

This has been an anxious, disruptive and terrible past 18 months, hasn't it?

And right on cue we have this story from Job this morning, and in many ways it's just exactly what we don't need. A story about why people suffer.

Here's a recap of the story again:

God asks Satan (the tempter) where have you come from? (I guess there must be a bunch of places where Satan hangs out with all the other "heavenly beings.")

Satan responds, "I was visiting earth and just kind of wandering around. Nice place, God. "

And God says, "Have you seen my good friend Job? Amazing guy. He is pretty perfect. Has tremendous faith."

Satan raises an eyebrow. "No one is perfect—or has that much faith. He only has faith in you because he's never REALLY suffered. Just let me afflict him with a bit of suffering, and we'll see how faithful he is then!"

God—sure that won't happen, says: "You're on!" then adds, "Just don't kill him."

Satan gives God a big smile. "Oh, I won't kill him."

It almost seems as if God decides—to prove a point—that he will allow Satan to test Job—a person the story acknowledges is "blameless".

Now why would God do that?

Most scholars, both Christian and Jewish, believe that Job was written as a morality play. A morality play is defined as **allegorical drama** – where the characters personify moral qualities, such as charity or greed, or abstractions such as death or youth. The characters in these morality plays serve as witnesses to larger truths. These allegories are meant to encourage people to contemplate the big questions.

Several years ago- at my last church—we did a sermon series where we asked the people in the congregation to submit their biggest theological questions. Then we would preach on them. One of the biggest: “Why do bad things happen to good people.”

Now, many have tried to answer this question, and most do it by blaming something—or someone. Job’s friends will do this very thing later in this book. But I think Job has the right of it.

His final words in the reading today ask the pertinent question: “*Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?*”

Job assumes that God is responsible for both the good and the bad. Do you believe that?

Some do not think that. Some think that God gives us the good. The devil brings the bad.

But then, what are we to do about the passage from the book of Isaiah, when God says, “*I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things.*”

So—does God test us?

That’s a good question. Here’s my answer: I don’t know.

I think we are certainly being tested. I don’t believe that God afflicted us with Covid as a test, but I do believe Covid—and everything else that happens in our lives--- will certainly test us.

We are in an anxious time in our country, in our church, in our families. There just seems to be free floating anxiety all around us, and it often makes us act in ways that surprise even us.

We are all dealing with the ramifications of a disease that has caused the death of over 700,000 people in our country alone.

We want comfort. We want life to be “normal”. We want to stop worrying about our health, our jobs, our world. We want to stop having to change, refocus, adjust. Again.

But as this story seems to be telling us, things – good and bad—sometimes just happen.

We all know there are things in our lives that will test us. We've all been through quite a trial this last year and a half, haven't we?

But there's one thing I do know, that helps me get through this trial by pandemic, and it's this: God has given us each other. We're in this together.

We know that it's often easier for us to just pull up the drawbridge, slam all the doors and say we really need to be focused on our personal needs at this time. Batton down the hatches.

It's much harder for us to put the good of the community above our own individual good. But we aren't the first community of St. Thomas' to have to do that. And we won't be the last.

So we'll keep listening for what we think God wants us to do as a community. We will continue to have faith that God will help us through it.

We will ponder Job's words as he exclaims: *"Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?"*

And we will ask questions. We will wonder why this is all happening.

And we will do it—like the people of St. Thomas' have always done it—together. The earliest churches knew the importance of mutual support. They knew the importance of sharing the load and strengthening the faint-hearted. They knew that there would be good and bad, and everyone adjusts and carries the load. And so do we. We will persevere—together--in faith. Amen.