

“Job’s Lament: Why, God, do I Suffer?”¹

October 21, 2012

I

You don’t hear too much about the story of Job in the church these days. But I think there’s something about innocent, horrendous suffering that draws us to Job’s person. I mean, once Job climbs up on his mound of dirt and starts cursing the day he’s born, I think it’s hard not to empathize.

See, I think everyone’s been there at one time or another, or been close to someone, knows someone who’s been there ... read about someone who suffers great injustice ... and we empathize ... literally feel with them. Like that Pakistani girl who loves to learn ... stood up to the Taliban thugs ... and got a bullet through her head. Horrendous! Maybe you, yourself, or someone you love, faced with an implacable, devastating disease. Devastating ... unjust somehow.

See, true stories like this – and you can fill in your own – I think stories like this make Job our brother in a way that few Bible stories do. So on your behalf and mine Job shakes his fist at God and says, “Where are you and why are you letting this happen to me?” The cry against injustice – even the cry against God’s seeming injustice. This is a strong theme in the story of Job.

Now in our reading this morning, we just get the very end of Job’s story ... heard a little bit more of it last week. But I think just about everyone knows the outlines of this plot ... the plot of this great poem. But anyway, I’ll remind you just in case – and actually include the end of the story that you didn’t hear today.

See, Job starts out being a man most blessed. ‘Cause he’s blameless, upright, pious in the eyes of God. And he’s also most blessed ... a blessed man with a loving wife and ten children, thousands of sheep and donkeys, and a slew of servants to boot! And he’s good! Praying for each of his children so they won’t stray, packing box lunches for the poor who show up hungry in the park across the way. I mean, Job is a good man.

But then the scene switches to the hallowed halls of heaven, where Satan gets in a conversation with God. Now Satan's not what you think of as the devil in this story, but he's what in Hebrew means the Accuser. So in Job's time, I guess Satan's a perfectly respectable member of God's court, a kind of divine prosecuting attorney. And his job is to bring folks to trial when God gives the nod.

So one day God calls the heavenly court together and asks Satan where he's been. "Oh, Walkin' around down on the earth," Satan replies. And then I guess a smile breaks out on God's face, and God asks, "Well, did you see my friend Job down there? There's no one like him on all the earth – an upright man for sure!"

And then Satan says, "Well begging your pardon, sir, but who wouldn't be. I mean, every time Job turns around, you're showering him with blessings. He's rich, got ten happy kids, respected by his whole village. So with all due respect, sir, he doesn't worship you for nothing." And then Satan gets this sly smile on his face. "But you know sir ... take away all his goods ... and he'll curse you to your face!"

Well, that's what did it, of course. Now either God's so *sure* about Job that he knows Satan will be proven wrong, or ... maybe God does want to know – wants to know how deep Job's faith really does run.

So He gives Satan the high sign to test Job. And as fast as you can blink an eye, I mean Job loses everything! Lightning strikes his sheep barn and incinerates the whole flock, not to mention the poor shepherds. The Chaldeans rustle his camels and slaughter his camel drivers. And then a hurricane hits the house where his seven sons and three daughters are partying, hits it with such force that there isn't even enough left to identify their bodies.

But sure enough, Job *is* a good man. And so his first response in his grief is to tear his robe and shave his head, throw himself face down in the dirt, crying, "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away," mumbling with his face in that dirt, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

II

Well of course Satan the accuser is not done with Job yet. So he says to God, “Well, Job’s still pious and humble ‘cause not a hair on his *own* head’s been touched. But you know what, Sir? Hurt him physically, and he’ll curse you to your face.”

Well ... maybe God still wants to know, I don’t know. So he gives Satan the thumbs up, but says, “Only spare Job’s life!”

So then Satan causes boils to break out all over Job, painful sores from the top of his crown to the soles of his feet. And then ... and then Job erupts in pain!!! As one translation has it, Job’s grief just flies off the page. “Damn the day I was born,” he shrieks. And then he prays to die! But still his heart beats on.

So then he prays that the sun will go out like a burnt match! But it just keeps on shining. And then ... and then his good wife advises him to just curse God and be done with it and then go hang himself – ‘cause to curse God ... then he’ll surely die!

But ... does Job curse God? Does he?

No, he stops just short of that. ‘Cause he is, after all, a very good man ... and a very religious man ... and so there are some lengths ... despite being almost out of his head with the horror of it all ... there are some lengths he can’t quite bring himself to go to.

Now someone’s said that that’s the crux of Job’s problem. His problem is that he’s a very good man ... a very religious man ... and the thing is ... he knows it. And so it’s all just so unfair! So Job wants to know – he wants to know why has God let such things happen to him. No, he demands to know! So Job pleads his case on and off for about 37 chapters.

