Job 1:13-22, John 11:1-6

“How does tragedy become God’s glory?”

 After a week away it feels good to be back. I know most of you are familiar with The Shack. How many of you have ever gone on a trip to the Shack? Quite a few, I imagine. It is a Presbyterian sponsored mission in West Virginia, in the heart of Coal Mining country. In 1932 its purpose was to be an: educational, religious community service program, and political, social, and labor meetings. Today dozens, if not tens, of kids come every day to be impacted by its outreach ministry. It is a great mission project of our church.

 We arrived, and we worked, and we represented you all very, very well. 10 of us in 5 days were able to lay 20 tons of rock, the kids did most of that work, lay 8,000 pounds of cement, which the kids lifted by themselves 3,200 pounds. Put in 16 industrial sized posts with 4 canopies, redo a wooden fire escape, replace an entire ceiling, replace various lights and fans and ballasts. We did a lot in a short period of time.

 There was a tremendous sense of satisfaction when we left recognizing that our work was appreciated. But probably the most significant event for me all week was a meeting I had on Tuesday. The director approached me and asked if I would sit in on a meeting with a 15 year old boy and his dad. The boy had attempted suicide over the weekend and the dad knew nothing of it. He just knew that he was being called in to speak with the director about his son. I was willing to be there because I guess I do have a little experience with this issue having worked at an orphanage for 4 years where these issues were commonplace, and for 8 years worked extensively with youth at risk.

 About 45 minutes into the meeting which was basically the father saying how disappointed he was with the son, and still the son had not said anything about attempting suicide. Then he started expressing how he felt like he wasn’t good with at anything, how he hated that his 21 year old brother was back home and how they were fighting every day, he was still angry with his mom who had left home 4 times for reasons he didn’t at first understand, but now he was getting it as she had struggled with a drug problem. He spoke about the issues with his dad who was a coal miner and whom he loved dearly but who never seemed to have the time to be with him.

 There didn’t seem to be any resolution after 45 minutes and the dad had to get to work and was heading to the door when the son looked up at the dad and said: “I’m sorry, dad, I love you” and jumped up and hugged him. The dad hugged him back and we were all a mess. He then told him, you don’t have to do anything stupid to know that I love you. Too many people around you have made mistakes and I don’t want you to do the same.

 In this setting a potential tragedy had been arrested and it did lead to God’s glory of reconciliation. But it doesn’t always turn out that way, does it? The reality of tragedy is often too real. In theory we say we will give our life to Christ but when push comes to shove it is at times hard enough just to give one day and give it meaningfully.

 In today’s Scriptures we find our protagonists each dealing with tragedy in a healthy way. Both lead us to a big picture understanding of how God is at work at all times especially in the midst of tragedy to make it work for His glory. Today I pray we will learn how tragedy can and does become part of God’s glory if we are able to surrender ourselves to him, even in the midst of tragedy . Let’s see how tragedy can become God’s glory.

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I feel like I go away for a week and the Supreme Court and the Senate have a field day and offer me all sorts of opportunities to use what has happened for fodder for sermons. Many would consider the overhaul on immigration, and the fall of DOMA, and Snowden’s actions as tragedies that can take us to places where our nation does not want to be. Especially on this 4th of July weekend as we see how this nation of immigrants has become a shinning light, or a city on a hill to use the words of Jonathan Winthrop to describe the Massachusetts Bay colonists, or the first immigrants to this country.

 But lest we be dictated by the actions, or the exigencies of culture I prefer to take the stance of Karl Barth who was teaching in Switzerland at the beginning of WWII when he said that no matter what is happening in the world around us we are called to live as if nothing had changed. That was not a call to indifference but rather a reminder that we are not called to societal norms but rather to the norms instilled by our Savior Jesus Christ which has never changed. This approach to daily living where our influence comes from our Savior and not our ever changing environment, which is often tragic, will serve us well, especially today.

 This was certainly Job’s approach in our first Scripture. If you were able to follow what is happening Job has gone from one of the wealthiest, and also well adjusted people on the face of the earth, to a succession of tragedies leaving him destitute. All was taken from him in one fell swoop. When we think of an image of one who has suffered tragedy, Job is used to describe someone undergoing the type of suffering that seemingly is too much to bear.

 How does Job handle his extreme tragedy? Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, fell on the ground, and worshipped God. Huh? Which one of these doesn’t fit? He worships God, is able to put himself as one naked come into the world with nothing and all he had, wealth, family, friends, was a gift from God so completely undeserved by him so its lows was never his loss. And he ends blessed be the name of the Lord.

