

The Grand Inquisitor
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
October 20, 2019-PM Service
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Job 9:1-24

You are evening service people, so most of you know the story of Job. A righteous and Godly man, Job loses everything in a series of natural disasters. His home, his job, his children, and even his health are torn from him through no fault of his own. Job is left on the ash heap, covered in sores. On the ash heap he cries out against God. His friends come along and try to tell him everything's okay. That part of the story you probably know. What you may not know is the ferocity of Job's complaint. You might not know the depths of Job's critique of God and His ways. Listen now, and get a sense of Job's anger, I have come to feel that this is one of the most surprising passages in the Bible. Does it get angrier than that? Did you catch all the accusations Job made against God? Let's run through them. Job says God is capricious, He is unpredictable in His dealings with creation. "*He moves mountains without their knowing it, he overturns them in his anger!*" (vs. 5). You never know how he's going to react.

God is remote, says Job. He has all this power! He can stretch the heavens and trample the seas. Evidence of His power is everywhere in creation, and yet (vs 11) "*When He passes me I cannot see him; When He goes by I cannot perceive him!*" Sure He's powerful, but it's a cold, distant power.

God has a terrible temper, says Job. He's like an unstable father who loses his cool over small things. In verse 13 Job says, "*God does not restrain his anger.*" It's like the opposite of Psalm 103. Psalm 103 says, "God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Here Job says, "Hah! God is *quick* to anger and abounding in destruction."

God is unjust, says Job. Not only does He fail to defend the weak and the oppressed, He's the *author* of the oppression and injustice. Vs 24: "*When a land falls into the hands of the wicked, he blindfolds its judges!*" *If it is not He, then who is it?*" *God the oppressor!*

And finally, and most brazenly, Job says God mocks the suffering innocent. Verse 23: "*When a scourge brings sudden death, he mocks the despair of the innocent!*" In other words, God is like the playground bully who slugs the smaller child, and then laughs at her when she cries.

Wow. Doesn't this seem close to blasphemy? If your friend or family member started to talk like this about God what would you do? Would you think they'd gone too far? Would you think that they'd lost their faith? Job really lets it fly. He stands in the chaos and he howls. He's not alone. Even if we never verbalize our feelings, lots of us have been in a Job place.

When I think of a modern version of Job's complaint, think of Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky's classic, the Brothers Karamazov. I realize that most of you won't have read that book, so let me tell you that in a famous scene called the Divine Inquisitor, Ivan Karamazov confronts his devout Christian brother, Alexei Karamazov, with his complaint about God. Alexei wants to be a monk, and Ivan wants to shock his pious little brother. Ivan launches into a brutal litany of crimes of cruelty against children: children abused, children tortured, children slowly and brutally murdered in front of their parents. He brings a litany of horrible crimes that were *based on real events*—Dostoevsky gleaned them from press reports of his day and put them in Ivan's mouth. These are crimes so horrible that I'm not comfortable repeating any specifics in a sermon. After pointing to these horrors, he says, 'Even if God makes everything shiny and new in the end, how can that happy ending justify all this cruelty and horror!? Even if everything is

made new in the end, I don't want to be part of a system that has the torture and murder of innocent children as part of the plan,' says Ivan. 'I return my ticket' Ivan says. "I don't want to be on the Jesus train. I want no part of a God who allows horrors like this as part of his plan."

Dostoevsky was a Christian, but the words of Ivan Karamazov represent some of the strongest critique of Christianity in all of literature. When you read them you find yourself groping for a reply. They shake you. Yet here in the middle of our own book are words in Job 9, words just as hard, and just as scathing as anything that ever came out of Ivan's mouth. What shall we say to the angry voice of Job here?

First of all, isn't it striking that such a stark accusation against God is in the Bible? This isn't just a Psalm of lament which says "Where are you Lord?" This is a Psalm of *accusation* against God: "God, you are nasty!" No one can accuse the Bible of being a book of propaganda that sugar coats reality. Life is here in all its messiness. To me, the presence of this chapter testifies to the wonder of this book, and it shows how far you can go and still be inside of God's gracious reach.

And maybe even more amazing, not only do these accusations appear in the Bible, at the end, *God approves of Job's words!!!* In Job 42:7 God scolds Job's friends for their explanations and their attempts at comfort, and He says to them, "You have not spoken of me what is right like my servant Job has." Job has spoken rightly says the Lord. How can that be! Job has said terrible things about God, he's called God an oppressor, a mocker, a cruel distant parent; how can he be understood to have spoken rightly? Job has spoken rightly in this sense: It's not the content of his speech. In chapter 9 and elsewhere he says things about God that are wrong. God is not quick to anger. God is not a bully who laughs at innocent suffering. God is not an oppressor. Job got all those things dead wrong. But Job spoke rightly in the way he spoke. Job spoke rightly in that he never took refuge in the easy answers of the friends. Job spoke rightly in that he never stopped calling his suffering an injustice. Job spoke rightly in that he never stopped seeing what happened to him as evil—something twisted and out of balance.

