

Job 1:1-12

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt-offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, 'It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.' This is what Job always did.

Attack on Job's Character

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?' Satan answered the Lord, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.' Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!' So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

"Diminished Capacity"

Rev. Charles Schuster

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Every now and then, it become important to attack a subject that the preacher thinks he can handle. You can spend your whole ministry dealing with such trivialities as, "What is the liturgical color of Epiphany?" Or, "Did Jesus use grape juice or wine at the Last Supper, or did he turn the water into wine before he turned the wine into Welch's?" Or "Should baptism be total immersion or sprinkling?" Those are topics that will get you noticed and promoted, and maybe even elected to Bishop. But you can't spend all your time worried about theological punctuation and split infinitives. Every now and then, you've got to take on a subject that's so important, you're not sure you can deal with it. And so today I sill try. Today I will put words to a problem that is bigger than the pulpit from which it is preached, but not larger than the Gospel that gives good news.

What is the worst we face? What is the worst we face? I'm reminded of the Peanuts cartoon, Lucy and Linus thinking about life, talking philosophically, seeking perspective. "Life is peculiar," Linus says. "Wouldn't you like to live your life over if you knew what you now know?" Lucy answers, for all of us, "And what do I now know?"

One of the things we know now, and it doesn't take long to learn it, is: pain is a problem. But to live is to suffer. Pain is a problem. But to live is to suffer. I grew up in West Virginia, that's a strange place. It's a beautiful place. Our new pastor will be with us next week. She's going to preach in two weeks, the 9th of August, she's going to preach. But she'll be here next Sunday. She's been living in Pennsylvania, where Ray's from. I don't have real positive thoughts. I have positive thoughts about Ray, I don't have positive thoughts about Pennsylvania. Once we went to Pittsburgh. We took a wrong turn, and somebody yelled at us, "Why don't you West Virginia snakes learn how to drive?"

Rebecca and her family, they've been looking for a house, and they've been doing some hiking. They have two little children, and while they were up on Horsetooth Mountain they saw a rattlesnake? I wonder if it hit her, that might have been a West Virginia snake? West Virginia has a lot of snakes above the ground, and lots of coal under the ground. They even take tours through those coal mines. Once, there was a group prepared to go down into one of those West Virginia coal mines, and there was this woman who was wearing a white dress. Wearing a white dress, going into a coal mine. Probably from Pennsylvania, I'm guessing. Someone said to her, "You're surely not going to wear that white dress down into the mine." She wondered if there's some kind of superstition, and so she asked the old miner who was conducting the tour if it was okay for her to wear the white dress down into the mine, and he said, "Well there's nothing to keep you from wearing your white dress down into this here mine. But there's a considerable amount to keep it from being white when you come back up."

Our dresses won't be white. Our lives won't be free of pain. That, we now know. In life, there is suffering. To live is to suffer. If we read through the pages of the story of Job in the Old Testament, we discover the truth. Bad people suffer from the bad they do, we call it justice, sometimes. Good people suffer for nothing that they've done. We call it life. The other day, I'm on the way to the class I teach Friday mornings, 6:30 at the restaurant. I'm going down Drake, I'm headed to College, and that truck is out that's painting the lines on the streets, and they put these cones around, so that your cars won't drift over into the lines. I'm one of these people, when I see wet paint, and I'm in a car, there's something - it's the devil - something that makes me want to drive over those lines. I worked for the State Highway Department in North Carolina one summer, so I kind of know what's going on here. But they put these cones up, and so you have the question - do you stay within the lines, or do you blur the lines?

You go on down Drake to College, that big intersection where they have the, if you don't know this they've got cameras there. If you go through a red light, they're going to take your picture, and you're going to get a letter, and there's going to be a fine. But if you look at that intersection... because I saw this coming. The paint truck was coming this way, I'm going this way, and we're right on Drake and College, this big four-way intersection, lights all around, it's dark, and the guy in the paint truck, I kid you not, didn't turn off the paint. Went through the intersection, painted the whole intersection. And I'll tell you what else. If you follow those lines, if you stay within those lines and there's somebody coming from the south, it isn't going to be good. You stay within the lines, and

sometimes, there's still pain. A wreck. That's life. Because the lines are blurred, and we're never quite sure where we're supposed to be.

