would get over his shattering loss, but that God had not left him alone in his sorrow. Presence, not `recovery,' was what enabled him to believe again that `all shall be well.'”
(*Weavings*, Volume XV, Number 2, March/April 2000, “Wounded and Healed,” Deborah Smith Douglas, pages 19-20)

Just down the street at Avondale Presbyterian Church, they have in their backyard a beautiful labyrinth. A labyrinth is an ancient tool to help one meditate and pray. At first it looks like a maze, but it's not. There's only one direction in which to walk this path. You make your way in, winding and curving your way through until you reach the center. And at the center, you are encouraged to stay a little while until you begin to wind and curve your way back out. Once you enter a labyrinth, the only way out is through the center. I believe that Job would say to us that the way through our sufferings is through the center of our pain. And I think that if we take a look at the life of Jesus, we will see that he followed that same path. To acknowledge our fears and to admit our pain and to share our sufferings is the way to the center.

This is a place for broken people. We come here to try and put the pieces of our lives back together – until we fall apart again. And because we are in this together, we can know that when we are the most broken, someone will be here that can help us to mend so that then we can stand ready to be a part of someone else's healing story.

But the real Good News is this: at the very center of our suffering there is God – the One who is fighting through all the noise and clamor of our anxieties to get through to us that we are loved and that we are not alone. And I know for a fact that there are many people in this room today that needed to hear this. I know I did, for I have stuck my toe in

a shoe called grief, and now Job, Jesus and I have a lot in common. The shoes of suffering that you wear have different names. But the gift of The Church is that we will make our way through the center – together. May it be so.