

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Job 1:6-22; James 5:7-11; Matthew 11:2-11

“Blessed be the name of the LORD.”

Why? We’ve all asked it. We’ll all ask it again. Why? It’s a natural question. It flows off the tongue. Why? If only it were always answered! Why? A question even Christ Himself asked from the cross. Why?

“I wish I was a little bit taller. I wish I was a baller. I wish I had a girl who looked good. I would call her. I wish I had a rabbit in a hat and a bat and a ‘64 Impala.” Yeah, Pastor spits mad flow, but the point, as this song from those glorious 90’s expresses—albeit with a lack of understanding of the subjunctive mood—is that we all have wishes, we all wish certain things could be different. Isn’t that where Why? always comes from? “The grass is always greener...” and so on and so forth. You know what I’m talking about.

Two weeks ago, the lessons addressed the dangers of spiritual laziness. Last week, the lessons took aim at the dangers of pride. This week the lessons drive home another important point: the dangers of misinterpreting suffering. James tells us to be patient in such suffering, encouraging us, ***“You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.”*** John the Baptist turns to Christ and not to himself for reassurance in such suffering.

One of the dangers of suffering is that we read into it. When suffering strikes, we almost immediately jump to the conclusion that God must be mad at us, that our suffering is a judgment upon our lack of faith. Yes, sometimes our suffering may be a result of God’s judgment, and, yes, sometimes suffering may spring from a lack of faith, but for the faithful Christian suffering is often indeed not a judgment upon a lack of faith, but proof of an active faith. The devil already owns the unbelieving. He need not work hard on them. He can leave them in luxury. It is the believer that is a danger to the devil’s plans. It is the believer that is the target of the devil’s schemes, for what better way to lash out, to strike back at God, than for the ancient foe to attack His children? The devil is that heartless, and we are God’s children.

If anyone has ever suffered, apart from Christ our Lord Himself, it was Job, and it wasn’t spread out over time, but all at once. Everything he owned, everything he loved was taken from him in but a few moments. And not only that, but he himself was stricken, covered with festering boils, and, in all of this, what did his friends do but accuse him, but try to convince him that it was all his fault, that he must have sinned in some way. Surely, Job had sinned in some way. Sinners sin, not only in some ways, but in many and manifold ways. But who were they to divine the mind of God? Who were they to presume that what happened was a judgment upon Job’s lack of faith, and not proof of his active faith? I’ll tell you who they were: they were wrong.

The story is told of Katie Luther that once when her husband, none other than the great pastor, preacher, and professor Martin Luther himself, became depressed and bordered upon despair, she changed into funeral clothes and became exceedingly somber and silent. When he asked her why, she told him, “I thought that God had died, the way you’ve been acting; and so I thought it proper that I should go into mourning.”

How often don’t we feel right at home in Luther’s shoes? We suffer and we assume that God is dead. No, we wouldn’t put it that way, but if we still truly trusted that He was in control and that He loved us and wished for us the best, we wouldn’t spend so much time wallowing in doubt, we’d rip up the invitation to our pity party.

If anyone had a reason to wallow in doubt like a pig in the mud, it was Job. If anyone had a reason to take a seat at his pity party, it was Job. But what did Job do? He fell to the ground in worship. And what did Job say? ***“Blessed be the name of the LORD.”*** Yet how often don’t such times move us to anger and drive us, not to worship, but away from it? How often don’t such times lead us to tell ourselves what Job’s wife later told him, ***“Curse God and die,”*** precisely when we should rather with the suffering Christ in Gethsemane pray, ***“Thy will be done.”***

In the book of Job, in the original Hebrew, the same word is used for blessing and cursing God. There are two responses to suffering: to bless God or to curse God, to praise Him or to blame Him. The Hebrew for ***“blame God”*** literally means ***“give God folly.”*** It is to surrender faith to doubt and to let yourself think that God doesn’t know what He’s doing, that God has dropped the ball. But God doesn’t drop the ball. If He did, the Lions would sign Him. No, His hands are money in the bank. Faith never forgets that, at least when that faith is rooted in the death and resurrection of the Suffering Servant, Jesus Christ.

At the close of World War II, a note was found on a dead child at the large concentration camp for women in Ravensbruck, Germany. It read:

O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but all those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us, remember the fruits we have borne, thanks to this suffering—our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all of this, and when they come to judgment, let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness.

Suffering is not always a judgment upon a lack of faith. Suffering is often proof of an active faith, and an opportunity for it to flower, not only for our good, but as a testimony to those around us, that they too might come to know the forgiveness of sins in Christ that buoys us in the valley of the shadow of death. We do not know that child’s background, but we do know ours, and as children of the Most High God, how can our hearts not swell with the same confidence in the midst of earthly trials, for our Jesus knows the way through suffering to glory, and He will never abandon us.

When you suffer, don’t put on your funeral clothes. Fall to the ground in worship. Give thanks for God’s love, for the fruit He produces through you even in the wildernesses of this life. Hold fast to what often wins you such suffering and at the same time stays you through it: faith in the One who suffered for you and your salvation. Why? Because while unbelief might spare you suffering now, it will bring you eternal suffering beyond compare, while faith promises an end to our crosses and an eternity of glory and peace.

I wish I were a little bit taller, and, yes, on Sunday evenings I often wish I were a baller, but wishes never saved anyone. Promises save. Promises from God save. And you, like Job, have God’s promises. The Lord always gives more than He takes, and no one can take from you the greatest Gift He has ever given: His Son, whose suffering has become your blessing, and whose blessing has become your joy.

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” He whom God loves most was born on Christmas to suffer most. As one beloved by God, you will suffer as well, but God knows when to say “when.” You will never suffer beyond what you can bear. When your cup runs over, it will be with the oil of gladness, and not with the bitter waters of despair. The devil’s hand can reach no farther than God allows, and God is never so focused on you as He is in your trials.

“Blessed be the name of the LORD.” Amen.