

Sermon on November 19th 2017 HIW

Text: The book of Job in dialogue with Petr Eben's
"Job for Organ"

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

So here is Job, a man of integrity, blameless and upright, he fears God and shuns evil. "There is no-one on earth like him", as the Lord himself says to Satan. But then incredible things happen. Within a very short period of time he is bombarded by horrifying news, which just gets worse and worse. He loses all his oxen and donkeys, many of his servants are killed; then a fire burns his sheep as well as more of his servants; soon later all his camels are taken away by enemies and the rest of his servants are killed. And as if this weren't enough news reaches him that all of his ten children are buried under their house which had collapsed by the force of a mighty wind which swept in from the desert. That's too much. Job collapses, too, totally shattered. He tears his robe and shaves his head - acts of utter despair. And to top all this Job himself is struck by painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. The only relief he finds is by scraping himself with a piece of broken pottery while sitting among the ashes.

More than 2000 years later, in the 1970s, the Jewish rabbi Harold Kushner is living happily in Boston with his family. When his son Aaron is 8 months old he all of a sudden stops growing. Finally progeria is diagnosed, a very rare illness which causes children to stop growing, they become old rapidly and also look alike. Shortly after his 14th birthday Aaron dies. Up until the fatal diagnosis Harald Kushner had never seriously doubted God's justice. Like people in Old Testament times he was convinced, that only those were hit by such fate who had somehow deserved it. Neither Harold Kushner nor his wife were aware that they had done anything seriously wrong, let alone their son Aaron. Kushner saw himself confronted with deep doubts and despair, he started wrestling with his belief which finally led him to write a book entitled "When Bad Things Happen to Good people". To Kushner's surprise his book soon became a bestseller and was translated into 13 languages.

Not much wonder if you think about it. Up until our present time people have been hit by inexplicably brutal strokes of fate though maybe not as massive as with Job. You yourselves may have experienced that in your own life or you may know somebody with that kind of experience. Children are born handicapped, others fall terminally ill or die in a road accident. Or there is the mother who at the age of 46 dies from cancer after a long period of suffering. She leaves her 8 year old daughter behind. Or we all know of Samuel Koch's tragic accident in Thomas Gottschalk's show "Wetten dass..." which in a second turned the strong and healthy young man into a paraplegic. Why? Why me? Why him or her? As quick as lightning one's whole world is turned upside down. And this is the case, too, when natural disasters

like the earth quake on the borders between Iran and Iraq last week leave behind dark marks of devastation.

More than 400 people have died, thousands have lost their homes. And we all remember when 13 years ago at Christmas 2004 230 000 people lost their lives in a disastrous tsunami. We all could add more of these dreadful happenings. Why are innocent people struck by terrible fate – similar to Job? The crying of those who are hit or left behind is shattering, their urgent questions painful and gnawing. -

Despair and Resignation is the title of the fifth movement of Petr Eben's organ cycle Job. It refers to verse 21 of the 7th chapter of Job "For I shall soon lie down in the dust; you will search for me, but I shall be no more". This movement is in two parts. The restless first section reflects despairing reproaches against God ("Why have you made me your target?" ch.7, 20), changing to a plaintive song of submission in the second part.

➤ Organ Part V

How do you deal with a stroke of fate? Is it possible to ever come to grips with it? There is not an easy, let alone a generally valid answer to this question. It depends on the society you live in, on your background, your personal disposition or on your personal circumstances: whether you live on your own or in a family or with friends.

One way of dealing with it is resignation. Tired of pondering by day and by night over what has happened you finally give up struggling for answers. You resign yourself to the fact that you can't change things anyway and that life has got to go on. This would be a kind of positive form of resignation. You turn back to life, so to speak. But there is also another form of resignation. What's the meaning of life in these circumstances? You are worn out and totally flattened, you are losing the joy of life. Why should I go on living? Thoughts of putting an end to this miserable life yourself are coming dangerously close to your mind and pulling you down even further.

