

## "What Stays When All Is Lost"

I was nervous as I drove on the way to visit the son of one of the members of the church. I was much younger in the ministry then and even though the years have gone by, this is one of those experiences that feels like it was just yesterday. The memory is that clear. The man I was going to visit was not active in our church but his mother was one of the pillars of the congregation. She asked me to go and see him. Her son was not well. He had been diagnosed with cancer and they were saying there was no cure. Sometimes that's when we preachers get called in, when there is no other hope. I mention I was nervous, not so much because his diagnosis was a tough one but because he was reported to be a tough guy. His mother tried to prepare me for my visit with him. She didn't want me to be surprised by the kind of life he had led. "My son's made some bad choices," she said. "He hasn't been very 'in-tune with' God through much of his life," she told me. "I don't want you to be caught off guard." The mother went on to say that her son had chosen a rather hard path through life. She described him the way we sometimes hear others described, "Oh, he's a drinker, you know." She went on to share that he'd spent a good deal of his young adult life as a member of a motorcycle gang. This wasn't a criticism of motorcycles. It was her lead-in to tell me that the group he'd been riding with had influenced him to stay in a lane of life that kept him on the wild side. All of this was to make clear to me that going to see her son would not be the usual kind of pastoral visit. So, these were the things I was thinking about as I drove to his place. "He's not a church-going kind of man," I thought, "not in the least." I also knew he hadn't asked to see me, his mother had arranged the meeting. She wanted me to go "for her sake," she said, and yet she was certain my visit would be helpful to him. She was more confident about that than I was. This is another reason why I was a bit apprehensive, as I knocked on his door.

I remember my first encounter with the son did not go anything like I expected. "That guy is tough," I was told, and yet what I found was a man whose body had been severely weakened by his disease. His hair was long, down to his shoulders but dull and thin. His house was what you'd expect from a hard-living guy who hadn't been able to give much attention to keeping the place tidy. But what I remember most was how grateful he seemed that I was there. He quickly ushered me to the kitchen table and as we sat across from each other he got right to the point. "Preacher," he said, "I don't want you to feel sorry for me. I know this hard on my mom," he said, "and I'm sorry about that." Then he went on, "But God knew I had this coming. And, you know what I think?" the man said to me. "I think there's nothing I can do to change what God's bringing on me now. God's giving me what I deserve." I remember how amazed I was at how easily he talked about his feelings and how certain he was that God was doing this to him because he deserved it. I was grateful for the chance to be with him. I wasn't there to change his mind about what he thought God was doing but it did give me a chance to say something about God's grace and God's love. These may not be the only things we have in life but sometimes these are the only things we need, God's grace and love.

That man's story, and all of our stories for that matter, have a connection to one of the most ancient stories we know, the story of Job. There is a connection for us because seeing what Job goes through and his struggle with God reflects what we sometimes experience. The opening scene of the story begins with God and Satan laying a wager on the table. The bet is whether or not Job, a righteous and good-living soul, will remain faithful to God even if he should lose everything. God says he can do it. Satan says he can not, and this begins a series of devastating losses that puts Job to the test. Now, before we go on, let's realize there is something important happening just beneath the surface of this story. Knowing this helps us understand it better. In the ancient days, there was a way of thinking about the relationship between God and human beings that made the claim good people always receive good things. That way of thinking is known as The Wisdom Tradition. I'm putting "wisdom" in quotes because it's the kind of wisdom that sounds perfect on the surface but it breaks apart when you really think about it. This is the backdrop of Job's agony, a tradition of thought that said if we live well God will reward us with treasure and success and good health. That's what the Wisdom Tradition said and, of course, the unspoken part of this is just as important. If the assumption is that good people always get the goods then it follows that people suffer because they deserve it, and the point needs to be made that there is a problem with this way of thinking. This is why the memory of that mother's son came to me. He was sure his suffering had been delivered by God because he thought he deserved it. This points to the fact that remnants of The Wisdom Tradition way of thinking still exist today. Even in Christianity, we bump up against the assumption that heaven is a reward given to us for a good life; which sounds reasonable on the surface but that way of thinking falls apart when we go deeper. The story of Job is a protest against The Wisdom Tradition. They knew in that ancient time just like we know now, sometimes bad things happen

to good people. In more times than not, our suffering is mostly about our vulnerability than it is a punishment. And so, where is God when all else seems to be lost?

I went on to visit the son of that church member many times. I mentioned I wasn't there to change his mind but I did witness to how his heart changed. His mother's love never wavered, and added to that was the caring way that church reached out with their prayers, rides to the hospital, meals and house cleaning. Medicine had done all it could for him but the love of God through the people of God continued a healing work in his life and it changed him. Near the end of his physical journey I asked him if he thought God was with him or against him. "Oh," he said, "God is with me. I don't know how I could have ever doubted that." It's Job who said in the midst of his suffering, "For I know that my Redeemer lives..." (Job 19:25) Back in that ancient time, when a person faced a tough situation, a close family member or loved one was identified as that person's redeemer. This wasn't a religious thing. It was a relationship thing. Job knew that no matter what he lost or how hard it got his redeemer would stand by his side. You see, the story of Job is our story because who is Jesus for us? He is our rock and our Redeemer. There are plenty of times when we can't make sense of what is happening. Sometimes the trouble we're in isn't anybody's fault. It just happens, and no matter what is lost or how hard it gets, our Redeemer is by our side.

Most of us know the name, John Wesley. He was the founder of the Methodist movement and his writings give shape to many of the ways we think about our relationship with God. Wesley was often a troubled man. He struggled to know what God wanted. He anguished over trying to present himself as good enough so as to deserve God's blessing. Wesley was a complicated man in what is often a complicated world until he realized the power and truth of God's grace and love. Wesley came to realize that the focus of life can't be about trying to be good so that bad things won't happen. The goal, according to Wesley is to "stay in love with God." When we hurt, when we question, when we gain or when we lose, this is our goal, to stay in love with God. The beauty of this faith is trusting that even on the days when it feels impossible for us to keep our love with God strong, our Redeemer lives and shows us the way.

This is our focus for today and for the week ahead. This our task as Christians in the world. Stay in love with God and know that your Redeemer lives.