

THEME: Where Was God When?

“Sickness, Suffering and the Silence of God?”

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber - based on a sermon by Adam Hamilton
January 15, 2006 at First United Methodist Church - Durango

Scripture Readings - John 11:32-37

When Mary arrived and saw Jesus, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping and saw the other people wailing with her, a deep anger welled up within him, and he was deeply troubled. “Where have you put him?” he asked them. They told him, “Lord, come and see.” Then Jesus wept. The people who were standing nearby said, “See how much he loved him!” But some said, “This man healed a blind man. Couldn’t he have kept Lazarus from dying?” (NLT)

As you are seated I want to invite you to take out your sermon notes and study guide for today. The sermon notes are an outline of today’s message and I want to encourage you to write down things you would like to remember. We won’t cover all of the things listed, but we will get to most of them.

On the back of your sermon notes is a study guide that gives you an opportunity to read the Bible on your own. This week you will get to read from Job, the one book in the Bible whose main purpose is to answer the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” I would normally not have you read the last part of a book first, but since I know you only have 5 days I am going to have you read the final 5 chapters. These are the best parts and I hope you will take the time to read it. You should be familiar with this literature as Christians and it is powerful and profound.

Today we continue in our series of sermons on “Where Was God When?” In this series of sermons we are wrestling with the question of Theodicy. Theodicy is a fancy name for how we reconcile the problem of evil and suffering in our world with the belief in a good and loving God. How do those two things go together?

SLIDE Theodicy

We are also trying in the series of sermons to help you develop and adequate doctrine of providence. Providence is another fancy theological word that means...

SLIDE Providence = How God provides for his people—or how God works

in the world to care for us.

When we are finished with next weekend's sermon, I hope both of those things have been accomplished in your life. Last we dealt with the problem of evil of suffering as it pertains primarily to the choices human beings make. We talked about evil which results from choices other people make. We talked about how God gave us freedom of will. This is a wonderful, and frighteningly powerful gift. We talked about how all of us in this room have some point misused the freedom that God has given us. We have wounded them, and God allows that. God does not want this and has given us all kinds of resources to tell us how not to do that, and yet we still hurt others. In the world, when we find a whole culture working together and making evil choices, we find terrifying consequences. From the Nazi Holocaust to the near nuclear holocaust of the Cold War to the prejudice and war and oppression that exists in places in our world today.

God grieves at these things. We talked about how God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, and that Jesus himself was the recipient of evil choices people make. God wept over his own Son who suffered because of our human freedom. Yet, God will not take that freedom away. That helps me understand much of the evil that takes place in our world today. While some people point a finger at God, and indict God, I look around and see that we are responsible for most of the bad that happens in the world, and not God.

But that does not take care of all the evil and suffering that I see in the world. There is the kind of suffering we experienced this last year with Hurricanes, Tsunami's and the Pakistan earthquake. Many homes were destroyed and many people, mostly the poor and children, suffered. We hinted at the solution for this problem last week when we talked about the natural laws at work in our world. The same laws that cause tectonic plates to move and form the beautiful La Platas and the strata you see on Animas Mountain, also cause earthquakes. We understand that when human beings collide with the laws of nature, humans will almost always lose, but the laws of nature are still good. So that helps me a bit and I think I understand how that works.

But that still does not solve my dilemma as a pastor. My dilemma has to do with the real life people who I touch and to whom I minister—people who experience terrible tragedies in their lives that are not a result of natural laws or someone making an evil choice. Usually this happens when someone gets sick. The times when I struggle with this the most have to do with children who have done nothing wrong, yet out of no fault of their own, end up sick and sometimes

experiencing tragic consequences. At those times I wonder, “Okay God, what is the deal here? I don’t understand how this works. What do you want me to say to these people?” I have prayed that to the Lord, “God, you tell me what to say because I have no clue how to address this situation? I don’t know what to say!” I am guessing that if I don’t know what to say when I am with someone whose child is gravely ill, maybe you don’t either. We’re going to wrestle with that a little bit today.

