

**SOUL RESET:
Life in Crisis**

Job 7:7-16

*When everything falls apart,
what do we know, and what do we do?*

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
March 29, 2020

There was a shipwreck at sea, and only one sailor survived, washed up on a small uninhabited island. He was exhausted. He cried out to God to save him. Every day he scanned the horizon, searching for help. Nothing. Finally, he managed to build a rough hut and store the few articles he had salvaged from the shipwreck.

One day, coming home from hunting for food, he was horrified to see his little hut in flames, sending a cloud of smoke into the sky. Apparently, his campfire had ignited the hut. It was the most devastating thing he could imagine. He flung himself on the sand and wept until he passed out from exhaustion.

The next thing the sailor knew, there was a poke on his shoulder. Another sailor stood there, with a crew and a small boat and a larger ship in the distance.

“Are you OK?” the rescuer said.

The survivor asked, “How did you find me? How did you know I was here?”

The rescuer replied, “What do you think? We saw your smoke signal!”¹

Sometimes the worst thing that can happen can turn out to be the best thing that can happen. That’s how God works, bringing good out of evil, blessing out of curse.

If not the worst thing that has ever happened, the outbreak of COVID-19 has at least changed the lives of people all over the planet. As of yesterday morning, there were over 600,000 cases of the disease in the world and over 28,000 had died. In the U.S., we now have over 100,000 cases (more than China, where the thing started), and over 1,700 deaths. The health crisis is bad enough, but the economic fallout from the business closures and loss of jobs is also quite devastating. We have been bombarded with information and opinions constantly; fear and anxiety are at a fever pitch. It’s just a weird and unprecedented time, at least in our memories.

What can we do in these crazy times? What does our faith teach us? Where is our hope?

With all that has been going on, I have almost forgotten that we are also in the season of Lent. We are walking the path with Jesus as he prepares for his destiny in Jerusalem. It’s a journey that will end with his arrest,

torture, crucifixion, and death. Lent is a season when we confront the sacrifice of Jesus and enter again into the grief of considering what our Savior did for us. Jesus took the sin of the world (and you and me) into himself on the cross, and through that sacrifice, we are saved. We are redeemed. The worst defeat becomes the greatest victory when Jesus is raised on Easter.

We know from our faith story that God can turn things around. We know that even death is not the final answer. We know that whatever dark valley we have to walk through, there is hope to bring us through on the other side. The coronavirus has not changed that.

There's an old hymn that talks about "seasons of distress and grief,"² and that's certainly where we find ourselves today. But apart from the COVID-19 outbreak, we all have times in our lives when things just fall apart. We walk through the darkest valley of pain and despair. We find ourselves on the losing end of things. Life becomes a struggle against tremendous obstacles that we never even saw coming. Have you ever been there? Are you there today?

Dr. Junius Dotson, the author of the book *Soul Reset*, which we are using for this Lenten sermon series, had a year in his life that was like a perfect storm.³ Grievs seemed to assault him from every direction. The year was 2012. He had come through a time of struggle with depression and exhaustion and was getting back on an even keel. Then his mother passed away. They were very close, and that blow hit Junius hard. In the aftermath of his mother's death, he found out that the man he had always thought was his father was not his father. That rocked his world to the core as well, to think that the man he was closest to for his entire life was not really his father. Then, before the year was over, Junius' brother died suddenly. The weight of grief piled on Dotson's life, and he didn't know how he could come out from under it. But he did. He gradually crawled out of the hole and regained his strength and went on to do more and greater ministry. I want to share with you today some insights from his journey.

When Dotson was trying to make sense out of his burden of grief, he turned to the Biblical story of Job. Job is always the poster child for bad times. The Book of Job in the Bible is not about a historical person. It is a

work of fiction, like a play. It was written to address a certain question, perhaps the most problematic question of all for people of faith: Why do bad things happen to good people? If bad things happen to you, does that mean you are out of favor with God? How are we to understand evil in the world?

The problem is set up as a wager between Satan and God, that Job would lose his faith and curse God if all the good things in his life should suddenly disappear. Job had it all—a big family, a great business, a luxurious house. In addition, he was a good man, righteous in every way. But in a short period of time, he lost it all—his kids were killed, his flocks were stolen, his home was destroyed. All he was left was a skin disease and a nagging wife. It was bad.

