

“We’re In Good Hands: Dealing With Personal Tragedies”
(A Reflection on the School Shooting in an Amish Schoolhouse)

Job 1:1; 2:1-10

October 8, 2006

Alright, let’s play a little game called “name that company.” I’ll give you a catch phrase that appeared in this company’s ads for many years and you tell me which company it is. Here it is **“You’re in good hands with _____.”** That’s right, it’s Allstate. That’s a great motto for an insurance company isn’t it? When it comes to insuring what is important to us, our homes, our cars, our health, even our lives, it’s important to know we are in good hands, secure hands, caring hands. Why? Because in this world both the insurance companies and we ourselves know, bad things happen and when bad things happen it’s good to know we’re in good hands. In today’s passage from the ancient Hebrew Scriptures Job isn’t placing his trust in Allstate, he’s placing his trust in God, talk about good hands!

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. A company is only as good as its ongoing, steady practice. It’s not enough to have a slick motto and advertising campaign. You have to be able to back it up with concrete results, or the customers will soon catch on that you don’t really mean what you say and they will go elsewhere. They will look for other hands in which to entrust their property, their very lives, their loved ones, even their deaths. The book of Job certainly raises the question of whether or not we really are in good hands with God? Certainly Job’s wife doesn’t think so, she suggests to Job that he curse God and die! Indeed, from her point of view there are no “good hands” to entrust all we hold dear to, God’s or anyone else’s!

When one considers this world with all its brokenness, sinfulness, senseless, unnecessary violence one might well be moved to follow Job's wife's suggestion. As if wars, earthquakes, floods and famine were not bad enough, this last week we all vicariously, through our TV screens, found ourselves in the midst of three school shootings in which a principal and 6 or 8 students were killed for now particular reason, other than they were at the wrong place at the wrong time and a tremendous evil was perpetrated on them for no reason whatsoever, at least not one that makes any real sense.

It's not so very different than what happened to Job. We are told at the beginning that he **“was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.” (1:1)** We learn later in that opening chapter that he was a father of seven sons and three daughters. He was a loving and doting father who even rose very early in the morning on every holy day and offered sacrifices to God in his children's names, just in case they had forgotten to do so themselves. We also learn that he was a very good farmer and rancher, for his prosperity was recognized by all. He is an ideal husband, father, rancher and member of the community. The story teller puts it quite simply, **“There was no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man.” (1:8b)** He is so upright and blameless that even God notices.

Perhaps like me the shooting that go to me the most this week was the one that took place in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, at the Amish schoolhouse. While the Amish lifestyle is not my idea of paradise, it none-the-less is idyllic in many ways. There are aspects of the Amish lifestyle that reflect our ancient images of paradise lost.

We all saw the one room white clapboard school house that looked like something straight out of *Little House on the Prairie*. There it sat in the

midst of cornfields and white oaks. Unlike our city schools there were no guards, no alarms, and no “drug-free zone” posters. The school didn’t even have electricity or a telephone! Students didn’t bring laptops, or I-pods, or CD’s to class. There were no TV’s or DVD players to bring the outside world in. The students were dressed in back pants and dresses. The girls wore bonnets. No T-shirts, bare midriffs, torn jeans, much less gang wardrobe. Students walked to school or were dropped off in their parents horse and buggy.

Just as in the case of Job, this idyllic world has come to know real evil and tragedy. It came from an unexpected source. Charles Carl Roberts, a local milkman, who picked up milk from many of the Amish farms, wrote a suicide note, took his own children to school and then enacted a nightmare that had apparently been troubling him for sometime. His nightmare became the nightmare of every Amish family who had a child in that school and for the wider community; indeed it became a nightmare for all of us, via the evening news.

Such nightmares can not help but raise the question, “Where do such things come from?” “What is the source of evil in our world?” “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Following the lead from the story in Job, “In whose hands are we Satan’s or God’s?” Or perhaps a more modern question, “Are there really any good hands, godly hands to be in?”