In these sermons we have tried to not just talk about theory. We have tried to answer the question, “How does this Gospel really relate to our daily lives and to real people?” So in each of these sermons we have invited persons in our congregation to share their stories. To night, Ed and Karla Dudley will share their story with you. Two more remarkable Christian people you will be hard pressed to find. I am a bit biased because I have known them for more than twenty years when we were in college together. 11 years ago, in 1994, they were pregnant with their first child. They were very excited to have this first child as you might expect. Shortly into the pregnancy they found out they were expecting twins, and then they were in shock! This was not something they expected, but they got excited for both of these children.

But 6 months into the pregnancy, there were complications and they lost one of the children. Listen to their story...

VIDEO Ed and Karla Dudley

Why do these things happen? Why didn’t God just give them one child to begin with? Would you know how to pray?

Every single one of us in this room is going to go through a time like this at some point in our lives. I pray to God it is not with one of your children. It may be your spouse, or a parent. It may be facing your own mortality. But you are going to go through a time where the rug is pulled out from underneath you and your world is turned upside down. You are going to think, “Where is God in this?” And when you finally get your bearings you are going to ask, “I don’t even know what to pray for or how?” Today we are going to try and address where God fits in these moments; what do we pray for and how; and I am going to share with you the answers I share with parents and persons I sit with as we go through moments like this together.

To begin with, we want to understand what our normal first response is to tragic things like this. We hinted at it last week. Our typical first response is to

become angry with God. Even people who don't believe in God become religious at these moments in that they begin to cry out and accuse God. "Why did you do this to me? Why did you do this to the one I love?" That is a typical response. We become angry, and God can deal with our anger. God is okay with that and he understands this is how we are at these moments. After we become angry, sometimes we can begin to blame ourselves—like there is something that we did to bring this on. Maybe we did something directly, but more likely we tend to feel that God is punishing us for something we did to displease him.

We dealt with that in great detail last week, but since this is our typical first response in tragedy—to blame God for the tragedy or to feel that we have done something wrong—I want to touch on this once more.

It was April of 1998 when Brian Stewart was arrested. He lived in Columbia, Illinois but was arrested in St. Louis after having traveled to Colorado and several other western states. You may remember the story which was on the front page of newspapers and began the evening news for several weeks. This was the man who injected his own baby with the AIDS virus. It was back in 1992 when he did this. His girlfriend had a child and claimed it was his. He insisted it was not, but paternity tests proved it was his child. Child support was expected but Brian Stewart had a plan.

He worked drawing blood from HIV positive patients in a hospital. He brought a blood sample to the hospital in his lab coat on a visit to his son, and he injected his baby. I remember seeing the news story and being horrified and sickened. Then I became angry as I read the boy's testimony at his father's child. How could someone do this to a child? How could a parent, a father, inject this disease into his son? It was not discovered until 1996 when the child was found to have full blown AIDS. As they began to research the child's history and how he might have contracted the HIV virus, it all began to point back to the father, who is not in prison for life.

I think most of us would agree that this man was a monster. And yet, at those moments when we find out that someone we love is sick, or we ourselves have something tragic happening in our lives, we begin to point the finger at God and believe God has done this thing to us. What we consider monstrosities committed by human being cannot be a part of the activity that God is a part of in our world. For God at his very worst, is infinitely kinder and gentler, than we are at our best. This is not how God operates in our world.

I had a parishioner who had heart surgery with 6 bypasses a number of years

ago. I went visit him in the hospital after the surgery and asked him how it went. He said the surgery went well and then he said, “Boy Jeff, God was sure teaching me a lesson, wasn’t he! God obviously had something he wanted to say to me!” I asked, “What did you think God wanted to say to you?” His response was that God was trying to tell him to eat better, and slow down in life, and eliminate stress. I said I was certain God wanted to say those things to you. “I have no doubt in my mind that God wants you to eat better, take better care of yourself, and distress a bit. But you know, God doesn’t teach us that lesson by sending us into cardiac arrest!” For this man it wasn’t God who gave him a heart attack. It was 30 years of eating donuts for breakfast every day and bacon-cheeseburgers for lunch without ever exercising, which built up the plaque in his arteries, which choked off the blood supply, which caused his heart to go into cardiac arrest. That’s how it works, right! Sometimes we forget that when it comes to illness.

