

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
“My God, My God”  
Thomas G. Speers, III  
Ordinary 28—October 14, 2018

Lessons: Job 23:1-9, 16-17, Psalm 22

My God, my God. My God, my God why? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? Those words are found in the twenty second psalm and you might recognize them also because they are the words Jesus speaks from the cross. My God, my God, why?

Some years ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a little book many of you will know, called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. I sometimes wonder if someone should write a sequel and call it *When good things happen to bad people*, but that is another story. Kushner’s book might have been helpful to Job who surely understood about bad things happening to good people. Job had everything and then he lost everything. He was blameless and upright, fearing God and turning away from evil, and he lost his possessions, his family and his own health for no apparent reason whatsoever. The few friends he had, offered the worst kind of support, trying to explain away Job’s suffering as not being so bad—it is almost never a good idea to minimize the suffering that someone else is going through. And making matters worse, they also suggested that Job’s suffering must somehow be his fault.

Job refuses to listen to these friends and today in our lesson, Job talks back to God: “Today my complaint is bitter. . .if I could simply talk with God, I would be acquitted forever.” Job is honest in his talking with and about God. He doesn’t pretend that all is well when it is not. There are some churches today that preach a kind of gospel of prosperity. If you believe, then you will receive riches, and a great life, because God wants those for you. I wonder if such preachers would be helped by our prayer of confession today: “You have offered us abundance, but we are satisfied with wealth.”<sup>1</sup> God may want us to have life in abundance, but that is different from a life of riches and wealth and one of the problems of this gospel of prosperity is that it implies that if you don’t have prosperity, if you know about suffering, if you’ve lost a job, or a loved one, or your health, or your well being, then you must not be a good Christian. Job would tell you, Don’t believe that. Job is honest and faithful enough that he is willing to take God on, demanding justice of God, taking God to task, in ways most of us are not used to. Most of us, I suspect, have learned that when we talk with God, when we pray, it should be quiet and reverential, using language that we would never use with each other, including lots of “Thees” and “Thous” and we should not be demanding. Sometimes that is the right way to talk to God. But sometimes we may need to talk to God in another way. Sometimes it is better to argue with God, to question God, to be honest enough to share our doubts and fears and pain with God, even to demand justice from God. Don’t you think God appreciates a relationship that is passionate far more than simply pietistic? If you were God wouldn’t you want a relationship that is strong enough and matters enough that it can be honest? What relationship can survive if there is not some honesty and accountability on both sides?

If you know the reality of suffering right now, it is OK to talk with God quietly and with reverence, and it is also OK to share your anger with God. It is OK to be direct and demanding with God. It is even OK to be bitter with God. You’ll have good company with the man Job who was blameless and upright, who feared God and turned away from evil, who was honest when he talked with God.

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<sup>1</sup> Prayer of Confession in Call to Worship Volume 51.1, Lectionary Aids 2017-2018, Year B. © 2017 Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Job was also honest in admitting that in the midst of his grief and suffering he did not feel God's presence. For someone who might have grown up with the 139<sup>th</sup> psalm this almost sounds like heresy. In that psalm we read: Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you."

Contrary to this magnificent hymn, Job is honest enough to cry out: Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments...If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him." If this seems like heresy to you, if it doesn't feel right to be this honest, then remember the words of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm, the psalm that was in the mouth of Jesus when he was on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest." Job knew what Jesus also knew that "the reality of grief is the absence of God."<sup>2</sup>

After the death of his wife, C. S. Lewis wrote a powerful and honest book called *A Grief Observed*. It was his way of surviving the "mad midnight moment" of grief and suffering. He speaks of the fear that accompanies grief and also the isolation, the laziness, the tears, the self-pity, and the delusions that the grief isn't really that bad. He also speaks of the absence of God: "Where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be — or so it feels — welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once."<sup>3</sup>

When you are in the throes of suffering and grief, don't let anyone tell you it isn't so bad because of course it is. And yet this is not the whole story. We will discover next week that God does speak to Job and although Job doesn't get the answers he asks for, he does get what he really needs. Read a little further in the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm and you'll find the Psalmist saying that he will yet again tell of God's name to his brothers and sisters. He will again praise God in the great congregation and even though he understands only suffering now, still there will be future generations who will be told about the Lord, proclaiming even to a people yet unborn the deliverance that comes from God. Frankly the fact that these words of the Psalmist are uttered by Jesus on the cross means that God is present even when there are no signs of God's presence, even when we can't feel that presence, even when the doors are locked and the windows are shut. Still God is present.

Remember Job who was blameless and upright, who feared God and turned away from evil. When you know the reality of suffering, you can be honest with God and you can be honest about God. When it feels that God is nowhere to be found, it is perfectly fine to cry out, and in so doing, remember also, that precisely there, where God seems most absent, God is in fact at work, bringing new life in our midst.

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<sup>2</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Alex's Death*, in *The Courage to Love* © 1982 Harper Collins

<sup>3</sup> Clive Staples Lewis, *A Grief Observed*. © 1961, 1994 Harper Collins

Let us pray: God we do not understand why people suffer. Help us that in all times we might be honest in our relationship with you and so fill our lives with the strength of your presence that we might also know that you are with us even when we cannot find you. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.