Do you know which is the oldest book in the Bible? It’s not a quiz—I didn’t know (or couldn’t remember) until my son mentioned it a couple of years ago. Answer? Job.

That feels significant to me—the oldest book in Scripture, written sometime between the 7th and 4th centuries BCE, dealing with the question of undeserved suffering in the world. And, of course, with human responses to that suffering and attempts to explain it. This oldest book deals with one of the oldest questions: why does bad stuff happen to innocent people? Or, as Rabbi Harold Kushner stated it in the title of 1981 book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

Spoiler alert, if you’re about to read the whole book of Job or Kushner’s book: neither answers the question definitively.

The important thing is that the unknown author of Job wrestled with the question thousands and thousands of years ago. Job and his situation and his friends raise the basic questions that plague all of us from time to time, questions that begin with “Why?” or “Why should . . .?”

Today’s reading from Job follows a sequence of theories put forth by his so-called friends, which boil down to something like, “Think, man! You must have done something wrong for all these horrible things to befall you and your family,” or “God delivers the afflicted by their affliction, and opens their ear by adversity.”

I know: with friends like these, who needs enemies?

But the fourth being to address Job is the Supreme One. And we’ve read part of that today. The tone is brilliant—a bit of divine sarcasm. Even before that . . . well, let’s hear it from one of my favorite authors and commentators, Frederick Buechner:

Just the way God cleared his throat almost blasted Job off his feet, and that was only for starters. It is the most gorgeous speech that God makes in the whole Old Testament, and it is composed almost entirely of the most gorgeous and preposterous questions that have ever been asked by God or anybody else.

I love Buechner—his memoirs and fiction and essays all speak to me as if coming from the mouth of an old friend.

The point of today’s passage is fairly clear: neither Job, nor his friends, nor any one of us is God. Sometimes we might think we’d like to be, or that we could do a better job at it—until we come to our senses.

This morning I woke up thinking about our being funambulists, we human beings. Actually, I thought of us as tightrope walkers (I discovered the fancy term only after looking up the name for the pole they carry, because that’s the image I had in my head—a tightrope or tightwire walker, carrying one of those poles.) The pole, by the way, is called . . . a pole, or a balancing pole.

We’re tightrope walkers—I know, metaphors can become tiresome, but stay with me here for a bit—balancing between going off the wire on one side or the other.

On one side is our confusing ourselves for God, thinking that we and we alone are responsible for everything that happens, good or bad. We fall into the error of believing we can control everything on our own. That leads to some pretty crazy bad behavior—shoving matches, imposing unnecessarily restrictive rules and expectations on others (who, obviously, are *not* God), even to wars and genocides.

So that’s no good.

On the other side is something like the opposite of that—we are certainly not God, and we amount to nothing at all. That’s *not* the point of today’s reading from Job, but it does emphasize the not-God part of that line of thinking. (It’s what got me started on this.) Taken to the extreme (and that’s what we humans do so well) not being God can lead us to think, well, then, there is no God, and all this world and the life in it is random and meaningless, and my life counts for nothing. That leads to loneliness and despair and worse.

So that’s no good either.

Bear with me as I push the tightrope metaphor a bit more. It is guaranteed to be imperfect, as are all metaphors, but maybe still helpful.

It strikes me that our faith is something like the balancing pole. I won’t go into the explanation from physics about how that works—it has to do with increasing rotational inertia—just know that it helps us keep our balance. The net—you knew I’d get to the net, didn’t you?—the net is like the arms of God waiting to catch us and put us back on track. Always.

It can’t be helped—the dream exerted itself after I had written the sermon and called for this different ending.

Jesus’ walk on the water is not too different from God’s thundering questions in Job. This is God in our world, acting on our behalf.

Paul’s encouragement to the Corinthians may be the best for us as we make our life’s journey as expert tightrope walkers. Expert, because we are made in the image of God. Paul writes: “See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! . . . We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return--I speak as to children--open wide your hearts also.” And we pray for open hearts, to accept our role as people, just plain old folks, each doing our part in God’s creation, each of us made in God’s own image. + + +