I have to give you an example of this. About 7 years ago I was doing a sermon on healing in which I made the same point I made today, that God does not cause sickness so he can do healings or so we can learn something. Suddenly, a woman at the back of the church had a seizure—right in the middle of my sermon on healing! She was someone who had only attended a few times and she had numerous health problems. Luckily, a nurse was in the congregation and assisted as we stopped the service briefly, and made sure the woman was attended to. As they took her into a room to be comfortable and wait for an ambulance, I tried to figure out as a pastor, “What do I do now?” Well, we stopped and prayed for her in the service, and I tried to go on with the sermon. It turned out the woman was fine and as they took her away to the hospital, I knew she was going to be okay, but I had to get ready for the next service. All I could think was, “God, what were you trying to do today?”

It was right in the middle of my sermon on healing, was there something was God was trying to do! As I was getting ready to start the sermon, I could hear that small, still voice of God say, “Did you listen to that sermon you preached today? Did you hear any part of what you were saying? Jeff, I don’t come into church and give people seizures to teach the pastor a lesson. It’s just not how I operate!” I felt so foolish!

Here’s my point. If that’s my initial reaction as a pastor who is preaching this stuff, I am guessing you might have that initial reaction, even though you know all this stuff I am preaching about. This is why it is so important that you have your head on straight, and you think through it, and you understand it before you get to that point so that when you get there, and you start to say those kinds of things, you

can stop yourself and say, “Wait a minute! What am I saying? That’s not how God works.”

After my sermon last week, a woman in our congregation who lived through a tragedy many years ago that shook her to her core, gave me this wonderful cartoon which helped her get through that time. The Monk is praying...

SLIDE *“Gracious God, we praise you for bringing good out of bad situations...and we thank you for not bringing bad events in order to make us good.”*

So I am guessing that many of you are with me up to now. You get that God does not go around causing seizures in worship, or giving people heart attacks to teach them lessons, or cause a twin to not make to full term. But you are still saying, “You know all that may be true, but God is the one who made us and we get sick, and it seems like God could have done a little better job at this.” Sometimes we think that, don’t we? We think God could do a little better job.

I began thinking about that and wondering where does sickness really come from. It comes from a variety of places. In the case of cancer, it comes from a single cell whose software code has gone bad. It has just one tiny little glitch in it. You know what that is like, when try to boot up your computer but it won’t because there is one tiny little line of code that is not working quite right. So it is with this one cell that goes bad. Most cells die and can’t reproduce when something goes wrong. Of if they do reproduce the body begins to notice and it adjusts and takes care of the bad cells.

But every once a while, that cell with faulty information is able to reproduce. You remember how cells reproduce, they divide, and no that information that was in the once cell is in the two cells. They divide and it’s now in four cells. In the case of cancer, these cells are on steroids and they are told to reproduce and reproduce and reproduce. They reproduce so much that tissue is form. This tissue is now starving for nutrients. It has to find those nutrients somewhere, such as a brain or internal organ. That’s how it works. God does not rewrite that software code. This is something that just happens sometimes.

Did you know there are billions of cells in your body, and do you know what I think is amazing? That this does not happen more often—that’s the amazing thing. I think about our bodies and how fragile they are. They are frail. I think about the finest machinery have in our world. Let’s take automobiles for a minute. Some of you drive very nice cars that will last maybe 200,000 miles. If you have a diesel Mercedes, you may be get more than that, but for most of us 200,000 miles

would be a good distance for a car. That's 14 years at 15,000 miles a year.

Now in order to get a car to for 14 years at 15,000 miles a year you have to do some things. You have to give a blood transfusion...I mean an oil change...every 3 months or 3,000 miles. You will have to replace the brake pads and the batteries and all kinds of rubber hoses around the radiator. You have to replace the tires from time to time, as well as many other regularly scheduled maintenance items. You also have to be sure it has just the right fuel, with no water in the fuel line. You feed it just the right thing and even then sometimes things break down and you have major repairs to do before you get to 200,000 miles. This does not even take into account the body work you may need to have done after an accident!

