

SCARBORO UNITED CHURCH
Sunday, October 18, 2009
SERMON PREACHED BY
THE REV. JAN CRAIG

“NOT SILENCED BY THE DARKNESS”

Trevor Hudson, a South African pastor who works outside of Johannesburg, says to all of us who seek to follow Jesus Christ: “Never forget that everyone you meet sits by a pool of tears.” Everyone you meet sits by a pool of tears.

The book of Job is so full of tears - and with every reading of it our own tears mingle with the tears that flow off the pages. Job was a good man, he had lived a good life. He had loved his wife and his children. He had worked hard and cared for them all. He had been faithful to God - he had cared for his extended family and for his neighbours. He had good friends who stood by him and cared equally for him. Job was a good man ... and then life took a turn.

One does not have to live very long sometimes before one understands what those turns can mean. One can become familiar with suffering very early. Each of us can name in our own hearts those whose faces are familiar to us - those who have suffered greatly in life and those whose suffering has brought us great suffering. Each of us can name in our own hearts those times when life has brought us to our knees. Illness, death, divorce, a sense of failure, a diagnosis, depression so deep we can't see the way out, something happening to a child, job loss ... the list goes on and on. For some of you I know that it was all you could do to get out of bed and come here this morning because of the weight of sadness and grief, or the fear and anxiety that almost paralyzes you. Almost but not quite ... because here you are.

Job is a long book and today we read from close to the end. Job is a good and upright man - but he seems to get caught as the story unfolds in almost a game between God and Satan. Satan says to God.. this Job that you think is so faithful ... well just try him, just test him ... “Take away his farm, his health and his children and Job won't be able to stay faithful to you - he will curse you and the day he was born.” But God says “Not my faithful Job.” And so it begins with worse and worse things happening. And God being more and more silent as Job weeps and wails longing to hear God's voice.

Why do such terrible things happen? Is it to test us? Why is God so silent sometimes? Why do we struggle as Job's friends did with what to say to one another? They tried to help but they were not helpful for they tried to explain the suffering away. They tried to tell him what he might do differently. But that is not what he needed. Of all things what he needed was for them just to accept him and how awful it was. He needed them just to sit with him -- in silence -- just to be there and acknowledge how much it all hurt.

Finally, Job finds his voice and for 34 long chapters he tells God what he thinks. He rails at God and refuses to accept any excuses. Job will not let God off the hook. He has been faithful and a good man and this is unacceptable - it is unfair. Job goes on and on and on and on. Job will not let go of God ---- Job will not let go of God's promises. Job will not be silenced by the darkness. Somehow Job is still faithful. Through all the hurt and pain and tears Job will not let go --- but --- then again neither does God let go.

When God finally speaks, it is out of a whirlwind. Renee read the start of God's reply. It may not be the reply that Job wanted or that we want. But God does speak. It is full of poetry and imagery. It goes on and on too - it asks question after question and doesn't give any time for an answer.

Job wants desperately to know why there is suffering in this world - in his life. God talks about images of creation, about morning stars and heavenly beings shouting for joy - about creating from nothing but chaos and setting the cornerstone in place. God seems to be out to remind Job that God is behind and below and above and around all that is - that God has a covenant with all of creation and that covenant means that God will never leave any part of creation alone and will never destroy creation.

Job wants an explanation for suffering - because it seems so destructive at times. Job is convinced that the world is a manageable place and so God should be able to look after things and just take charge and put things to rights. Instead God seems to recognize that the world is not a manageable place and so takes great joy in a creation whose quality is wonder and magnificence and independence and freedom. God has not limited creation nor has God limited God's love of creation nor God's presence throughout all parts of creation.

God tried to be silent for so long that perhaps God prefers the silence - In some way I think God's message finally to Job was - that God is not in the practice of punishing or rewarding human beings but that the universe is far bigger, far stranger and far more mysterious than we ever imagined. And really all God can assure us is that we are not, and will never, be alone in it, but that God is with us whatever happens. God will not be silenced by the darkness either.

The thing about the pain of suffering is that it can change us. It can, for awhile, erase most of what we think we know about ourselves. Whether chronic pain or sudden pain it can change how we view the world, ourselves, one another and God - it can change how we respond to the world - it can change what we do day by day. Pain and suffering are high maintenance relationships which can totally take over our lives and shrink our lives into a smaller circle. To make peace with pain requires as much energy as fighting it, but the end result may be different. The thing about pain is that it can silence us too - it can keep us from speaking our truth to one another and to God.

Pain and suffering change us -- if we think about it our greatest times of growth may well be the times of greatest suffering. That can seem unfair but it is true. God is a God of resurrection and out of pain and suffering God is able to help us to bring beautiful signs of life. This is true when we look at our own lives or when we look at places and times in our world when there seems to be absolutely no redemption or saving grace. Out of those times come great human creativity – art, poetry, music and dance. An unknown poet wrote the following prayer and left it by the body of a dead child at the Ravensbruck death Camp during WWII:

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

This prayer is at the far extreme of the world's experience of suffering but it does bring us back to where we started -- with the reminder to never forget that everyone we meet sits by a pool of tears. Today, with Job's story we are reminded that no one sits by the pool alone, and that as our creed says "We are not alone - we live in God's world."

God's promise to us is that whatever happens and wherever we find ourselves, God will be with us. In the darkness of suffering God will not be silenced. We never sit by a pool of tears alone - God is our constant companion. The darkness cannot silence love and caring because these two can be heard in silence or in din. And we can learn much about sitting there with one another. We need not be afraid - all we need to do is be there.

Following a time of silence we will sing "In the Quiet Curve of Evening", Voices United #278. Please remain seated during the singing of this hymn:

"In the quiet curve of evening,
 in the sinking of the days,
 in the silky void of darkness, you are there.
 In the lapses of my breathing,
 in the space between my ways,
 in the crater carved by sadness, you are there.
 You are there, you are there, you are there."

My thanks for this sermon to all those others who have written sermons and articles and books about suffering. I do not write alone.

My thanks to all those who have shared their lives, their stories and their suffering with me.

My love and thanks to those who have and do walk with me and share in the journey of life as we meet at the "pool of tears".

Amen