To live is to suffer. But to find meaning in suffering is to live a whole new life, because you see, our suffering is going somewhere. The classic book on this is Victor Frankl's book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. It is a great book. We ought to study this book here. It's about his concentration camp experience as a Jew in Nazi concentration camps, and how he survived that, and his point is, if you can find meaning in a place like this, you know, you can find meaning anywhere. A theory developed, as he was a medical doctor becoming a psychologist. The theory was called logotherapy. It's a theory that says, wherever you are, the thing you do is, you find meaning where you are. He writes, "Even under the most difficult circumstances, to add a deeper meaning to our lives, to remain brave and dignified and unselfish," then he says, "If we do that, we have a chance to be worthy of our suffering." To be worthy of our suffering. Meaning in suffering. It's a whole new life. It doesn't end the pain. It doesn't make it less, but sometimes more. But it puts the pain in perspective.

An old prospector came into a saloon in frontier California, ordered a glass of milk with a shot of whiskey in it, and while the bartender was fixing his drink, the old prospector wandered over to visit with some friends, and before he could return, a man came in wearing all black. "Sir," he said to the bartender, "I'm a traveling Methodist circuit-riding preacher. I've just made it across the desert. I'm bone-dry. I saw you pouring that glass of milk. Is there any way you could give me that?" "Take the milk," said the bartender. "We're glad to have you in town. Take the glass of milk, drink it up." There was a twinkle in his eye, and the others began to gather around the man in black, to see a preacher pick up the milk, now spiked and loaded, teetotaling preacher, barroom veterans, milk, whiskey, an odd Communion beverage, don't you think? What would happen? The preacher drank the milk, savored every drop, looked up toward the ceiling, smile on his face, declared for all to hear, "Lord, what a cow!"

Lord, what a life. It's a whole new life. Meaning to our suffering. God puts it there, but we've got to find it. That's the one thing we know now. The hardest thing, suffering? No, sometimes suffering leads to diminishment. It isn't the pain that's the problem, it's the problem that's the pain. We cannot to what we could. It's the hardest thing we face. Diminished capacity. A friend sent me this story. A new pastor was visiting homes in his new church, the church members, for his first Sunday, knocked on the door of one church member. No one answered. So he left a business card - his name, the name of the church, a Scripture verse. Nice touch, don't you think? The verse Revelation 3:20 was written on the card. Stuck it in the door. Next Sunday, in the offering plate was the preacher's business card. The Scripture verse, Revelation 3:20. Below it, another verse, written by the church member, who seemed not to be home. "Genesis 3:10." It all makes sense when you put it together. He wrote, Revelation 3:20, it says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." She wrote, Genesis 3:10. It says, "I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid, for I was naked."

Diminishment makes us afraid to open our door, unable to do what we could, feeling exposed and vulnerable. Diminishment comes through age, and that begins when we're born. We cannot run as fast, we cannot do as much, our fingers don't work like they should.

I was in a hardware store on Monday. I was pulling into the parking space and a man about my age ran out of the way to let me park where I was parking, and I rolled down my window. I said, "It's really too hot to run. I would have been glad to wait for you." He looked at me and he said, "I wanted to see if I could still run at my age." And then he said, "What you just saw me do, clearly that was not running." And I said to him, "You're strides, sir, reminded me of a deer in the woods." And he said to me, "Thanks, you're a kind man."

It seems to me this is the issue that stands before us now in the country. It's the cost of health care. It's due to the fact that we live longer, but because we live longer, we will experience diminished capacity before we die. We will, we are. How do you pay for diminished capacity? How do we deal with it? I like what Reynolds Price has done with his life. Prize-winning writer, professor at Duke, cancer of the spine. Life has changed for him. He's accepted it. He writes, "I know that this new life is better for me in measurable ways, with its maddening limitations. It has forced a degree of patience and consequent watchfulness on me. I have begun to feel, and eventually to savor, the keen attention of old friends who stand a little closer. Even my handwriting looks very little like the script of the man I used to be. Cranky as it is, it's taller, more manageable, with more an air of confidence." And then he says, "And my writing, it runs down the arm of a man who's grateful." Who is grateful. When something is taken from us, if we look, we'll see that something has been added. Something has been given back. It's a whole new life. God gives us gifts in our diminishment, but we've got to see them.

Many in the congregation have listened to tapes, or maybe some have even heard Ram Dass, the great philosopher, speak. He suffered a stroke, when he was sixty, about ten years ago. Confined to a wheelchair, he reflects on his diminishment. He said, "Well, you know, my speech was impaired by the stroke, and I considered not ever speaking again publicly, but my friends told me that my halting new voice enabled them to concentrate on the silence between my words." And then he said, "Healing is not the same as curing. Healing doesn't mean going back to the way things were before, but allowing God to move closer." It's a whole new life.

