

"The Problem of Job"

Job 1:1-22; 2:1-10

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York Center Church of the Brethren

Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

Where did we ever get the idea that we wouldn't suffer? When, in the history of human existence, did anyone ever promise us that bad things wouldn't happen? Where did we ever get the idea that life is fair, and you get what you deserve?

I am always a bit surprised when something terrible happens- a hurricane or an earthquake, for instance, and people ask, "Where was God?" as if God has a history of steering hurricanes away from populated areas and just chose to let this one slam into a coastal city. Really? This is what we think of God?

Extremist religious leaders are quick to throw God under the bus when something terrible happens they declare- "God sent Hurricane Katrina to destroy New Orleans because of homosexuals."

Are you kidding me? What kind of God would do that? There is nothing more obscene than suggesting that God kills some people in order to punish others, or to simply get our attention.

Why do we need to find someone to blame when the worst happens? Granted, there are situations when a terrible event is the direct result terrorists, or bad behavior or poor choices. But when an earthquake hits or cancer is discovered, why do we expect that God could have or should have prevented it?

Today we begin a three Sunday exploration of one of the most difficult and theologically sophisticated books in the Old Testament, the book of Job. Virginia Woolf once wrote to a friend, "I read the book of Job last night. I don't think God comes out of it well."

Job is a beautiful, interesting and confounding book that has baffled readers and scholars alike for centuries. It wrestles with the questions human beings have been struggling with since there have been human beings.

- Why is there suffering and evil in the world?
- How do we respond to evil?
- Where is God when I am suffering?

The ten-dollar word that describes these questions is

"theodicy." Why do bad things happen to good people? Spoiler alert- the book of Job doesn't have an answer for this question- and neither do I.

Today we will dip a toe into this great work of poetry and theology. Next Sunday we will look closely at Job's so-called "friends," and in two weeks we will hear God's response to Job. I encourage you to read the book of Job in the coming weeks so we can wrestle with it together.

The story of Job is basically a fairytale. It could begin with, "Once upon a time, there was a man named Job." We are told he lived in Uz, which is not found on any map or anyplace else in scripture. From the very beginning we know that Job was a good man who was totally devoted to God. He was a rich man with a large and loving family. The first big surprise in this work comes in chapter one when we are privy to a "behind the scenes" look at heaven. And who do we find there but a character called "the Satan."

Now before you picture a red guy with a pitchfork and horns, we must realize that this character is not the same one we associate with the devil. It is an unfortunate choice of names because it causes confusion. The Satan is part of God's heavenly council. He has been described as the chief of God's secret police or as God's prosecutor. Some refer to this Satan as the original "devil's advocate." His job is to see what human beings are doing on earth and then report back to God.

In chapter one we see him returning from one of his reconnaissance missions and God asks, "Have you seen my friend, Job? Isn't he something? He's one of a kind, more devoted to me than anyone else on earth."

Satan isn't impressed. "Of course, he is devoted to you, you have given him everything he could ever want, and you protect him from suffering of any kind. If you really want to see how loyal he is, take away all the good things he has. I'll bet he won't be so devoted to you then!"

To our horror, *God* takes the wager and says, "Go for it. Just don't touch him." (Don't forget, this is a parable, a folk tale.) You know what happens next- tragedy upon tragedy strikes with each one worse than the one before until even Job's children have been destroyed. And Job remains faithful to *God*.

In the next scene, we are back in heaven and *God* is still bragging about Job. "Have you seen my friend, Job? Isn't he something? Even after all you have done to him, he is still one of a kind, more devoted to me than anyone else on earth."

Satan isn't impressed. "Of course, he's loyal to you, he's still in good shape. But if you let me take his health away, I'll bet you anything he will turn against you." So *God* says, "You're on!"

The next thing poor Job knows, he's stricken with a horrible skin disease and ends up miserable and alone at the garbage dump. His wife, who incidentally, also lost all of her children and everything else, asks, "Why don't you just give up and die?" But Job remains loyal to *God*.

So, what do we make of this terrible story? Scholars believe that this tale was written while the people of Israel were living in wretched exile in Babylon. It is a response to a great tragedy during which the people wondered if *God* was really with them anymore. In the great lament tradition of the Hebrew people, Job wrestles profoundly and honestly with *God* and with his "supposedly faithful" friends.

Job holds on to *God* with a fierce faith, but he doesn't let *God* off the hook for the reality of the inexplicable suffering in his world. When he is stripped of all that gave his life meaning, Job clings to the *God* who gave him life in the first place.