 I remain amazed at how every family that I know who has a child born with DOWN or some other debilitating condition is able to tell me what a blessing little Daniele has been to them, they couldn’t imagine their family without him. Thank you Lord. How do they take a potential tragedy and interpret it as a blessing?

 Maybe most of us are like Job’s wife in 2:9 who tells Job – “curse God and die.” Stop faking your integrity. Be bitter and angry, as we tend to be when things don’t go our way we become defensive and lash out, and a cursing posture is normally our style. But Job realizes that God’s glory was still able to be revealed even in his very real tragedy.

 Every real tragedy has the potential for redemption, but not every tragedy goes redeemed. What society, played by Job’s wife, tells us to do in the face of defeat, curse God and go out on your own, should not dictate our approach. But we live in a society that has moved from giving glory to God, to complaint and false martyrdom.

 We have turned complaint into liturgy by creating a constant litany of complaint. We have become habitual complainers so when tragedy does strike that’s just one more thing to tack on to the country being overrun by foreigners, our moral compass has been lost, and we might as well curse God and die.

 What we were able to see at the Shack was worship in living in a setting where Job would have felt right at home. The realities of those families, while hidden to most, were well represented by what that boy was coming home to every day. He was able to face that tragedy and eventually saw hope because of people who believed in him.

 We have one who believes in us but calls us to move from complaint to worship, from cursing to giving God the glory. At every funeral I use this line from Job when I first say friends and family, we gather in our grief today to worship God. Yes, the two can and do go together.

 Jesus’ approach to glorifying God in an ultimate way is completely wrapped up in thinking that which is tragic and using it for the glory of God. The story of Lazarus is a perfect example of that. We’ve already been introduced to Lazarus and his two sisters Mary and Martha. The story of Mary washing Jesus’ feet with perfume that we saw on Mother’s Day, takes place after this Scripture.

 We pick up with the notice of Lazarus being ill and we know that this will go from bad, to worse, to death, but Jesus says in verse 4: “This illness does not lead to death, but rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Notice that Mary and Martha are not around when Jesus says this. What he says is completely true but when you are in the company of someone facing tragedy the cloud of impending death or the pall of death itself is all that can be felt and any words that minimize this reality or sound as if it is no big deal because God has this, serves not as a blessing but as a curse.

 This is not the time to whip out Romans 8:28 that all things work for good for those who trust God because in the face of death nothing seems good at that time. So how can Jesus say that Lazarus’ illness will lead to God’s glory and can we apply that in our own lives?

 We find the answer in the fact that Jesus can say this because he does lead Lazarus from death to life as he will lead all of us in the resurrection. In fact, the glorification of the Son of Man is what? What does Jesus mean when he says that the Son of Man may be glorified through it? Look at John 12:23 and we read: “Jesus says the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Again in John 17:1 Jesus looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come, glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.”

 Jesus was talking about his crucifixion, the most tragic event in human history where one who was without sin was raised up on the cross, in glory, for our sake. The raising of Lazarus is the catalyst as we find in verse 57 for the chief priests to give orders to have Jesus put to death in that way as verse 57 states.

 So way back here in verse 4 Jesus knows all that is going to happen and how Lazarus’ illness will have the effect of him being revived which will in turn lead the religious leaders to crucify him which will in turn lead ultimately to our glory in our resurrection because through his death and resurrection we are made spotless before the throne.

 Those involved here from Mary to Martha, to the disciples, the religious leaders, had no idea of the story line. The cross teaches us, the tragic, tragic cross teaches us that we don’t have to make things come out just right in the face of tragedy. Because somehow, God will. Somehow, God will be glorified in the tragic, I can’t explain how, or in any other way, I’ve just seen it too many times.

 A number of you said you were looking forward to this sermon. One of the reasons could be that some of us see tragedy as an act of a capricious God . James 1:12-16 tells us that God does not test us, God does not work evil out on us in spite of some interpretation of the book of Job, as if we could put God on trial. We hear in James that sin when it is fully grown results in death. All tragedy that we face is not the will of God, it is the result of generations of sin or willful disobedience.

 And we hear today that God wants to work in the midst of that. We even have a God who when our sin, or the sin of the generations before us become unbearable and tragedy builds and takes us to the place where we can break. We have a God who promises in I Corinthians 10:13 that we will not endure more than what he will allow us to bear. He will show us how to endure it for His glory.

 Jesus’ resurrection is the strongest example I can find for the redemption of a tragedy. As a result we hear in I Corinthians 15 “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where O death is your victory, Where O death is your sting? But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”