The friends fall down on this score. In their speeches they go to great lengths trying to explain why this suffering must be just, why it must be fair, why God is justified for doing this to Job. They try to show that as Job sits there on the ash heap, the scales of the universe are not actually out of balance, but that in fact, all is right with the world, everything is OK. And they use explanations like: Job you must have sinned to deserve this. Or maybe your children sinned. Job, this isn't chaos! It's order! Job, this isn't an ash heap, it's a flower garden! Everything is fine Job, you should be thankful! Just keep thinking happy thoughts! Job will have none of this nonsense and he sticks to his guns. He won't let someone say that his suffering is balance. He won't let anyone call his chaos, order.

Explaining suffering is always a dangerous thing. Remember the 2004 Tsunami in southeast Asia? 225,000 people died in a chaotic way. Most of us found the whole event sad and inexplicable, but a few of people thought they had explanations. Some said, "This happened because those people aren't Christians, and they don't follow Jesus." Others said, "It's because of the immorality and prostitution in Thailand!" But see what you do when you say things like that? *First*, you have shut your compassion down. They deserved it, so I don't need to send money. *And worse* you have called evil good; you have taken this evil, tragic event and turned it into something just and right and good. You have said, "it is right and fitting and just that innocent children died slowly in the cold, buried under tons of rubble." In their zeal to have everything figured out, the friends make an idol of their theology and its explanations. I don't think it's saying too much to say that one of the central messages of the book of Job is: beware

of trying to explain too much. Apparently, God prefers Job's angry accusations to the easy answers of the friends. In the book of Job, God seems to prefer our hard questions to our easy, pious answers.

Of course, the friends aren't the only ones to respond to Job's speech. God responds too. But notice, and this is what is both frustrating and wonderful about God's response, He doesn't respond with an explanation. He doesn't tell Job, 'well, here is why this all happened to you.' He doesn't give Job a three-point sermon designed to help him understand why bad things happen to good people. God responds, not with an explanation, but with himself. He shows up and makes it clear to Job that He is a just God, that He does hate evil. He shows up and tells Job that He is powerful and stronger than the chaos that surrounds Job. He shows up and, by addressing Job in person, shows that He is not a distant God, He cares about all his children, he knows them by name, and seeks their salvation. Job doesn't get an explanation—he gets the voice of God, the presence of God, and the power of God as a sign of hope and love. And that's enough for him.

This isn't all of God's response to Job. Later, God responds to Job, and to all the Job's who have screamed their accusations against Him throughout History. Again, he doesn't respond with an explanation. He responds with His Son. The ultimate response to Job 9 is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus came to earth and came and sat beside us on the ash heap. He got close enough that we could shout our accusation not only to heaven, we could shout our accusations right in his face. We could get right in front of him and scream at him. Not only could we scream at him, Jesus got close enough for us to touch him, to grab him, to slap him, to nail him to the wall. We could pour out all our purple fury on him and scream for his crucifixion. God responded to us by letting us pour all our anger and our fear and our sin out on Jesus. And after we thought our accusations had buried Him, Jesus responded by rising with healing in his wings. Jesus' life death and resurrection are not an explanation of evil, but they are a sign that — no matter how chaotic and evil things might be - there will always be a hope and a joy in this world that is stronger than our sorrow.

Explanations are never very good responses to evil. The best responses are something altogether different. If you have read the Brother's Karamazov, do you remember how Alexei responds to Ivan's stories of pain and suffering? He doesn't try to explain anything. He doesn't go into a theological discourse on the nature of evil. Instead, he walks over to Ivan and gives his brother a kiss. He responds to his anger with an expression of love. It disarms Ivan. And when he leaves their conversation, the angry cynic softens. He says, *"If I love anything in this world, I shall love only remembering you. It's enough for me that you are here somewhere, and I shall not stop wanting to live."* A kiss instead of an explanation. A sign of hope in the middle of Ivan's chaos. It seems to me that's the best we can do too. It seems to me the best funerals too are light on explanations, and heavy on signs of love—God's love for us and our love for each other. Thomas Lynch visited Calvin Seminary a few years back. Lynch is an author and a funeral director in Midland, Michigan. As a funeral director he has a unique perspective on life and faith, and that's what makes his books so interesting. During the question and answer period, someone asked him about what made a great funeral, and after offering a few observations he told this story. One of the best funerals he had ever been a part of was the funeral of a man who was about 60 years old who died after living a wildly imperfect life. He left his family in mid-life and sank into alcoholism and depression. He didn't come to church much. He had almost no good deeds or great successes of the kind that would appear in your standard funeral eulogy. His life was a wreck, and he had caused misery to other people. All the kids and relatives of this man came to the funeral. They sat in their sadness, in the chaos.

The funeral was led by a young pastor, and Lynch wondered, “What on earth will this poor man say in the face of this misery?” Here’s what this young minister did: he went and stood beside the casket. “I don’t know what to say about Bob. It’s not easy to figure out. So I think maybe the best we can say is this:” And there, beside the casket, he took out his harmonica and played Just As I Am: “*Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, O Lamb of God I come. I come.*” Lynch said it was about perfect. Not an explanation, but in the middle of chaos, a sign of hope; in the middle of despair, a note of joy. We will never explain the power of evil in this world or the terrible things that happen in this world, but in the place of chaos, may our lives be a sign of hope, a note of joy, a hopeful song in the face of evil, a testament to the resurrection.

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