

Job—and Jesus

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Text: Job 1:1, 2:1-10

If, during this past week or more, you've heard an incessant whine or a discordant drone in the background of your life, kind of like static from a radio station that doesn't quite come in, it could be the background noise of thousands of preachers groaning over this Sunday's lectionary selections. Assuming that this community is at all reflective of the national average, today's assigned gospel lesson from Mark would have made some 50% of us profoundly and very personally uncomfortable, maybe even angry. Today is that dreaded day in our gospel lectionary readings when we encounter Jesus talking about divorce, and it's not easy reading, particularly for those of us who have been there. And it's also the day when, in the Old Testament lesson, we deal with the book of Job. It's a kind of lectionary one-two punch.

We're not going to deal with the divorce passage this morning, not because it's an uncomfortable passage--no preacher should ever avoid a text because it causes discomfort--but because I really wanted to explore with you the reading from Job. If divorce has touched many of us, the questions that the book of Job raises touch all of us.

So, as painful as the reading from Mark would have been, the story of Job, the second punch in today's one-two lectionary combination is painful in a different way. Job raises a perennially and agonizingly difficult question. It's a question that

every pastor is called upon to answer, more often than we would like. It isn't an abstract theoretical question that resides in the academy or in the arcane discussions of philosophers; it's a question that springs unbidden from life's experience. It tests faith as no other question can, because it is so close to our experience and so achingly personal.

I am referring to what is commonly called "the problem of evil." Simply put, the problem is this, "If God is good, and God is all-powerful, then why is there evil in the world?" It's the question raised by a mother when the love of her life, a child, precedes her to the grave. It's the question raised at the bedside of someone afflicted by cancer at the prime of life. It's the question that follows upon natural disasters that destroy lives and communities, or that follows on the unnatural disasters of war when innocent non-combatants become victims of someone else's disputes. "God, how can you allow this to happen?" we ask. "Where is your justice, God? Why can't, or won't, you protect us from such unbearable pain?"

This morning's reading is but the beginning of the story of Job, but during the course of the sermon, I will attempt to summarize the rest. In itself it's not a long story, but it contains long and fascinating dialogues which I encourage you to explore in your own reading. Job was, as we heard from today's lesson, a blameless and upright man, and he was also a man who had been blessed with a large and close family, and material riches and comforts almost beyond imagination. So far so good. We might conclude, and conventional wisdom often does conclude, that material blessings are given to us in proportion to our righteousness and our devotion to God. We call this the gospel of prosperity, and if you want to hear it preached, tune in to your favorite televangelist. It goes something like this: if you want success in life, be a good Christian. If you are unsuccessful in life, or if you have suffered loss, it must be the result of some

fundamental character flaw, or God's retribution for something you've done wrong. So says that gospel of prosperity.

But the story of Job flies in the face of such conventional wisdom. Satan, whose name means "the accuser," enters the picture and challenges God. Satan's accusation is that Job's devotion is conditional, that it's based solely on a profit motive. If God were to afflict Job rather than to bless him, Satan says, Job's love of God would surely evaporate.

God will not do violence to Job—and this is an important point—but he permits Satan to test Job, first with the destruction of all of his property, and then the death of his ten children. When Job's faith doesn't falter as a result of these personal catastrophes, Satan ratchets up the suffering, and gives Job a horrible skin disease, chillingly saying to God that Job will pay "skin for skin." Job, the scripture tells us, scraped his sores with a piece of broken pottery and sat among the ashes of destruction and death. But even when he was urged by his wife to curse God, he did not "sin with his lips." The remainder of the story of Job consists of dialogues between Job and three "friends," who turn out to be not so friendly, the intervention of a fourth friend, and then, finally, a dialogue between God and Job.

The first reaction to Job's undeserved suffering comes from his wife. "Curse God," she says. Such a curse would, of course, be a violation of the third commandment, the commandment that tells us that we are not to make wrongful use of the name of God, or what the King James Version calls "taking the Lord's name in vain." In effect, Job's wife does what Satan had expected Job to do: she curses God, and considers his afflictions to be a sign that God is either horribly unjust or, if Satan has powers that are outside of God's control, that God is powerless, and therefore not worthy of worship. In either case, Job's wife seems to

be saying, there is no point in living an upright and blameless life if this is what you get in return.

This very human reaction, which corresponds to the anger phase of grief, is an expression of an underlying understanding of the nature of our relationship with God as a kind of contract. If we do this, God will do that. God will bless us if we live upright and devout lives; and God will afflict us if we don't. There's an agreement, perhaps an unstated agreement, but an agreement nevertheless. Both parties are bound by this unbreakable contract: if we are to live happy lives, we must fulfill our obligations to God; and if God is to receive our worship and praise, then God is required to give us at least minimally happy lives. The loss of loved ones, or the utter destruction of our way of life, is way outside the bounds of the contract. God hasn't kept his part of the deal. Just as we would curse, or at least take to court, someone who has violated a solemn contract, so, Job's wife is saying, we have every right to curse God and to turn our backs on God when we are treated so unjustly.