The book of Job is a slap in the face to an easy, feel good, prosperity theology. It refuses to accept any simple, "bumper sticker" faith. Job asks the hard questions, and in the end, he has more questions than answers. But what he finds out is that *God* is with him in his mansion as well as in the garbage dump. What Job comes to realize is that the presence of *God* is the true basis of faith. What Job comes to realize is that there simply is not always an answer to the hardest of questions.

I think the story of Job is so difficult for us because it raises the issue of undeserved suffering. We want someone to be held accountable for the bad things that happen to good people.

And we want someone to make sure that bad things happen only to bad people. Job was doing everything right, and still everything went wrong.

In his book, *DISAPPOINTMENT WITH GOD*, Philip Yancey suggests that the point of the book of Job is not his suffering but his faith. Yancey tells the story of his friend, Douglas. Douglas's wife was suffering with cancer when they and their daughter were in a car accident caused by a drunk driver. Douglas sustained a severe head injury that left him with debilitating headaches and double vision.

When Philip asked him, "Could you tell me about your disappointment with God?" Douglas gave a surprising answer. *"To tell you the truth, Philip, I don't feel any disappointment with God. The reason is this. I learned, first through my wife's illness and then especially through the accident, not to confuse God with life. I'm no stoic. I am as upset about what happened to me as anyone could be. I feel free to curse the unfairness of life and to vent all my grief and anger.*

*But I believe God feels the same way about that accident- grieved and angry. I don't blame God for what happened.*

*We tend to think life should be fair because God is fair. But if I confuse God with the physical reality of life then I set myself up for crushing disappointment. God's existence, even God's love for me, doesn't depend on my good health." (1)*

In the midst of his suffering Job finds himself in an even larger mystery- the mystery of God. The Bible does not explain suffering, it just describes it. By the end of his story, Job will realize that it is more important to seek God's love than God's answers.

Maybe this isn't a satisfying answer for us, but it is the best Job could do and it is the best I can do. I think our struggle is between the way the world is and the way we think it should be, the way we want it to be. I think we want to know that someone is in charge of everything that happens, otherwise how can we live in the chaos? I think we want to know there is a reason when unreasonable things happen.

Why do hurricanes destroy cities? Meteorologists can explain it in terms of weather patterns, air currents, high and low pressure fronts, and climate change. Urban planners can explain it by population density and where and how people build their homes. But sometimes that just isn't enough for us.

One of the most eloquent things I have ever read on the dilemma of suffering was written by theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff, after his 25-year-old son, Eric, died in a mountain climbing accident. In his profound and pain-filled little book, *LAMENT FOR A SON*, the grieving father speaks against the understanding some have that it was time for his son to die; that God caused his death. Nicholas writes, *"the Bible speaks of God overcoming death. God is appalled by death. My pain over my son's death is shared by God's pain over my son's death. And yes, I share in God's pain over the death of God's son. I cannot fit it all together by saying 'God did it,' but neither can I fit it together by saying, 'There was nothing God could do about it.'*

*I cannot fit it together at all. I can only, with Job, endure. I do not know why God did not prevent Eric's death. To live without answers is precarious. It's hard to keep one's footing."*

Nicholas writes with a deep and despairing honesty. Even after spending his entire career as a theologian, studying and thinking about God, he still didn't have the answers he craved in a time of profound crisis.

He writes, *"I have no explanation. I can do nothing else than endure in the face of this deepest and most painful of mysteries. I believe in God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and resurrector of Jesus Christ. I also believe that my son's life was cut off in its prime. I cannot fit these pieces together. I am at a loss. I have read the theodicies produced to justify the ways of God to humans. I find them unconvincing. To the most agonized question I have ever asked I do not know the answer.*

*I do not know why God would watch him fall. I do not know why God would watch me wounded. I cannot even guess. I am not angry but baffled and hurt. My wound is an unanswered question. The wounds of all humanity are unanswered questions."*

This grieving father came to the same understanding as Job. He writes, *"Instead of explaining our suffering God shares it. God is love. That is why God suffers. To love our suffering sinful world is to suffer. God so suffered for the world that God gave his only Son to suffering. We're in it together, God and we, together in the history of our world.*

*Every act of evil extracts a tear from God, every plunge into anguish extracts a sob from God. But also the history of our world is the history of our deliverance together. (2)*

In the face of so many difficult and painful questions I know this to be true: instead of explaining our suffering, God shares it.

Amen.

End Notes:

- DISAPPOINTMENT WITH GOD, Philip Yancey, Zondervan. 1988. Pp. 203-204.
- LAMENT FOR A SONG. Nicholas Wolterstorff, Eerdmans, 1987.