When we lose, we gain somewhere. It's God's gift to us. What we were, we are no longer. But what we have become may be better, if we can see it. If we can move closer to God because of it. The storm Monday night reminded me of the story of the little boy living in a house that lighting, thunder, a crack of lightning hits a tree near the house, furthermore, near his bedroom. He runs into his parents' bedroom and he's scared to death. "Mommy, I'm scared. I'm scared." And the mother replies, "Go back to your room. God will be there with you. Go back to your room, Son, you must face this." The child stands in the doorway for the longest time. They didn't even know he was there, still, and he said, "Mommy, I'll sleep with Daddy. You go sleep with God."

Where there is loss, there is gain. Where we are diminished, we may get back something we didn't have, and move closer to God. And if we do, it's a whole new life. What's the worst we face? From pain to diminishment. Worse than that? From diminishment to death. The loss of a loved one. The end of our lives. The hardest thing we face, death. Joan Borysenko said it, "The question is not whether we'll die, but how will we live?" Good friend Dick Evans tells the story of the Catholic priest and the Methodist pastor holding up a sign at the side of the road. It reads, "The end is near, turn around before it's too late." The driver pulls up, a Corvette convertible. Stops, looks, yells "You two are religious fanatics and you ought to get a life." Speeds off, burning rubber. Then, tires screeching, and then *splash*. The priest turns to the pastor and says, "Do you think we ought to just put up the sign that says "Bridge out"?"

The end is near. Death is a problem we face. Did you hear it in Andy Rooney's voice as he gave tribute to his friend Walter Kronkite at the funeral service? Did you hear it? Talking about their friendship, how they met, what they'd done together. Going on with a eulogy that you knew would unfold in beautiful ways, and finally, suddenly, Andy Rooney, who is pretty tough, just stopped. It was too much for him. He couldn't finish. He walked away. And who among us, alive when John Kennedy was assassinated, will ever forget how Walter reported it, how the words stuck in this throat. He's written an autobiography, Walter Kronkite has. It's called *A Reporter's Tale*. Kronkite writes, "Yes, the words stuck in my throat. There was a sob that wanted to replace them. Tears formed in the corners of my eyes. I fought back the emotion. I went afterwards into my glass-walled office off the newsroom, intending to call my wife. I needed an intimate moment to share with a loved one." My emotions... Walter Kronkite faced the death of the young president. It broke him. It was the end.

Death. How do we deal with it? Is it the end? Or is it part of a beginning? Do the dead live? Is it legacy? Is it resurrection? Are the two the same? We face death like we face suffering and diminishment, with God, with faith, with trust. The details, what happens, we're not sure. The substance, the essence, we know. We know now, because for us the end is never the end. It's a whole new life. It's a tomb with the stone rolled away. It's a crucifixion that empowered a movement. It's the Jesus of history that led to the Christ of faith. It's twelve disciples, and that led to the church. It's a whole new life. A legacy of a loved one, what they were, what they are, what they did, what remembering them continues to do. What they left us. What we do with it.

Wednesday, I visited with an old friend. An old friend, and I mean old. This spring, she turned one hundred. We visited. We drank coffee, we talked. Isabel wanted to know why I drove a hundred miles to see her. I said I didn't exactly know, but I said, "You're one of my favorite people." She told me I was one of her favorite people as well. Isabel was a writer, a very creative, gifted writer in her early years. She had written this one essay on death. She wrote, "Will I become aware of my life when it's through? Will there be fear, a fading of a sigh, a sense of loss? Or will I feel a new wondrous exaltation when I die? Will I be there as now a questing soul on tiptoes to explore the otherwhere, convinced that if I try to see death whole I will in faith find all familiar there? What I perceive will

be perfection squared, raised to infinity, without a break in consciousness, when with all heavens it is shared, the joy of being startled, brought awake. I'll understand at last when time is done, eternity and time are one."

I don't know why I went to see Isabel Wednesday. She looked really good. We spoke of her life, of the meaning of her life, her legacy. I don't now why I went to see her. They have a cat named George in the nursing home. He comes around whenever somebody's dying. Wednesday night, George slept on Isabel's bed. Thursday morning at one they called us. They said it was peaceful, and she died with a cat named George. And God was there. A whole new life. To know death can come, but cannot take away what's been, because the end is near, but beyond a new beginning. It's a whole new life.

This morning I have tried to take on one of the hardest questions we have. Did I win? Did I lose? It depends, I think, on this. I will say, as I've tried my best to say it, if we suffer, can we find meaning in our suffering? If we are diminished, can we find gain in God in every loss? And if we know death, can we see beyond it to the Resurrection that always outlives it? It's a whole new life, and we can live it well, because, you see, we have nothing to fear.

Let us pray. O God, you are with us in the darkest times, and you are with us when we know not where to turn. We trust you when we hurt, as we trust those who are near and dear to us to be in your eternal care. Amen.