

WGUMC November 10, 2013 "almighty"
Psalm 91; Job 29:1-5; Job 30:16,17,20,24-26

My husband works for Islamic Networks Group, which runs an interfaith speakers' bureau, the only one in the Bay Area. This last week, Hank was at Balboa High School in San Francisco participating in an interfaith panel. After each of the speakers had talked about their faith and practice, they opened up the floor for questions. One of the questions that came was, "If you believe in God, how do you explain the suffering in the world?"

Do you remember wrestling with that one in high school? Another way to ask the question would be: if God is so good and so powerful, why is evil so rampant? Even a teenager can look at our world—a super typhoon in the Philippines, chronic hunger and disease in Africa, civil wars in the Mideast, school shootings here in the U.S.—and then wonder how anyone can believe in God the Father Almighty.

Even when there's no question about the existence of God, there are still plenty of questions about the goodness and power of God. Even in the Bible. The Psalms give us one answer; the Book of Job, quite another. In general, the psalms tell us that if you're good, God will reward you. And Psalm 91 says that if you trust God, God will deliver you. If life only looked like these psalms, it would be easy to believe in a God who is almighty.

But then there's Job. Remember Job? He was the upright man who suffered downright evil. He was the one who had everything going for him until God let everything go south on him. He lost his livestock, his wealth, his children, and his health. For thirty-some chapters, Job pours out his complaint, "I cry to you and you do not answer me...Surely one does not turn against the needy, when in disaster they cry for help...But when I looked for good, evil came; and when I waited for light, darkness came." [Job 30:20a, 24, 26]

I suspect that Psalm 91 is where we all want to be, but Job is where a lot of folks seem to be. Job gives us a God who seems to be either unwilling or unable to help us. That's the problem of evil, and it's the problem at the heart of Rabbi Kushner's old book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. In that book, Kushner studies Job's situation and comes to a startling conclusion: God is good, all the time, so God must not be all powerful. In other words, God can't just come in and fix everything for us, because God has chosen to give us freedom.

Kushner argues for a self-limited God. What he means by that is this: before the creation of the world, all power belonged to God. But when God created the world, God surrendered some of that power, so that the creation could be free. So, even though all power originates from God, not all power can be exercised by God. There are things that God cannot do because God gave that power to us, because God gave us freedom and God will not take it away.

Now that idea goes against everything we've always been taught: that God is all powerful and in control of all things. God is like the Justice League or the Avengers, only better. So, we who have a lot of problems don't even want to think about God giving up any power. Yet, if the idea of a self-limited God doesn't sit very well with us, what do we do with Jesus, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross"? [Philippians 2:6-8]

Those ancient words, from Paul's letter to the Philippians, tell us of a self-limited savior. Christ emptied himself of his God-self and became a man, a slave, who went to the cross for us. Not in power, but in weakness, he saved us. You bet it's radical. The depths to which God will go to redeem us! So the

cross of Jesus Christ challenges all of our assumptions about how God's power works in the world. It works in weakness.

Now, how does that work for you? How does the cross help us deal with something like cancer? I know that I'm not alone in wondering why an almighty God would create a world where cancer kills almost 8 million people a year. Cancer is so widespread it almost seems to be a built-in feature of life on this planet. And in fact it is, when you consider life from an evolutionary perspective. It's ironic that gene mutation, the cellular process that drives evolution and makes life on earth possible, is the same process that makes cancer inevitable. If God had somehow made our immune system so strong that it could kill off all mutant cells, we human beings would never have evolved in the first place. But understanding the science doesn't help us come to terms with the sickness.

To tackle the "why" questions in life, we can't look to science. We have to tell stories. So let me tell you a story. I

met Susan when she showed up with her husband at church one Sunday. The next Sunday they were back again, and I soon learned that she had recently been diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. Now Susan had been a successful high tech executive and lived several lives by the time she was 51. Whatever she wanted to do, she did it. If she wanted to go lingerie shopping in London, she hopped on a plane. When she wanted to visit Antarctica, she boarded a ship. Not surprisingly, she approached her cancer the way she approached everything else in life. If there were an obstacle, she would overcome it. If there were a prize, she would win it. As one friend put it, “She made everything a victory.”

Susan was a personal friend of Zig Ziglar, the motivational speaker, and she had every intention of beating her cancer. But she knew that she needed a strategy. The doctors didn't give her any hope. The medical profession didn't have any

answers. All they could offer her was a year to live, and she wasn't buying it.

So somewhere in the recesses of her beautiful brain, she retrieved the Sunday School lessons she learned as a child but had been seriously neglecting. Yes, there is a power stronger than disease and death. Yes, there is a light that overcomes the darkness. Yes, there is a love that casts out all fear.

That power was about to give this very purpose-driven woman a whole new purpose in life. She told me that she was now "under new management" and trying to beat a deadline. Spiritually, Susan began making up for lost time. She rekindled her relationship with God and signed up to be in God's service. So she started visiting the nursing home with her three-legged cat in homemade costumes. She dragged her atheist sons to church. She began witnessing to God at gas stations. She talked of being a missionary. She sent me her resumé. I smiled when I got to the part about her climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro. I

thought: good training for the mountain she's climbing now.

She began reading her Bible, seriously, as if it were life and death for her, and it was. She grabbed hold of Psalm 91: "You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.' For God will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence." Susan read those words and believed in them with all her might.

For months and months, her strategy worked. It worked so well, the doctors marveled at her. The chemo was working; the tumor was shrinking. She began testifying to the wonders God was doing in her. She kept repeating the words: "Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent."

Then one morning, she came into our Disciple Bible study class to announce that she was supposed to be dead that day. She had reached the outside limit of the doctor's very most

optimistic projections for her living with the cancer. She woke up that morning and turned to her husband and asked him, "Is this the look of a dead woman?" Then she got out of bed smiling that radiant smile.

By the grace of God, Susan turned her cancer into a victory. And that's the story I told several months later at her funeral. She found the power of God in her weakness. She found a higher purpose through her illness. She picked up and carried her cross and it led her all the way to new life. So, I'd like to change one word of Psalm 91, one little preposition, and my Hebrew scholar husband gives me permission. God the Father Almighty did not deliver her *from* the deadly pestilence, but sure enough, delivered her *through* it.

Why else would we follow a suffering savior, if there weren't something really important we needed to learn—that we can only learn—through our suffering? Without the gift of our weakness, how could we ever proclaim Christ crucified, "a

stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those of us who are the called...Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." [I Corinthians 1:23-24]

I have no doubt in my mind that Susan is wearing the crown of glory and with the saints is even now encouraging us to look at the cross and learn to see—through the weakness in us—the almighty power in God. I was all alone with her, singing to her, the moment she died. And all I could think of was, "Thanks be to God [the Father Almighty] who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." [I Corinthians 15:57]

Amen.