Questions like these are not new. They are as old as the human race and they will be asked till the end of time itself. In chapter one of Job we are told that all hell breaks out in Job’s idyllic life. An enemy tribe raids his fields and carry off his oxen and donkeys and killed his farm workers who were with them. Only one lives to tell the tale. Fire falls from the heavens and destroys his sheep and all but one farm worker caring for them. Another

enemy tribe carry off all his camels and kill all but one worker there. And as if all this wasn't bad enough, the coup de grace, a servant comes running to tell him that the roof of his eldest son's house has caved after being struck by a terrible wind out of the desert, in killing all ten of his children!

What will be Job's response? Well, not surprising he is filled with grief. In the custom of the time he expresses that grief by tearing his robe, shaving his head and falling on the ground, but wait he does one more amazing thing, "he worships!" He makes an amazing statement, **"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."** (1:20-21) Wow! Doesn't that just blow your mind?!

Now I don't want to get sidetracked into the whole question of whether or not God causes such bad things to happen. Let me simply say that I don't believe God does cause such bad things to happen. Our story teller in Job says that Satan caused these things to happen, although with the permission of God. I am not going to get into the whole theodicy question today, "If God is all powerful and all good, why do such bad things happen?" What Job's statement says to me is that for him nothing is outside of God's ultimate grasp. Evil will not have the last word and that a person who trust in that can not ultimately be overcome. In regards to the school shootings at the Amish school house I agree with Fannie Beiler, a Mennonite, who lives in the area, who said, **"I don't understand it, but it's not from God. He wants us to love one another."**

In the next stage of the story, in chapter 2, God throws Job's faithfulness in Satan's face and Satan wants to up the ante on Job. Satan says to God, **"Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives.**

But stretch out you hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.”

In the next scene Satan strikes Job with a terrible skin disease that covers his body from head to toe in boils. Sitting in a pile of ashes Job takes a piece of broken pottery and scraps away the dead flesh to try and bring himself some relief.

His wife doesn't help matters much. We tend to give her a rough time because let's face it compared to Job she doesn't come off too well, but then again how would we fare in such a situation? Would we do much better? I would hope so, but then again, Let us remember that while she has not been physically afflicted, she too has lost all her children, the children she had carried in her womb, and she has lost almost everything else as well, so perhaps we can cut her some slack when she says to Job, **“Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.” (2:9)**

I would love to know the Hebrew word for integrity here. My commentary didn't help me here. Certainly the uprightness of Job's character must be part of the reference here, Job's continuing willingness to trust and praise God in spite of everything. For me there is also a sense of “wholeness” involved in integrity. When the space shuttle Columbia crashed, it did so because its structural integrity had been compromised by the piece of frozen foam and the hot atmospheric gases were able to penetrate the wing, causing it to fall off. Perhaps there is a sense in which Job was able to maintain his wholeness by continuing to be able to praise God as his Creator and Sustainer. Certainly, I believe that our wholeness as human beings is made possible by our ability, or should I say the grace or blessing to be able to believe in God, trust in God, in the most trying moments of our life. Perhaps it was exactly such a failure that led Roberts to

do what he did to live out the nightmare that had long afflicted him?

Perhaps this is the source of many nightmares in both our personal lives and in this world we and all whom we love inhabit?

If the shootings do much to cause us to want to join Job's wife in cursing God, cursing the world and everything in it, or cursing the "emptiness" then the reaction of the Amish community of faith should inspire us to believe in and praise God.

I personally found it profoundly moving that in a world that seems to live all too much by the old dictum "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" the Amish community in Nickel Mines has chosen a very different path, a more Christ like path. News reporters seemed to be amazed that the Amish people they spoke to didn't sound like the people they interviewed everyday. Yes, they spoke of being deeply hurt by what had happened and of their surprise that it had happened, but they also spoke of Christ's call to forgive. One of the families of a young girl who had been shot even went so far as to invite the wife of Charles Roberts to come to the funeral, perhaps recognizing that she too must be both ashamed and grieving. We learned that at an Amish funeral the main focus is on praising God. I truly believe that even amidst the terrible tragedy in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania this week there has been an amazing profound praising of God that expresses the integrity and wholeness that deep faith can bring.

No matter what happens, we are in good hand! Thanks be to God.

Amen!