But maybe you have friends or family who stand by you and listen or talk things over with you. The book of Job tells us about many talks of Job with three of his friends. We can't go into this in more detail. It would be too much. But obviously talks, controversial as they are, keep Job alive. He is challenged and challenges his friends. It's not only good, it can be life-saving when you have friends or family to talk with. But Job does even more. He naturally laments on his fate, but it is not a fatalistic lamentation into the open universe with no hope of getting any response. Rather his lamenting is directed to a counterpart. It is God himself. In all his misery and in spite of the danger of losing sight of God Job still turns to God. And not only does he put his lamentation before him, he even accuses God of his cruel deeds. This is extremely daring if not revolutionary. Who is Job to give himself the right to accuse God? Isn't that blasphemy? Is he not aware of the fact that God is the creator and he, Job, is

merely the one who has been created? On the other hand: There is no account in the book of Job that God reprimands Job because of his provoking attitude. On the contrary: In the end God reprimands Job's friends for their arguments and takes Job's questions seriously. Thus for Job it obviously was a successful and above all a very constructive and productive way of dealing with his situation. This may encourage us to do likewise should we be in a similar situation. Why not cry out into God's face, why not challenge him? "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Resigning, talking with others, lamenting, accusing God; there is maybe not only one way of dealing with a stroke of fate. There may be rather ups and downs, like waves which come and go. In all his ups and downs it is astonishing how Job at one point can formulate these words: "Shall we accept good from God, and not the trouble?" (1, 21). This points to the third movement of Eben's cycle with the title *Acceptance of Suffering*. After an initial outcry, this movement reflects Job's confidence, and we hear the peaceful strains of the chorale "If you but trust in God to guide you" which we sang at the beginning of our service.

➤ Organ Part III

How can this come about: Acceptance of suffering? As I mentioned before people's concept of justice in the Old Testament is marked by a clear connection between deeds and consequences. Good people will be rewarded, bad people will be condemned, and suffering clearly is a punishment by God. Breaking up this connection is almost unthinkable in the Old Testament, but it is exactly what Job does. He simply does not accept this connection because he is certain about his impeccable belief in God.

Centuries later Martin Luther in a different, yet somehow similar way did not accept the connection between deeds and consequences. At his time Christians strove to gain God's acceptance and justification by good deeds which could be done even by giving money. The business of indulgences was flourishing. By reading the Scriptures over and over again Luther finally came to the conclusion: No, you can by no means do anything to gain God's grace however good your deeds may be. You are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ. We will hear about that in our reading later. Of course Job had no access to these passages in the bible. That's why yet another way of accepting suffering is mentioned in his book which can be of great value today as well. As I said earlier, God finally answers Job at the end, but he does not do this in a reproachful way. Rather he underlines his own undisputable sovereignty as the creator of this world. "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?" he asks Job. Tell me, if you understand." And God keeps on telling Job in detail what all he has created. In other words he is telling Job: Do not think you can fathom how I make my decisions. Later, in the book of the prophet Isaiah, God repeats his words by saying: "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways

higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (55, 9). This puts things right again. It does not answer all of Job’s questions, let alone our questions, but it places Job into the bigger community of God’s world. It turns him away from his self-centeredness. The course of the world does not depend on his fate as horrifying as it is.

God’s ways are and remain, however, unfathomable for us human beings. In the end they remain a mystery as we also confess before sharing bread and wine during Holy Communion: Christ’s redeeming presence remains a mystery.

The mystery of the almighty and at the same time merciful creator is expressed in Eben’s music in a very refined and almost tender way in the next piece of music: *Mystery of creation*. It opens with a series of mysterious pianissimo chords and ends, after depicting a vivid picture of creation, quietly with a return of the opening question.

➤ Organ Part VI

With these last chords Petr Eben deliberately leaves the questions open which arise in Job’s dispute with God. I would like to take up this open-endedness and ask us at the end: What is important to us when we are confronted with similar situations to Job’s strokes of fate, personally or in natural disasters? Do we resign, positively or negatively? Do we want to dig deeply into possible causes in a rational way and get to the bottom of what has happened or can we live with the uncertainties, with the contingencies of life? And even more important: In all temptation and doubt, can we, like Job, keep on talking with God, lamenting to him, challenging him, maybe even accusing him? And at the same time keep on trusting? Trusting means believing in spite of. Trusting that God through his son Jesus Christ stands beside us, suffers with us, holds us and never abandons us? It is indeed a question of belief to trust that you may sink into the depths but never deeper than into God’s arms. It is the grace of God which embraces us even then, as documented in Paul’s letter to the Romans (Romans 3, 21-28).

May the peace of God which transcends all understanding, guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.