Your car is made of very durable materials—metal and plastic and rubber. Your body is made of very frail materials—primarily water, flesh and bones. And yet this machine that you call your body—that your upset with God because he has not taken better care of it for you and doesn't make it more impenetrable to diseases—you expect to last 80-100 years! At 15,000 miles a year that is 1,250,000 miles that you are going to put on this machine, and you are never going to change the oil! Most of you are not going to take it in for routine maintenance, until there is a problem, right! Very few of you will have a complete overhaul done, although more and more of you will get new hips, knees, and internal organs. But you know things are going to break down because our bodies are not immune to sickness.

We live in a world where there are germs and diseases and sickness. Our bodies are not perfect and they were planned to be obsolete at some point. All of us are going to die, and that was a part of the plan. The question is when.

Sickness is not God's will, I am convinced of that. In fact, sickness is contrary to God's will. God tolerates is just like God tolerates sin, because he knows that someday it will disappear. Then every once in a while, God uses that sickness that comes to us to accomplish his purposes and his ends. We'll talk more about that next week.

Most of us might agree that illness is a part of life and that is just how it is—one of the consequences of having frail bodies. But then you might be asking, "When I pray to God, why doesn't God heal?" The Bible talks about praying, but sometimes when you pray the people don't get better. I will tell you as your pastor, sometimes I don't understand that either. Some pastors say God simply doesn't heal anymore and that solves it. There's this rule somewhere that says God just doesn't do it anymore. It used to happen with Jesus and the Apostles, but we're

neither so God doesn't heal anymore. Yet, we read in the Bible in James 5: 14-16...

SLIDE *If any among you are sick, let them call for the elders of the church, and the elders of church will anoint them with oil and the prayer of faith will raise them up.*

This is what we do when we do a healing service here. We anoint you with oil. I am an elder of the church, and often when I go to the hospital I take the vial of anointing oil and make the sign of the cross on your forehead and I pray in the name of Jesus for you to be healed. And yet sometimes you are still not healed. There are times, especially when it involved little ones, that I don't understand that. Sometimes it makes me mad.

So, does God hear our prayers? Does God heal today? Let's think about this for a moment. In my 17 years of ministry experience, I am guessing that I have prayed for 20,000 people. I just guessed based on how many prayer requests cards you have turned in, and how many I have received at churches and ministries I have served over the years. Let me share with you for a minute my experience related to those prayers. Of those 20,000 prayers I can think of 5 times where there were miraculous, out of the park, home run, kind of healings. 5 out of 20,000 are not very good odds! Some of you may want to find a preacher with better odds, but I am being honest with you.

Out of those five, two were pretty minor miracles where a headache or fever went away. Once a youth in my youth group was in a car accident and the chaplain came out and told me he was not going to make it out of surgery to relieve bleeding in his brain. While the dad went to make telephone calls, I called the church staff and told them to start the prayer chain. Then I got on my knees with the rest of the family and with about 20 youth who had gathered and we prayed, "God, please don't let Doug slip away. Please touch him and help the doctors and nurses to do something amazing." About 5 minutes later the chaplain came out and said she couldn't believe it, but the doctors had relieved the pressure to Doug's brain and he was going to make it. Not only did he make it, but within a few months he was back in school when the doctors thought he was going to be a vegetable his whole life.

The other two miraculous healings were really not just my prayers, but all of yours. You all prayed two years ago for Hannah Miller and Sara Ruth Leadabrand who were born with a heart defects. I believe thanks to many of your prayers Hannah and Sara Ruth are now doing much better than many anticipated.

You may say the doctors would have fixed what was wrong with Doug and Hannah and Sara Ruth anyway. Maybe so, I don't really know. But in those moments I thought God had intervened in those prayers and those were real miracles that happened. In the rest of my experience with prayers, I am guessing that God has answered my prayers 95 percent of the time exactly as I have prayed them. It may have been later or in a different way that they were answered.

Just like last week when I prayed for Jean Bruscia, a member of our church who is going through seminary to become a pastoral counselor. We got a call that Jean had a brain tumor, and we so we started the prayer chain. Right after I got that word, I met with one of our small groups who were meeting in the church library at the time. Most of the women knew Jean, so we knelt and prayed for God to be with the doctors and with Jean and with her family during this time. It turned out Jean did not have a tumor, but she did have a stroke. They were able to treat her and send her home on Friday. She's now at home recovering and getting better each day.