But even in the midst of his devastation, Job kept his faith. He refused to lash out against God. In humility, he said, “*The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.*”⁴ Later on he would say, “*Though God slay me, yet will I praise him.*”⁵

It was tough, but Job was coping, until his religious friends showed up. At first, they did the right thing. They were so distressed at what had happened to Job that they couldn’t even speak. For seven days, they just sat with Job in silence. Sometimes the best thing you can do for someone is just to be with them. Don’t try to explain or justify or cheer somebody up; just sit with them. We call that the ministry of presence.

Finally, Job broke the silence with a long lament about his suffering. Of course, he was devastated. But then his friends began to try to explain his condition. That’s when the trouble started. The religious friends were full of conventional wisdom: If you’re good, God will bless you; if you’re bad, God will punish you. If bad stuff happens to you, you must have sinned or offended God in some way. Job, what did you do to deserve this?

We get that kind of conventional wisdom even today. “Everything happens for a reason. It’s just God’s will. God won’t give you more than you can handle.” Like the advice of Job’s friends, this kind of conventional wisdom is not helpful and gives us a distorted picture of God.

The advice of the friends causes Job to question the prevailing theological paradigm of his day, “If you’re good, God blesses; if you’re bad, God

punishes.” There’s a good reason Job is in the Hebrew Bible. He ends up demanding an audience with God to sort this all out. And finally, after 36 chapters of discussion, God shows up.

God never really answers the question of Job, “Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do the innocent suffer?” God’s answer to Job is more on the order of, “Are you God? No, I am God, and you are not. There are some things you cannot understand. Deal with it.” And Job finds his answer, not in the words God says, but in the encounter with the divine Presence. Job repents of his arrogance toward God, and God restores Job to his former state of blessing.

Despite the critique of Job, the conventional wisdom of the Old Testament was still prevailing when Jesus lived and taught. In the 9th chapter of John, the Lord encounters a man born blind. His disciples ask the conventional question, “*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*” But Jesus gives an unconventional answer: “*Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.*”⁶ In other words, this bad thing—blindness—is not something God sent as a punishment for sin. But God can use this bad thing for good. We can respond to this bad thing by showing the works of God. It’s exactly what Paul was saying in Romans 8:28: “*We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him and are called according to his purpose.*”

Here’s the reality. Some suffering we understand. It is a direct cause and effect of natural forces or human sin. We get it. But some suffering we do not understand, no matter how hard we try. However, in all types of suffering, God can work for good, and we can work for good alongside God.

So when life falls apart—through grief or illness or disaster or tragedy—what can we say? What do we know, and what can we do?

We know that God is God. There is a God, and it’s not us. God made the world and all that is in it, and God will ultimately bring all things to a glorious conclusion. That doesn’t mean there won’t be trouble along the way. God is God.

We know God loves us. We are God's people and the sheep of God's pasture. God's will is always for our good, and we cannot be separated from God's love.

We know God's response to our suffering is to enter our pain with us. If something bad happens to us, God's heart is the first one to break. We know this because of Lent. God does not refuse the pain and suffering of the world as God's Son is brutally murdered on the cross. If we want to ask, as Elie Weisel did in the concentration camps of Germany, "Where is God?" the answer is always, "Right here with us."⁷

Finally, we know that God can bring good out of evil. Jesus healed the man born blind, and God's works were revealed. You have seen it happen. Faith is strengthened through trial. Courage is tested and tempered by obstacles, and people of faith respond. Some have wondered if this virus outbreak might be the catalyst for a period of religious revival, as we all realize just how important the connections of the faith community are. It could happen.

Understanding these things about a time of crisis, what can we do? How do we respond?

First, we can use all the resources for help that we have. In his time of grief, Junius Dotson spent time in prayer, of course. But he also went back into therapy and got back on his anti-depressants for a while. You have to do whatever helps. In our current crisis, there are resources for help, both medical and economic. There are measures we can take to increase our odds of safety: social distancing, staying home, washing hands, coughing and sneezing safely. Simple stuff, but we ignore these measures at our own risk. It's just common sense to use the help that is available.

We can respond in worship. As Job said from the depths of his despair, "*Though he slay me, yet will I praise him!*" A couple of weeks ago, we talked about the "yet praise" mentality. It was based on the words from Psalm 42: "*Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*"⁸ Even in our times of crisis, even when the storms of life are raging, we can still praise God—because we know God loves us; we know God does not send evil upon us; we know that only God is our hope for the future.