If Job's wife represents the view that God hasn't upheld the divine side of the contract, Job's friends suggest that it is Job who failed to uphold his side. It's not in God's nature to violate a promise, they argue, so Job must not have been as righteous as he was cracked up to be. Their attitude can be crudely summed up as, "you must have done something really bad to have merited such cruel retribution from God—we don't know what it is, but it must have been bad." Failing to identify the sins for which Job is being punished, they proceed to make up stuff.

The attitude of these friends—Job in exasperation calls them "miserable comforters"—is not, after all, so unusual among religious people. There are people who view God as having his finger perpetually on the trigger, waiting to visit wrath upon those who violate God's will. The tragedy is that such views are

sometimes internalized, leading us to blame ourselves for things we couldn't control. So in the wake of personal loss we wonder, "What did I do to deserve this?"

In response, Job points out that there are many flagrant sinners who are doing just fine, thank you. "Why do the wicked live on, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?" he asks. But, when all is said and done, Job accepts that basic premise of God's mode of operation, that contractual arrangement. Job just wants an explanation; and he wants to plead his case. He still won't curse God, but he wants to take him to court. But God seems to be absent. "Oh that I knew where I might find God, that I might come even to God's dwelling! I'd plead my case."

In the end, Job does get his audience with God. He's one of only a few figures in the Bible who get to hear directly from God. And he is convinced by God that God's ways are inscrutable, but just, and that the problem lies in Job's own lack of understanding. "I have uttered what I do not understand, things too wonderful for me which I do not know," Job says. And for his profession of continued faith, Job is rewarded with the restoration of his fortunes, his reputation, and is even given a replacement family.

I wish that I could tell you that if you want a solution to the problem of evil, just read the book of Job, and all will be clear to you—that the problem will be resolved, and maybe even, as happened with Job, your loss restored. I wish I could tell you that, but what in honesty I must tell you is that the mystery of the existence of evil and of unmerited suffering remains. The ending of Job is too pat, precisely because it is so contrary to actual experience. Some scholars have even suggested that the ending was added later to relieve the uncertainty of unresolved mystery, to pretty up the story.

But there is that kernel of wisdom in Job that at least helps us to grapple with the issue. It is the wisdom that God is God, and that if we could explain God, if we could confine God to a nice neat formula, then we would be dealing with but a projection of ourselves, and not the God who is beyond comprehension. For a person in the throes of grief, God's incomprehensibility isn't really a satisfying explanation for our pain. But in the wisdom that we can't ever fully understand God is perhaps also a hint, or a guidepost to the significance of Jesus.

For Jesus, God doesn't operate out of contractual obligation, but out of pure and boundless love. Jesus himself doesn't conform to the world's rules, or to some unstated contract. The Apostle John, reflecting on the meaning of Jesus, doesn't say that God loves us only when we are good, or even that love is an attribute of God. John says that God *is* love, God's very being is love. God is unconditional love, love that is not bound by some kind of cosmic contract or by our limited human understanding of love. But even these are just words, words that we understand at some level, but really don't absorb until the words are lived out.

And this is where Jesus comes in. Jesus comes to us to live out those words, to show us what God means by love. Jesus *is* that love; he *is* that love incarnate, in human skin. Jesus comes to us as one of us, one who suffers for us and who suffers with us, who in his own pain cries out, "Why have you forsaken me?" but who, in the face of manifest injustice, nevertheless witnesses to God's unexplainable but unfailing love for us. "Father forgive them."

A divine love that is freely given is also a love that is self-limiting on God. Just as God doesn't go around pulling triggers, so God doesn't go around miraculously saving us from pain and death. God offers us minimum protection, but maximum support, and the symbol of both is a Jesus who would not be miraculously removed from the cross, but a Jesus who, even at his darkest moment was able to

testify to God's undying love for us. In Jesus we confront not the problem of evil, but the problem of good, God's incomprehensible and boundless love for us. If Job, in his doubt and pain, is all of us, then Jesus in his pouring out of his very being in love is God.

Our response to such love, to the problem of goodness, can only be awe and praise. Job himself expresses it in words that are familiar to us as a beloved aria from Handel's *Messiah*: "I know that my Redeemer lives," Job says, "and at the last he shall stand on the earth. Then in my flesh, shall I see God." In Jesus, in the flesh, we see God. Thanks be to that God. Amen.