Did God answer my prayers, or was the going to happen anyway? I don't know. All I know is that in 95 percent of my prayers, exactly what I prayed for has happened. I am guessing those are much different than your odds, if you think about it. If you look back over all the things you have prayed about, most of them came to pass exactly as you prayed them. But not all of them.

When it comes to those prayers that are answered, I sense that God is working in at least two ways, and maybe more. First, I have sensed that in the moment I am praying for someone, God is working in their spirit to help them become more open to healing. This is not the direct healing. God is going to use the doctors or nurses or medicine for that, but God is readying their spirit to receive that kind of healing. I have seen this happen many times, where I meet with someone in the emergency room, or just before surgery, and like you would be if you were lying there, patients can often be a little scared. So I take your hands and I pray specifically to remind you that Jesus is with you. Before I even go into the hospital I pray, "Lord, help me to be you for just a minute. Help them forget that I am me, and help this person to remember that when I walk in I represent you—so that they will feel your peace as they go into surgery." And I take your hand and there is this sort of calm. I pray, "Lord, take care of this child of yours. Minister to her and use the doctors and nurses. Help her to remember she belongs to you no matter what. Help him to rest in your peace."

And you often do. I think emotionally, psychologically, and physically, you

are being prepared in those moments for receiving healing. That is very, very important. You talk to any good doctor and they will tell you that the mind and spirit have as much to do with healing as anything else. God heals in those ways.

But God also heals, I believe, by directly intervening. But when I look at 5 times out of 20,000, that tells me God does not do that very often! When I have met with parents like Ed and Karla when there is a pregnancy or child in trouble, and they ask me, “Jeff, what should we pray for?” I am going to tell you what I tell them. First, we are going to pray for a grand slam, out of the park, home run kind of miracle. The kind where fireworks go off and people say, “Wow, that’s amazing!” We’re going to pray for that because I have seen it happen, and the Bible says “you have not, because you ask not” and I am not going to make that mistake. I am going to just lay it out there. I don’t think God is ever offended when we tell him what we really hope will happen.

We’re going to first pray for a miracle, BUT, I want you to remember that miracles are rare, which they are called miracles. They don’t happen very often. God doesn’t suspend the laws of normal disease and how things take place in our bodies just because we are Christians or because we utter the magic words, or we use the anointing oil. If it worked that way then we wouldn’t need to have church services in here, and we wouldn’t need hospitals or doctors or HMO’s! What we would have is beds lined up all throughout the building, and all I would do every day of the week is go around and touch people with the magic oil and say the magic words and you would all be better. Wouldn’t that be great!

But that’s not how God chooses to operate. So the next thing we are going to do is pray for your doctors and nurses. We’re going to pray God gives them keen insights and helps them understand exactly what’s going to take place, and what can happen. We’ll pray that God will use their hands and use everyone who takes care of you as an extension of his healing. We’re going to pray for the people standing around you, who are supporting and helping and encouraging you.

Finally, we’re going to pray that God will give you the strength and the wisdom on how to respond to whatever life may throw your way. We’re going to pray that you will love your child, or your parent, or your spouse no matter what. All those things we pray for.

God works in our lives. He hears our prayers and sometimes he answers them in miraculous and amazing ways. Sometimes he answers them in most ordinary ways, so that people can say “Maybe it was an answer to prayer and maybe it wasn’t. I am persuaded that there is one of you in this room that is only here today

because there were hundreds, and perhaps thousands of people, who were praying for you continually. I think the doctors would say, “I can’t explain this, except God’s power just kept flowing to you in ordinary ways, extending your life and touching you.”

Even so, I struggle when a little one that I had been praying for doesn’t make it. There are times when pastors become very invested in their flock. There have been times when I have been in the hospital and I got on my knees next to a bedside of a child with cancer and said, “God please, just do it this one time.” I have knelt in the sanctuary, and even laid down flat in front of the altar like they used to do in the Old Testament and prayed, “God, please do this healing, just this one time.” But there are least 20 times out of those 20,000 that I prayed for where it didn’t work. The prayer was not answered. That person died anyway. I don’t understand that all the time, and I wish I did.