And with him by now are four friends. Now at first, these friends just sit and weep with Job. And that’s good. ‘Cause loss cries out to be shared ... to find its

way back toward meaning in company with those sitting by your side. But then ... beyond just sitting there in silent company, these friends of Job try to fix things by explaining Job's suffering. And in doing so they become insufferable, sanctimonious ... trying ... trying to set Job straight. I mean, they try to cheer him up by explaining all his woes to him.

So one of 'em says anyone with a grain of sense knows that God is just. So God makes bad things happen to bad folks and good things happen to good folks. And that being the case, you don't need a Yale degree to figure out that since bad things are happening to you, you must have done something pretty bad. And so they try to cheer him up!

And then another of Job's "friends" says that the loss of all Job's goods, the death of all his children, the pain of all his ugly boils are probably just God's way of building his character and making him a more sensitive person ... and so on. Cheering Job up!

Well, Job is a good man. And so he knows – he knows that none of this is true. And so finally he speaks up to his "friends." O.K., cries: "You're all worthless physicians. Oh that you would just keep silent and that would be your wisdom." So in other words, maybe the best thing they can do is just shut up ... these theological thugs!

And so Job – railing away – circles in on his closing argument in this trial. And with nothing left to lose, Job sits on his mound of dirt covered with boils, and screams at God with both fists in the air. "I have done everything you ever asked me to do! Why is this happening to me? Answer me!"

III

Answer me.

And so goes the universal lament of all those of us who suffer horrors. "Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord ... Lord, let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication."

And so Job's cry. And I do think Job's anguish here sits somewhere deep in your heart and mine ... part of our human condition. He ... and you and I ... want to know why. And so he shouts into God's silent mystery.

Well, God answers Job, all right! That's today's scene. In fact, God blasts Job off his feet with what, as someone has said, is the most gorgeous speech that God makes in the whole Old Testament. So with a majestic sweep, God replies (in a different translation), "Who is this whose ignorant words smear my design with darkness? Stand up now like a man; I will question you; please instruct me."

And then this gorgeous poetry follows, mostly a string of preposterous questions blasted by God at Job. "Where were you when I planned the earth?" God asks. "Where is the dwelling of light? ... "Is the wild ox willing to serve *you*? Have *you* given the horse strength? Does the hawk fly by *your* wisdom ... ?" And by this time, God is just starting to warm up!

Well anyway, God's rebuttal goes on and on for four whole chapters. But funny thing ... the funny thing: God never does get around to answering Job's question about justice ... about fairness. No, God's answer to Job is about *God's* might and *God's* mystery, probably in the end "the only answer that humans have ever gotten about why things happen the way they do."

God only knows. And as you and I ... as they say ... are not God.

Well, some take offense at God's response here. Virginia Woolf is reported to have said something like, "I read the book of Job and I don't think God comes out very well in it."

Well maybe. But I don't think I agree. I just don't see it that way. And I think you can take your cue here from Job himself.

See, Job apparently isn't crushed by God's response to him. No; instead, he stands before God's mystery, before God's mighty Presence that has now shown itself in the midst of Job's darkness. And Job says, "I have spoken of the unspeakable, and tried to grasp the infinite. I had heard of you with my ears; but now my eyes have *seen* you. *Now* I have glimpsed you through the veil of mystery. And so I will be quiet ... comforted that I am but dust." Finite. Frail. Human.

See, Job's now comforted 'cause he sees God face to face – he's faced with God in relationship ... still bonded with God in their struggle. And so I think he now grasps the deepest truth of his life: That God will not let him go ... despite his raised fists and his railing. God steps out of the darkness, showing God's self in the midst of Job's anguish.

And maybe ... just maybe ... that's enough for Job ... and maybe even enough for you and for me to live on the rest of our blessed ... and our pain-filled days, gaining a little wisdom along the way.

So finally here's the main point. Someone's said that for most of us, the worst thing that can happen – the worst thing ... is not to suffer without reason ... but to suffer without God ... to suffer without any hope of consolation. Without any hope in the Resurrection. So maybe the real point of this story is that Job hangs on ... just as God hangs on to Job. And maybe in the end that *is* the core meaning of faith.

Finally this. Our God is a God of relationship ... beyond calculating cost and reward. Like Job this encounter with God in the whirlwind of your own life calls you to a new kind of knowing, to a deep sense of divine Presence, overwhelming ... honoring ... transforming your very life. And God only knows. Maybe that *is* the very best you can do on this side of the Mystery yet to come.

Amen.

1. Resources used: Barbara Brown Taylor's "Out of the Whirlwind" found in *Home by Another Way*; *Job* by J. Gerald Janzen (Interpretation Series)