

Chapel Words (May 1, 2008) – Rev. Jim Holland

Have you ever had a really bad day, a day when something goes wrong and it feels as though your whole world has fallen apart? Have you ever had a day like that?

The book of Job in the Bible is the story of one poor schmuck for whom everything went wrong. His life was as good as one could imagine. He had a loving family, in fact, he had several loving families. He had wealth and prestige and he even had a clean conscience. He treated others kindly and he went to the temple everyday to pray.

And then everything fell apart. One day God was talking to the devil and the devil was saying to God, “The only reason people love you, is that they think that you are responsible for all the wonderful things in their lives. If you treated people badly they would start hating you.” And the Lord said to the devil: “I’ll make you a little bet. Take one of my faithful servants. Take Job, and torment him as much as you want, and I’ll wager that he will remain faithful to me.”

And so the devil began to torment Job. He took everything away from him; his family, his wealth and his health. And Job did remain faithful to God. But after the torment was over, and Job’s life had been restored to him, he asked God, “Why did this happen to me?” God answered by saying: “I am God. It is I who created the universe, and I can do what I like.”

This sounds strange to us. This is certainly not the warm and fuzzy God that I tend to preach about. But this is a very ancient view of God. This is a God who loves humanity, but in the way a creator loves his creatures. The idea of a mutual love between God and humans develops later, with the prophets and with Jesus. But the God of Job is a God whose message to the world is: “I know things can be tough. Buck up. I am God and you are not. You’ve got to trust me, and it isn’t always going to be easy.”

You may know Randy Newman as the person who wrote and sang the themes to movies like *Toy Story* and *It’s a Bug’s Life*. He’s the guy who sings like he’s got a mouth full of mozzarella cheese. In the 1970’s he wrote a piece called, “God’s Song” which echoes the story of Job. I won’t sing it, because I can’t sing like Randy Newman. One of the choruses goes like this:

*Man means nothing he means less to me
than the lowliest cactus flower
or the humblest yucca tree
he chases round this desert
cause he thinks that's where I'll be
that's why I love mankind*

This is how we all feel at times during our lives; as if God has abandoned us and the world is conspiring against us.

When I think of Job I often think of my father-in-law, Wim Krayenhoff. Like Job, he had a wonderful life. As a young university student in Holland in the late 1930s he was fun-loving and happy-go-lucky. He loved a good joke, and he could take it as well as dish it out. He was robust and attractive, he came from a loving and well-to-do family and he enjoyed life as much as anyone who ever lived.

Then on May 10th, 1940 his world fell apart. The German army invaded Holland and soon closed down the universities. Wim immediately joined the resistance movement. He told me that this was not heroism. He said that there was simply no choice; that the decision was not a decision at all. That he and his friends and his brothers and his future wife all simply did what they had to do.

Wim was engaged in a variety of activities designed to sabotage the German War effort, and this was, he told me, the most gratifying time of his life, the only time he knew without any doubt whatsoever that what he was doing was not only right but necessary.

Eventually, Wim was captured. He was sent to a series of labour camps. In one camp it was estimated that 3000 Dutchmen died, and Wim was one of a small handful who survived. His survival beat almost insurmountable odds. When he was finally released at the end of the war he weighed 66 pounds. I won't share the stories of torment that he told me, but believe me, Job had nothing on him.

What is remarkable is not that Wim suffered or that he survived, what is remarkable is that he came out of the war without any perceptible bitterness. He did not spend the rest of his life feeling sorry for himself or expecting the world to compensate him for what he suffered. He was, in fact, one of the hardest working and least bitter people I have ever met, and he had more right to be bitter than anyone I have ever known.

What characterized Wim was his curiosity about people and ideas, and the hell that he went through during the war did not squelch this curiosity, in fact it is probably what kept him alive. He made many friends while he was imprisoned, and people typically did not make friends in concentration camps. One of his friends was an Italian officer, and in order to get to know him better, Wim learned to speak Italian. While the people around him were living in terror and total despair, Wim was learning a new language.

When he was released he was taken in by the Swedish Red Cross. When he was brought to a table filled with all kinds of food the sight shocked him so much that he passed out. When he came to couldn't remember a thing and . . . he could only speak Italian. So he was placed in a ward with other Italians, and for several days everybody was trying to help him remember where, in Italy, he came from. Finally a Dutchman came through the ward, and when Wim heard him speaking everything suddenly came back to him.

Wim remained keenly curious about life until the day he died five years ago. When I have a bad day and feel like my life is falling apart, I think of Wim, and I can hear him saying: "You have a choice. When things seem to go wrong you can feel sorry for yourself, or you can live the life that is put before you, and live it to the fullest. There is always something to learn, always something or someone to enjoy. There is always something, no matter how difficult life becomes to make your life worthwhile and bearable."