But I think this is true. God doesn’t promise us in the scripture that he will make us all better in this life. He doesn’t promise us that he is going to exempt us from sickness. He doesn’t promise that we will never experience suffering or pain in this life. But in the book of Revelation there is a beautiful passage of scripture that says, **“In that place, there will be no more suffering. No more crying and no more pain, for all those things are wiped away forever.”**

I think about this when I read the wonderful story of Lazerus we just read from John, chapter 11. You remember that Mary and Martha and Lazerus were Jesus’ friends. They lived in Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem. Every time Jesus went to Jerusalem, he went through Bethany and stayed with them. He loved these people like brothers and sister. Then one day Lazerus becomes deathly sick. Do you know what this part of the story tells me? It tells me that even Jesus’ good buddies got sick. Even Jesus’ best friends became sick. Just because you are a friend of Jesus, does not mean you will not get sick.

Mary and Martha send word to Jesus who is a day’s journey away and say, “Come quick Jesus, because your friend Lazerus is dying!” But Jesus doesn’t come quickly. In fact he waits several aggravating days, meanwhile Lazerus dies. What kind of deal is that! Did Jesus not really love Lazerus? Or did he know something else, that death is not the worst thing that happens to us? Did he know that he was going to raise Lazerus from the dead so something miraculous would come of his illness.

Jesus begins to make his way back to Bethany, and by this time Lazerus has been dead for four days. Jesus didn’t even make the funeral! Mary and Martha are

in their home when they hear Jesus is finally coming. Martha won't even go out to meet him. You have to read between the lines to fully comprehend what she was thinking. "I'm not even going out to see him, because if he had been here my brother would still be alive." But Mary does go out to meet him and she falls on her knees and says, "Jesus, if only you had come quicker! You could have taken care of this and my brother would not be dead now. If only you had done something!"

Can't you feel what she is feeling. Isn't that what we feel when we pray and our prayers aren't answered like we think they should be? Jesus looks beyond Mary to all who are sobbing, and do you notice what the scripture says? It says "Jesus was deeply troubled." Jesus was disturbed way down in his Spirit. He was grieved and inside he felt something perhaps he had never felt before. Maybe now in Jesus God experienced what it was like to be human and frail. All the time before, God looked down on human beings when they were facing death and he knew they were grieving and had compassion on them. Yet, he didn't know what it was like to be one of us, because it is scary when someone is facing sickness. It is terrifying when someone dies because we can't see what's on the other side like God can.

Now Jesus knew. So he says, "Take me to the place where Lazerus was laid." They take him to the tomb. Did you notice what happens next? It says, "Then Jesus wept." You will never find that anywhere in the Gospels but right here. Jesus cries. Why is Jesus crying? He knows he's about to raise Lazerus from the dead. He knows that Lazerus has been in the Father's arms all this time. Why is Jesus crying? He is crying for Mary and Martha and all human being who can't see what he sees, and who recoil in the face of death and sickness. He is crying for us, you and me.

Did you hear what they said, "See how he loved him." It's true that his tears were witness to his love for Lazerus, but also note what others said, "Could not he who opened they eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" That is the question we ask of God, is it not?

God does not promise us that bad things will not happen if we become a Christian and follow Jesus. Even Jesus' best friends got sick and died. What God does promise is that there is ultimate hope. In just a few moments Jesus would stand back and say, "Roll back the stone!" Then, with everyone thinking he was an idiot, Jesus would shout, "Lazerus, COME OUT!" And they were amazed when Lazerus stumbled out of the tomb.

Do you know what Jesus wanted to show them that day? In the end, everybody is healed. Lazerus went on to die someday. He did not live forever after he was raised. He went on to die a second time, but he is with God to this very day.

There is one last thing that I have come to experience from those 20 people over the last 17 years who faced suffering and my prayers for them were not answered. It is simply this: Every time God trusts someone with their life in the face of the darkest circumstances, the Lord takes those tragic, ugly, terrifying things and he brings something absolutely beautiful out of them.

Clair Munoz was the 9 year old daughter of my Associate Pastor in the last church I served in the Denver area. Clair died of a rare brain tumor after several agonizing months of surgeries and treatments at Children's Hospital. I say with her on several days and in her last moments she was the picture of grace and mercy as she thanked the doctors and nurses who had cared for her, and assured them, her parents, and her pastor that it would all be alright. She was ready to go home to God. It was she who gave us a sense of peace as God carried her in her last days. When you looked at Claire, you could see the grace of God shining through her.

