

Dale Ramerman; Proper 25, Year B; Book of Job; God is With Us

***May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, Oh Lord our God. Amen.***

We probably all, from time to time, wonder about why bad things happen to good people. I often do. And this leads to another question: Is a good, benevolent, all-powerful God in charge here or not? And when we wonder about those questions, we are asking theological questions about God and God's nature. Because we've heard the last of the Lectionary readings from Job, and probably won't read Job in worship here for another six years, I will talk this morning about Job in its Old Testament setting.

In the Jewish Holy scripture, the Tanakh, Job is grouped with the writings, which includes the Psalms and Proverbs, books concerned with proper moral conduct and with the relation of human conduct to personal and communal well-being. Job is not an historical account of an actual person; it is a work of literature, mostly written in Hebrew poetic form.

There is reason to doubt the story of Job originated in the Hebrew tradition, however. None of the names in the book, or the places, are Hebrew. The book of Job has some remarkable similarities to a Babylonian wisdom story written about 400 years before the Exile, a story Jewish scholars would have had access to during the Babylonian Exile. In the biblical version of the story, a test is proposed by the Satan, a heavenly being that functions as an adversary who patrols the earth to find disloyal or sinful behavior. The Satan proposes to test Job's faithfulness in order to learn what really motivates Job to live an exemplary life, and God goes along with the idea. Job is deprived of his family, wealth, and health, to determine if he will remain faithful to God. In the popular imagination, Job is emblematic of the one who endures the unendurable without complaint. Hence, we say, the patience of Job. But Job is not patient for long: he debunks the piety of his friends, and boldly accuses God of injustice-time after time- as he argues that not only is his fate undeserved, but that

God continually fails to punish evil doers. But to classify Job as a rebel is also difficult: in the end Job withdraws his angry and anguished words against God, acknowledging his lack of understanding.

The fundamental issues raised in Job are the motivation for right behavior, the meaning of suffering, the nature of God, the place of social justice in the world, and the relationship of order and chaos in God's design of creation. These issues are often expressed with the question, Why do bad things happen to good people? And this is a question I certainly struggle with. Why does a good God allow suffering? There are simplistic answers, such as, "Well God won't make you suffer more than you can withstand." But this very unpastorial response is really no answer at all. It just leads to another question: "Why does God make me suffer at all?"

The first two chapters of the book of Job are straightforward prose writing about Job's suffering resulting from God's willingness to have Job tested by great tragedy. This introduction is followed by 39 chapters of sophisticated and beautiful Hebrew poetry which begins with Job's three friend's attempt to convince Job of the conventional theology, that good behavior results in God's blessing and bad behavior brings on God's punishment. We see this idea reflect in some of the Psalms. For example our reading from Psalm 26 in today's readings says:

***Evil shall slay the wicked,  
and those who hate the righteous will be punished.  
The Lord ransoms the life of his servants,  
and none will be punished who trust in him.***

Is this true in your experience? It's not in mine.

Job's friends go on to argue, that since Job has been punished as severely as a person could be, Job must have sinned against God, and his denials of this only make things worse.

Job, repeatedly, denies that he has acted wrongly and accuses God of injustice. Job's final speech is one of self justification.

But then God responds to Job from a whirlwind:

*Who is this darkening counsel  
with words lacking knowledge?  
Prepare yourself like a man;  
I will interrogate you, and you will respond to me.  
Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?  
Tell me if you know.  
Who set its measurements? Surely you know.  
who stretched a measuring tape on it?  
On what were its footings sunk;  
who laid its cornerstone,  
while the morning stars sang in unison  
and all the divine beings shouted?  
Who enclosed the Sea behind doors  
when it burst forth from the womb,  
when I made the clouds its garment,  
the dense clouds its wrap,  
when I imposed my limit for it,  
put on a bar and doors  
and said, "You may come this far, no farther;  
here your proud waves stop"?*

And then in the final lines of this long poetic discourse, Job speaks for the last time:

*I know you can do anything;*

*no plan of yours can be opposed successfully.*  
*You said, Who is this darkening counsel without knowledge?" I have*  
*indeed spoken about things I didn't understand,*  
*wonders beyond my comprehension.*  
*You said, Listen and I will speak;*  
*I will question you and you will inform me.*  
*My ears had heard about you,*  
*but now my eyes have seen you.*  
*Therefore, I relent*  
*and find comfort on dust and ashes.*

I find great wisdom in Job's acknowledgment he did not understand. How often we hear people ( and certainly including me) pontificate on matters of which we have little understanding, as if there is a simple solution to any problem. "Lets just build a wall to keep them out" from the current Presidential Primary debates, comes immediately to mind. In fact, I would suggest that the problems for which we think there are simple solutions, are usually the problems we do not understand. And that is part of the wisdom in the book of Job.

The book of Job concludes with a prose postscript about God's attempt to restore all that Job had lost. This "they all lived happily ever" conclusion precludes reading the book of Job as a coherent story, which could be what the writer/final editor intended, a way of saying "I cannot figure it out either." Or I think more likely, the happy conclusion is a latter addition, but hardly an improvement, since it suggests that, yes, this really was a plot by Satan and God to make Job suffer, and God was feeling bad about it and wants to make things right for Job.

The book of Job explores and questions the conventional Hebrew theology that good behavior results in God's material blessings, and that bad behavior results in the opposite. But it does not resolve the issues of why bad things happen to good people, or of the nature of God, or of what should motivate us to do the right thing. Perhaps

these are questions we just have to learn to live with. And the teaching, life and resurrection of Jesus give us some further understanding.

The book of Job does suggest, to me at least, that raising these questions is not a bad or unfaithful thing to do. It is ok to rail against God out of our anguish. God can take it. And Job's concluding words:

*My ears had heard about you,  
but now my eyes have seen you.  
Therefore, I relent  
and find comfort on dust and ashes.*

I hear in these words not only an acknowledgment by Job of his lack of understanding, but also that through his long ordeal, Job always had a sense of God's presence with him. I find those few words of Job very comforting. Through life's trials and tribulations, which are beyond our understanding, what more can we ask than that God will always be with us, through every experience, good or bad?

**Amen.**

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