There is no denying the fact that we are surrounded by bad news. Whether it’s the daily newspapers, radio or television news, or our Facebook/Twitter feeds, the twenty-four hour news cycle almost guarantees that our only escape from negative news is either an internet dead-zone in the mountains or rapid-eye-movement sleep. In the last week we’ve learned about an earthquake/tsunami in Indonesia that has left thousands dead, missing or displaced. Closer to home, we’ve been besieged with reporting about the Kavanaugh nomination to the Supreme Court and the many questions being raised about his suitability for such a position. And, even closer to home, we’ve learned of the tragic deaths of two teens at Arapahoe High School.

In the face of such negative news, one of the most frequent questions to be raised is “Why?”. For the hundreds of families in Indonesia (and similar situations), “Why did this happen to us, and not to our neighbors?” In the wake of the Kavanaugh controversy, one of the questions that has arisen has been, “Why have assault and abuse of women been so widespread, under-reported, and unbelieved?” As we consider the tragedies a few miles to the west of us on Dry Creek, “Why are teens so over-represented among suicide deaths—especially in OUR community?” These questions are, shall we say, “Normal”. Yet, the answers are complex and/or evasive. And, clearly, solutions demand more than “thoughts and prayers”.

The question of “Why?” is as old as human experience, and, of course, not all “Why?” questions relate to negative situations. Those of us who are parents have experienced, or will experience, the endless “Why?” questions from our children. Scientific discoveries have come from the successful search for answers to “Why?” questions. The most troubling “Why?” questions, however, are those such as I’ve indicated this morning. And the tragedies are more complicated when they are perceived as happening to innocent people.

This complication is at the root of our first two lessons this morning—from Job and Psalm 26. We’ll spend the next several weeks hearing from Job, so I don’t want to spend a lot of time with him, but the connection of his story, the Psalm and our current situation is significant: the connection being that age-old question of “Why do bad things happen to good people?”. At the core of Psalm 26 is the assumption of innocence: “I have lived with integrity” (1); “I have walked faithfully with you” (3); “I have not sat with the worthless” (4); “I have hated the company of evildoers” (5). Yet, the psalm arises out of some kind of unforeseen trouble experienced by the psalmist. Job, too, as most of you know, and the reading asserts, had “no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who [feared] God and [turned] away from evil . . . [persisting] in his integrity, although [the Accuser] incited [God] against him, to destroy him for no reason” (Job 2.3). In both cases, the assumption is that living a good life is both a sign of God’s favor, as well as a cushion against “bad stuff” . . . an assumption some preachers still assert. But, then, as now, it wasn’t true. Yet, despite the “bad stuff” that the psalmist and Job experienced, the negative situation was not the last word. The psalmist declares: “As for me, I will live with integrity . . . My foot stands on level ground; in
the full assembly I will bless the LORD” (11, 12). And Job asks, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” The narrator concludes: “In all this Job did not sin with his lips” (10).

In other words, neither the psalmist nor Job let their circumstances shake their faith in the ultimate goodness of God. Their ears were attuned to something louder, something greater, than the drum-beat from Mt. Doom coming from news anchors and commentators, or even their own experience. Their response illustrates another of the assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry (that change-management theory I mentioned a few weeks ago, and to which I ascribe): “What we focus on becomes our reality.” If we focus on that which the media, or our echo-chamber friends, want us to see, our reality will soon become depression, doom and death. The gospel, however, tells us something quite different . . . which, of course, makes it very hard to hear, operating (pardon the metaphor) as it does, on a different frequency.

Jesus drives this point home at the end of our lesson from Mark this morning (this time from the translation known as The Message:

The people brought children to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. The disciples shooed them off. But Jesus was irate and let them know it: “Don’t push these children away. Don’t ever get between them and me. These children are at the very center of life in the kingdom. Mark this: Unless you accept God’s kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you’ll never get in.” Then, gathering the children up in his arms, he laid his hands of blessing on them (10.13-16).

The disciples didn’t get the different reality. They believed that children were not important enough for Jesus’ attention; they believed that Jesus’ time and concern were limited — a scarce commodity. The parents, on the other hand, wanted hope for their children; they trusted in Jesus’ abundant love. And Jesus embodied hope: “Let the little children come to me! In them is the kingdom of God! If you don’t get it, you won’t enter!” Jesus told his disciples — Jesus tells us — to look at the world with hope, with the undistorted vision of children. And he blessed the children, and, by extension, those of us who can trust in the God’s abundant love.

As you no doubt know, we are just beginning our stewardship campaign. And, no, just as I didn’t want to focus on Job, I’m not going to shift and preach a stewardship sermon. I DO, however, want to pick up on our stewardship theme: “Hope Grows Here”. That theme was behind the parents’ trust who brought their children to Jesus. It was behind the psalmist’s claim that, throughout the future, he would live with integrity, he would bless the Lord in the full assembly. It was behind Job’s assertion (that we hear every year in Handel’s Messiah), that he knows that his redeemer lives and that he (Job) will see him at the last day (19.25).

Hope grows here at Good Shepherd. Hope is nurtured as we listen to our amazing choirs. Hope grows here at Good Shepherd when we realize that over fifteen young people from this congregation are on retreat at Quest this weekend. Hope grows here at Good Shepherd when, a Sunday a few weeks ago, a little boy handed me a slip of paper when he came up for communion. I couldn’t open it until after the service, and saw that upon it was written “I Love God”. As the Pumpkin Patch opens, and the proceeds from the sale of those pumpkins are used to help the marginalized around our community, their hope was grown here at Good Shepherd. Hope grows here at Good Shepherd because we realize that out of our
abundance—the fertile soil that is this place and this congregation—we can make a difference for those who only hear the drums of Mt. Doom.

This morning, a child [will be/is being] brought to Jesus. [The parents’] Sean and Meghan’s choice of to have Joshua baptized is a testimony to hope. [The child’s] Josh’s godparents believe in [the boy’s] his future. We commit to “do all in our power to support this person in his life in Christ”. Baptism is a declaration that we identify with Christ; we have been born into a new life, a life that sees possibilities, not limitations. A life not dictated by fear of death, but rather by the hope that we can participate with Christ in trampling death beneath our feet. “Hope” is NOT something associated with a wishing well or Santa’s lap; it is a fervent expectation that Mt. Doom does not have the last word. It is a fervent expectation that sustains us as we go forward. So, this is not a morning of despair, despite the news. It is a morning of hope, indeed of defiance.

We depart this place today, filled with hope. Hope, lived out in our lives, where those who need to be heard and believed can trust that that will happen, with gentleness and compassion. Hope, lived out in our lives, where resistance of evil is the norm. Hope, lived out in our lives, where all persons are seen, and treated, as Christ. Hope, lived out in our lives, so that we can ensure that those we baptize can grow into a world where justice and respect for all persons is a given.

Hope Grows Here in the fertile garden that is Good Shepherd. And you and I, together, are the confident stewards of that garden.

Amen.