That's what God does. That's part of what Ed and Karla experienced as God carried them along, through their loss. Listen to how they express that, as they look back 12 years later...

VIDEO Ed and Karla Dudley 2

Sickness happens. Our bodies are frail. It's a miracle how seldom we get sick, but it still happens—and all of us in this room are going to die. The Bible does not say, "I will keep you from the valley of the shadow of death." God says, "I will walk with you even when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death." Jesus didn't promise you wouldn't suffer, as a matter of fact he said that in this world you will have suffering, but I will be with you. He said, "Because I live, one day, you will live also." He promised the ultimately, there will be a day where there will be no more crying, no more suffering, no more sorrow, no more tears.

He hears our prayers and he listens as we plead with him. There are times when he just carries us through things we could not make it through on our own. He gives us a peace when we are standing in the face of death. He takes the ugly and terrifying things and turns them into something beautiful and profound when placed in his hands.

Some of you left Christ years ago because God didn't do something you thought he should do—or because God didn't do something you accused him of

doing. Today is a time to come back. Maybe now you understand how God operates and what he does and doesn't do. The truth is, that when you ran away from God, you ran away from the only real hope you have in the face of darkest circumstances. Listen carefully though. Don't choose to follow Jesus Christ because you believe that once you become a Christian nothing bad will ever happen to you. You will be disappointed. Don't choose to follow Christ because you think its cheap health insurance, and if you just turn in a prayer request card it will all be okay, because it does not work that way.

Choose to follow Jesus Christ because he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Choose to follow him because he weeps for his people when they are suffering. Choose to follow Jesus Christ because he will carry you and sustain you through the darkest moments of life. Choose to follow Jesus Christ because he is the only one who can give you the ultimate victory over life and over death. Choose to follow Christ because he is your hope and he loves you more than you can imagine or believe. That is the Good News of Jesus Christ in the face of suffering and pain. Let's pray...

Lord God we confess that we do not always understand what happens in our world. Sometimes we accuse you of things that you had no part in. In fact, you were weeping when they were taking place. Yet you are willing to take the blame if it means healing in our lives. Lord we admit there are moments we have run away from you because we did not understand and times when our faith caved because we saw suffering around us, not realizing you were there all along. Today we confess to you that we need you. We need your forgiveness. We need your love. We need your help in facing dark circumstances. And we revel in the hope that comes from you. Thank you. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

Suffering, Sickness and the Silence of God

The Problem of Evil and the Providence of God
John 11:32-37 and Psalm 42

When Mary arrived and saw Jesus, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping and saw the other people wailing with her, a deep anger welled up within him, and he was deeply troubled. "Where have you put him?" he asked them. They told him, "Lord, come and see." Then Jesus wept. The people who were standing nearby said, "See how much he loved him!" But some said, "This man healed a blind man. Couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?"

– John 11:32-37 (NLT)

Introduction: Recap and Introduction of the Problem of Sickness

I. Where Does Illness Come From?

- A. The physiology of sickness

- B. Does God make people ill or desire that people suffer? John 10:10

II. Does God Heal Today?

- A. How does prayer for healing work? Four possibilities...James 5:14-15

- B. The redemptive power of suffering and sickness

- C. What should we pray for when someone we love is ill?

III. When God Seems Silent and Prayers Go Unanswered...Dealing with the Dark Night of the Soul

- A. Jesus and Lazarus – Mary's Response and Ours – John 11

- B. Why and When God Seems Distant and How We Reconnect – Ps. 42

C. God's Self-Defined Role in Relation to Suffering

D. God's Redemption of Our Suffering

This study guide is designed to allow you to dig deeper into the themes of the sermon. Study these passages with a friend, a Bible study group or on your own. The most prominent book on suffering and the problem of evil in the entire Bible is the book of Job. This week we will read the conclusion of this book – God's answer to Job regarding his own suffering.

