

Dunbarton Congregational Church
Sunday, August 19, 2007
9:30 a.m.

Job 28:1-12, 23-28

“Tunneling Toward Truth”

On the morning of August 6th, 2007, I awoke early, downed a bowl of Special K with red berries, and headed for my computer to catch up on administrative work from the week before. Even at that hour I knew I would stay in my pajamas until nine, a luxury I treat myself to after a weekend of work. I knew that Bill would bring me a cup of coffee from Dunkin Donuts at 10:00—medium decaf, light, one sugar—and that he would be downstairs in the living room, enjoying a cup of black hi-test and a jelly stick. On this day, I would have lunch with a friend, then return home to check out the scriptures for the week and prepare for a CE meeting that evening.

You see, on Monday morning, August 6th, my life, like yours, was resuming its normal rhythm, that blessed unfolding of tasks and habits that brings form to our existence, that soothes us with a sense that life is basically predictable. The commute will be longer on Monday, the staff meeting will be at nine, the kids will have soccer at 5:00, I’ll visit my mother in the afternoon, go to my yoga class, volunteer at the library—our routines are very dear, but they can also numb us to life, to the raw power of calamity and the spiritual pain it just as predictably engenders.

On the morning of August 6th, 2007, two thousand and fifty miles west of Manchester, New Hampshire, seismologists at the University of Utah recorded shock waves of a 3.9 magnitude in the vicinity of Huntington, Utah. What they thought was an earthquake was in reality a cave-in of disastrous proportions at the Crandall Canyon Mine. Six miners in the midst of *their* morning routines were trapped 1500 feet beneath the earth’s surface, four miles from the mine’s only entrance. Hours after the collapse, searchers were unable to contact the miners and could not say whether they were dead or alive. If they survived, a mine executive said at the time, they had enough air and water to last several days. That was fourteen days ago.

State and national officials, plus hundreds of workers immediately descended upon the scene to conduct one of the most comprehensive rescue

efforts in mining history, tunneling horizontally and drilling vertically in a frantic search to locate and extricate the men. Then Friday evening, while westerners were sitting down to dinner and easterners to their favorite primetime TV show, the unthinkable happened: rescue workers were caught in what geologists call a “mountain bump,” shifting layers of earth forced chunks of rock from tunnel walls with explosive force—another cave-in. When the coal dust settled, three men were dead and six injured. Rescue efforts have been suspended indefinitely.

I think it is fair to say that the Book of Job is one of the most stunning pieces of literature in human history. It is the story of a righteous man who, inflicted with all manner of tragedy, is encouraged by his friends to confess his sins and uphold God’s divine sense of justice—“we get what we deserve”—or yield to Satan and revoke an unjust God. Job, as we know, does neither. Instead, he confronts God directly, foreswearing an ancient Jewish “Oath of Innocence” on the one hand, and declaring his faith in God’s ultimate righteousness on the other. In the middle of this drama, out of nowhere, Chapter 28 appears, an interlude regarding Wisdom—where it can and cannot be found. The imagery is exquisitely painful in light of the drama unfolding in Emery County, Utah:

"Miners put an end to darkness, and search out to the farthest bound the ore in gloom and deep darkness. They open shafts in a valley away from human habitation; they are forgotten by travelers, they sway suspended [from ropes, which is how they descended into the mine in ancient times], remote from people . . . The path [they trod] no bird of prey knows, and the falcon's eye has not seen it. The proud wild animals have not trodden it; the lion has not passed over it. They (the miners) put their hands to the flinty rock, and overturn mountains by their roots. They cut out channels in the rocks, and their eyes see every precious thing. The sources of the rivers they probe; hidden things they bring to light." This, written 2500 years ago.

How many of us will ever probe the deepest recesses of the earth? How many of us will descend to a place no bird of prey will ever see, nor the fiercest beast will ever tread? How many of us will put our hands to flinty rock and overturn a mountain by its roots? How many of us will see every precious thing hidden a thousand feet within the earth? Even at *this* depth, a thousand feet within our hearts, the Wisdom of the universe remains a mystery, revealed only in the Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ.

“God alone knows the way to Wisdom,”
writes the author of Job in verse 23,
“he knows the exact place to find it.
He knows where everything is on earth,
he sees everything under heaven.

When he gave to the wind its weight, and apportioned out the waters by
measure; when he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the
thunderbolt; then he focused on Wisdom,
made sure it was all set and tested and ready.
Then he addressed the human race: 'Here it is!
Fear-of-the-Lord—that's Wisdom,
and Insight means shunning evil.'" (The Message, adapted)

It is always distressing when individuals hold God accountable for the
calamities of the world, for floods and earthquakes and cancer and car
accidents and anything that subtracts from our notion that life is basically
benign and predictable and ours to control. Faced with disaster, some
Christians cry like Job's friends, “We must have deserved it!” Indeed, there
may well be some mine owners who will face a serious day of reckoning
when this sad dust settles. Yet other Christians, including those in
progressive churches like ours, exonerate God far too quickly, as if God has
no real interest in Creation, no *real* relationship at all with humankind.

In Jewish theology, which is, of course, our heritage, neither response is
adequate. As the author of Job says, we must both fear God and shun evil;
we must bend to the mystery and power of a God who gives weight to the
very wind, and actively follow the Word and wisdom of God at the same
time. Where do we find this Wisdom? As Christians, we proclaim it in the
life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Here in the Book of Job, the word for
Wisdom, *Adonai*, means "Lord," the same title reserved for the Jewish
Messiah. For us, as Christians, Wisdom exists in the words and work of
Jesus.

How sad for those who believe that tragedy is the opposite of love. How sad
for those whose faith has run aground on the shoals of this misconception.
Evil, my friends, is the opposite of love, and God has nothing, *nothing* to
do with that.

Three rescue workers died last Friday evening living out this Holy Word.
Thousands of people across our nation and the world are actively offering

hope to the families of those trapped miners through prayer. Just as the logic of suffering eludes us, just as we will continue to wrestle with what we call in the trade the “theodicy” question, we have to concede that disaster *does* evoke the world’s better side.

Perhaps, just for today, we can leave it at that, admit the extent to which disaster—personal or otherwise—terrifies us, trust like Job in a God we do not understand, then get busy and do what is within our Christ-inspired power to do.

“How wisely fate ordained for humankind,
Calamity! Which is the perfect glass,
Wherein we see and know ourselves.” (Sir William D’Avenant)

What we see in that glass *is* downright inspiring, a consistent reflection of humanity’s capacity for good. And though it pains us to say it, though it even makes us as furious as Job, let us concede this much: as we prepare today to glide back into our daily routines, as we continue to pray that those miners in Huntington, Utah will be saved, as we continue to reach out to *all* those in the world who lay trapped beneath the earth’s rubble, in spirit or reality, *when we shape the cadence of our life around Christ, God’s vastly inscrutable truth can be found.*

Amen.

Trapped men: Louis Alonso Hernandez, 23; Manuel Sanchez, 41; Kerry Allred, 57; Carlos Payan, in his 20s; Brandon Phillips, 24; and Don Erickson, 50.

Rescue workers: Dale Black, Gary Jensen and Brandon Kimber.