



February 28, 201 Sermon by Rev. Nancy Talbot

*Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?*

Readings: Job 1:1; 2:1-10 Romans 8: 31-39

One of the many things that I have appreciated about the Olympic Games is the fact that despite Vanoc's best efforts to window dress the games to present Whistler and Vancouver in the best possible light, from the get-go, the underside of real life has made its presence dramatically known at these games. From the tragic death of Georgian luger, Nodar Kumaritashvili, to the grief of Joannie Rochette and then the discovery of the body of actor Andrew Koenig in Stanley Park these games have been wrapped with the truth that no matter how well we plan for things to go as we want them to in life – there are times when pain and suffering and tragedy has its way with us and there is nothing we can do to avoid it. Sometimes life is simply so brutal and so raw that no amount of logo embossed fencing can cover it up. That, for me, has made these Olympic Games real.

For as long as human beings have been able to express wonder and curiosity, one thing we have been wondering about is pain and suffering. Why do bad things happen to good people? Who or what is it that causes suffering? What is its purpose in our lives?

My hope is that none of us in this room would ever want to suggest that the young luger from Georgia deserved to go off the track and lose his life that fateful Friday -- and yet it's quite remarkable the hold that way of thinking has on our subconscious – that way of thinking that suggests that life is made up of rewards and punishments.

How many of us when something bad happens to us in life almost without thinking ask ourselves what did I do to deserve this? Suddenly we start looking over our lives, searching for clues as to where it was we went wrong—panicking that maybe we have done something to cause our ill fate. And then there are the subtle prejudices that creep into us when we hear about someone else's misfortune – we may not say it out loud but on some level we act as if somehow to not be touched by tragedy makes one superior.

The obvious reversal of the question why do bad things happen to good people – is of course -- why do good things happen to bad people? In this line of thinking only bad things should happen to bad people – assuming of course we could ever come up with a good definition for what makes someone "bad."

A great deal of suffering in life isn't about who deserves it and who doesn't –suffering simply is.. (there are things we can do to cause our own suffering of course.)

I once had a conversation with a young woman whose mother was dying of cancer. "This shouldn't be happening." she said "My mother doesn't deserve to die; she doesn't deserve the pain she's going through. My mother shouldn't be the one to get cancer." "What's your mother's attitude about her impending death?" I asked. "She says why shouldn't it be her who gets cancer? Why shouldn't it be her who dies?"

I later had the opportunity to ask her Mother where that attitude came from. She said that after being diagnosed with cancer as a young woman she had the opportunity to meet people from every walk of life who had also been diagnosed. Some survived it, some didn't. She said she used to try and figure out the common thread, and although over time science has shown us clues into the mysteries of the disease, her conclusion was that to be human is to be vulnerable.

Some of us are visited with illness and tragedy of many kinds, and some of us are not and there seems to be no rhyme or reason to as to why that is.

The people of Chili, the people of Haiti, did not deserve the devastation of an earthquake – although there are some “good” Christians who will suggest they did.

And yet there is something about the human spirit that just can’t help but try and figure out an answer.

The story of Job from which we heard this morning, is one of the most famous ancient stories we have inherited that addresses at the question of suffering. It’s so ancient that it’s thought to have first been written down about 3000 years ago, but similar stories have been said to exist for over 5,000 years. So you can see that we really have been grappling with this question for a long time.

Now the story of Job is meant to counteract the notion that anyone should ever be blamed for their suffering. Job is a righteous man with no apparent reason to invoke the wrath of God, but the opening scene in which God has a conversation with Satan not only allowing Satan to have a little go at Job but encouraging him to do so to see if Job can withstand the test – does leave us with the impression that one of the reasons bad things happen to good people is to test our faith.

In the dialogue with Satan, what’s implied is that Job only loves God because he’s been prosperous, because he and his family have been healthy, because life has been good for him. What if we gave him a little test, took away all those things asks Satan, would Job still love you then, God?

And yet if we literally believe this portrayal of God – God as the giver of tests – or at least the one who allows tests to happen, then we also have to believe that God is all powerful and all knowing. And if God is all powerful and all knowing, we might wonder what kind of a God would put a child to the test of losing a parent, or suffering abuse, or dying a slow and painful death.

If God doesn’t cause suffering to test us and if not all suffering occurs because we deserve it, why does God allow it? and does God actually cause it to happen?

One of the most helpful scholars on the topic of suffering that I’ve found is Dr. John Cobb. John Cobb is a process theologian which among other things means that John Cobb doesn’t believe in the omnipotence of God. (He doesn’t believe God is all powerful and all knowing)

Process theologians believe instead that the divine has a power of persuasion rather than a power of coercion. God cannot totally control any series of events or any individual, but rather God influences our free will by offering possibilities. To say it another way, God has a will in everything, but not everything that occurs is God’s will.

When it comes to evil and suffering, John Cobb says that it cannot be said that God never causes evil. The work of God in the universe has created a world in which evil exists. In the act of creating increasingly sophisticated beings, the divine has brought into being creatures that can suffer. And yet Cobb would say that the work of God is always calling us to reduce suffering and pain. It’s simply too complicated to say that God causes suffering.

And yet what is so remarkable is that there is a positive side to suffering and for me that is where God (the divine) is to be embraced – not so much in the causes of this world's ills – but rather in what can come from those experiences—which is really what the Jesus story of suffering is all about.

Not long before Christmas, one of my oldest friends emailed me from Ontario to say that her father had been given a very short period of time to live, they hoped he might make it through Christmas. He did make it to Christmas but by New Year's he was in a hospice. When I knew the end was drawing near, I told her that in my experience, not always, but sometimes the experience of journeying with someone through the final stages of their life can be quite a wonderful. That was what I hoped for her—that the experience would be as good as it could be.

After her father died and we had time for a visit, she told me that she never would have believed that being with her father when he died could have been such a blessing. She spoke of the bond that had formed between herself, her daughter and her mother over hours spent in hospital; she told me of the reconciliation that took place between her brother and her parents, the healing of a wound that had been festering for 13 years; she spoke of the way she came to know her father on a level that she had previously not experienced; and she spoke of the powerful sense of awesome mystery of watching him take his last breaths; labouring his way into whatever new world exists beyond this earthly life.

I give you this example not to gloss over or deny those experiences of death that have not been so full of blessing, but rather to suggest that more often than not, when we are visited with pain and suffering and loss, we discover things about ourselves that we would never have known otherwise; hidden strengths; we discover things about our friends and families; about our communities; and last but not least, we discover things about God – about the mystery of life.

Who would have believed that a young woman could even lace up her skates and get on the ice just days after her mother's sudden death, let alone put on a bronze medal performance?

There is a wonderful quote from scholar Amy-Jill Levine which says that “Yahweh is a magnet for voiced human pain” When we weep, God weeps, when we cry out in agony, God cries out in agony. Sometimes, it is the voice of our pain, that changes the way that we live and that changes us.

The world has changed; we have changed because of what happened in Haiti.

I do not know why bad things happen to good people and why good things happen to “bad” people. I do know that bad things happen, whether we are good or not and good things happen whether we are good or not. It is the blessing and the curse of being human.

But I also know that to suffer pain and devastation can change one's life – and not always for the worst. The message of the Christian faith for those who are suffering is not to acquiesce and suffer like Jesus' suffered or like Job suffered, but rather to glimpse the good that can come even from suffering, to open oneself to the grace of God that seems to hover particularly close to those who are in pain; and to know that nothing can ever separate us from the love and the compassion of the one who created us.