Monday—God answers Job's Questions Job 38

The book of Job is an epic poem – the entire book is written in verse. Some believe Job was an actual person and that the book is to be taken literally. Many believe the book is not to be seen as an actual historical account, but is a poetic story designed to help people think about suffering and their views on it (this latter is my view of the book). In the opening chapters we're told that Satan has told God that the only reason Job serves him and is righteous is because God has blessed him and his life is easy. If his life were hard and tested, he would not serve the Lord. So God gives Satan permission to test Job. As a result Satan does terrible things to this righteous man. His children die, his property is destroyed, and his body is covered with terrible sores. The prevailing wisdom of the time this book was written was that bad things happen in our lives because we have done something wrong. The bulk of this book has Job's friends and even his wife saying that he has sin in his life and this is why such terrible things have happened. All the while the reader knows that just the opposite is the reason for his testing – he is truly a righteous man. His wife tells him to "curse God and die." But Job refuses to curse God, saying, "Even if he slays me, yet will I trust in him!" Yet even Job spends his time questioning how God could let this happen to him. Beginning with chapter 38 we hear God's response. This week we will read the last five chapters of this book – some of the most beautiful poetry in all the Bible – which contain God's response to Job's question, "why did you let this happen to me." *Read Job 38.* Did you hear the passion of God, and his frustration, in his response to Job? Imagine all of these things that God sees. What is God's answer thus far? Tomorrow we'll explore this book further. For now, give thanks to God for all of these things that God does and sees as the ruler of the heavens and earth.

Tuesday—God's continuing response to Job Job 39

Following in the same line as yesterday's reading, listen to God's response to Job's questioning of God regarding why bad things have happened to him. This chapter paints a beautiful picture of God's relationship to the rest of creation, and the love and joy God feels in watching the animals. If you did not read Monday's introduction to Job – please do that before you read today's scripture reading. *Read Job 39.*

Wednesday—Job gets a word in, and more of God's response Job 40

If you haven't yet read Monday's intro, read it before reading today's scripture. Now *read Job 40.* Here Job is silenced by God's words, but God knows he still does not understand, so God continues with his questions of Job. When God speaks of the "behemoth" he may have been speaking of the elephant or hippopotamus.

Thursday—God rules over even the frightening creatures Job 41

Read Job 41 which continues God's response. Here God speaks of "leviathan" – this may have been the crocodile, or a mythical sea monster – something like a dragon. Whatever it was, it was the most feared of all creatures by the people to whom this book was written – and yet God can make a pet of him. This chapter points to the power of God and the fact that God is the creator even of the terrifying animals. They bring glory to him as well. This begins to point to another dimension of God's answer to Job – namely, even the things that appear evil or terrifying to humans are under God's power. This is reminding the reader and Job that Job's suffering wasn't a result of God's weakness and inability to respond – and that even suffering, like leviathan, can ultimately bring glory to God, and like leviathan, God ultimately can tame suffering.

Friday—Job's Reply and the Epilogue Job 42

Remember, Job was written to confront the conventional wisdom of his day – that bad things only happen to bad people and are a sign of God's displeasure in one's life. The bulk of the book has Job's three "friends" telling him to repent because he has sinned – and if only he will repent God will stop punishing him. As we learned in the introduction on Monday – Job had

not sinned, he was being tested by Satan. In today's reading Job has finally been completely silenced by God. But for most of us, God's answer to Job is not completely satisfying. The answer we found in chapters 38-42 was basically that we humans cannot understand God's ways. A powerful line in Job's response to God is verse 5. Before his suffering Job had heard about God, but had not known God personally – if he had known God as he does now, he never would have questioned God – he would have trusted in him through the trials he went through. As you read this chapter note how Job's friends and their faulty theology is confronted. In the end Job is asked to pray for them! Finally God blesses Job more in the end of his life than he was blessed before the trials began. *Read Job 42.* [As I read this book, if it is an historical account it raises more questions than it answers – but as a fictional poetic epic the reader is invited to accept what the book has to offer without struggling with its lack of answers to other questions. The story is meant to remind us that sometimes even the righteous suffer for reasons we humans will not always understand. It is meant to teach us about the glory of God and that God is ultimately in control, even of Satan. It is meant to remind us that God is just, and in the end he takes care of those who have suffered, though we may go through intense suffering before he delivers us. And it teaches us to trust God even in the trials.]