We can respond in relationships. The crisis times of life are when we realize how important our relationships are. It is important to be in community, especially the community of faith. That's why you're listening to or watching this worship service. During this time of isolation, use the means you have—telephone, text, computer, social media—to reach out and engage with your people. Check on your neighbors, friends, and families. If you can help someone in need, especially someone in a high-risk category for the virus, do what you can to ease their burden. We have several families that have volunteered to help with groceries, medicine and supplies. That's what the church community is about. Acts of mercy are still a means of grace. We can respond in love to the people around us.

With all that has happened in the last few weeks, we might be tempted to ask, "What next?" The day's report on the virus comes out, and we ask, "What next?" A new restriction on our movement is issued, and we ask, "What next?" There's a lack of medical equipment or shortages at the grocery store, or someone we know gets sick, and we wonder, "What next?"

I was helped this week by an essay written by Rev. Jake Owensby, an Episcopal bishop in Louisiana. Entitled "Where Is God In That?" the essay turned the question of "What next?" completely around. Normally in this time, we are reeling from the last bad news, and we wonder what's next. That's because one thing leads to another. The virus is passed, and people get sick. There aren't enough respirators, and people die. But there's another type of causation that is based on the future, not the past. Drawing on the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas, Bishop Owensby calls this a *teleological cause*. Some things happen because of the expectation of the future. You walk over to a window on a hot day because you want to raise it and feel the cool breeze. The cause is your anticipation of the outcome.

When Jesus was confronted with the man born blind, the disciples asked a cause-and-effect question: "Why was this man born blind?" Jesus gave a future-cause answer: "It was so the works of God could be revealed."

When we see the tragedy and trouble of the coronavirus around us, when we see our life in crisis, we need to ask "What next?" not in terms of what terrible thing has been caused to fall upon us, but "what next?" in terms of what God is doing in the midst of this evil to bring about good.

Bishop Owensby writes, “The loving God is already actively working to heal the sick, mend the shattered, befriend the lonely, lift up the poor, and liberate the captive. God’s love for us draws us into participating in that divine work with our own hands and feet. God’s love for us—and our love for God—expresses itself in love of neighbor. We inhabit a messy world. All around us we see suffering, grief, and want. And if you want to look for God in that, you should ask: What next?”⁹

In these days of crisis, there are some things we know, and there are some things we can do, and when this time is over—and it will be—we will emerge better and stronger and deeper and more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. This housefire may be a smoke signal after all. The rescue is on its way. That is the best we can hope for.

SOUL RESET SPIRITUAL PRACTICE, WEEK FIVE

Worship

Day 1: Consider the practice of lament. Lament is the Biblical practice of grieving before God, sharing our feelings with God, and asking God to come near. Read Psalm 22 and look for expressions of both lament and worship.

Day 2: Continue to reflect on the practice of lament. Rewrite Psalm 22 in your own words for your own life situation. Trust that God can handle your deepest feelings.

Day 3: Choose a worship song or hymn as your theme for the day. Listen to it or sing it several times during the day. Use each repetition of the song as a time of worship. What does it feel like to have an attitude of worship throughout the day?

Day 4: Adore God today. Look for God’s majesty all around you--in nature, in people, in events. Pray prayers of

praise for what you see. At the end of the day, give thanks for all the God-sightings you had during the day.

Day 5: Subscribe to a worship podcast. There's a good one at "FSFUMC sermons." or search "worship" on your podcast app. Use technology to bring you closer to God.

Day 6: What do you REALLY love to do? Give thanks to God for whatever you love with a passion, and spend time with God as you enjoy that activity. Let a spirit of worship rise up within you as you do the thing you love to do.

Day 7: Practice corporate worship. Although we cannot meet together in person at present, join a worship service online or over the radio. (We'll be back seven days from now!) Enter that time of worship with an expectation of God's presence, and give praise to God for God's goodness and grace!

¹ John Yates, "An Attitude of Gratitude," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 110.

² William Walford, "Sweet Hour of Prayer," *United Methodist Hymnal*, No. 496.

³ Junius B. Dotson, *Soul Reset: Breakdown, Breakthrough, And The Journey To Wholeness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019), 75-89.

⁴ Job 1:21.

⁵ Job 13:15.

⁶ John 9:2-3.

⁷ Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 64f.

⁸ Psalm 42:5b, NIV.

⁹ <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/10194/where-is-god-in-that?>