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Bridge Street United Church  
October 6, 2024  
Readings: Job 1:1 – 2:10; Psalm 130

### What Do We Do with Job?

Job may well be the most challenging book in Scripture to interpret and therefore upon which to preach. Without question other books of the Bible contain some very challenging texts. But when one looks at each Biblical book as a whole, Job is at the top of my list of challenging books to interpret.

I want to make several general points about the book of Job before I go on to talk about what today's reading, and the book of Job more generally, might have to say to us. First, we ought not to think of the book of Job as a piece of history. There was an ancient tale in the folklore of the region about a saintly man, Job, and that tale provides background for this story. But, for example, we do not know the location of Uz, where Job apparently lived. The book would appear to be set in about the time of Abraham, though it was probably written much, much later, about 500 – 600 years before Jesus' birth. The book of Job, as we have it, is a parable rather than a book of history. And it is a parable that seeks to address questions with which we, in common with other human beings down through the centuries, have wrestled, namely, why does suffering happen? What lies behind it?

I am certainly not going to be able today to tackle all, or even most, of the theological issues that the book of Job raises. But I do want to tackle one of them. That said, we need to start by thinking of the book as a parable. Parables are stories designed to make a point or to address an

issue, though when you have a book the length of Job, the book as a whole can be addressing more than one issue.

Second, there is this character in these first two chapters of Job that Judy read for us that gets translated into English as “Satan.” However, “Satan,” at this point in time in Old Testament books, is not the devil or the demon this figure will be in the New Testament. Satan here is not the symbol of evil or a rival force to God. Satan will assume that form as the symbol of evil about a century and one-half or so before Jesus’ birth, and that later understanding will carry through Jesus’ lifetime and beyond. But here, Satan is part of God’s heavenly council.

One other thing that we miss in the English translation is that in Hebrew the word for “Satan,” in every place it appears in the book of Job, is always preceded by the definite article. In other words, it is always “the Satan.” In Hebrew, the word that is translated as “Satan” also means “Adversary,” or “Accuser.” There may well be the negative connotations we associate with the word “adversary,” but this terminology suggests the function of this figure rather than being the personification of evil that we shall see in the New Testament stories. So, to help to keep that point in mind, when I refer to Satan, I’ll use the words “the Satan,” strange as that will seem.

Turning to the text itself, we see Job described “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.” Job’s immense wealth is described. Then the Satan says to God, “You know Job is only righteous, blameless, and upright, because you have supported him so strongly; you have made him prosper. But take those things away, and he will curse you.” So God says to the Satan, or the Adversary, Job is in your power. Job, this righteous figure, then loses all his wealth and all ten of his children. There then occurs one of the more famous lines from the book of Job as, following these catastrophes, Job worships God and says “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” Then the Satan says to God, God having been impressed by Job’s integrity and

faithfulness despite the loss of his family and all his possessions, “if Job’s health goes, then Job will curse you.” So God gives the Satan permission to afflict Job’s health, but not to take his life. Again, Job continues to be faithful to God, saying “Shall we receive the good at the hands of God, and not receive the bad?”

What do we make of this book? On the one hand, God does not come off well in the opening chapters of this book. As the story is told, God allows the Satan to inflict almost unspeakable suffering on Job. It does not stretch the text of chapters one and two to say that God allows the Satan to test Job to see whether Job will cease to be a faithful follower and worshipper of God if Job loses everything. That said, I think that these opening chapters, and the book of Job more generally, want to make a different point. And remember that parables are stories where the purpose of the parable is to make a single point.

I think that the major point of the story was to challenge the concept that faithfulness to God was rewarded by material prosperity or, to put another way, one was religious in order to be rewarded by God. The concept that faithfulness would be rewarded by prosperity and a long life was certainly part of ancient Israel’s history and theological understanding. In fact, it is a theme that runs through the book of Deuteronomy. If you are faithful to God, you will prosper. If you are not faithful, you will suffer. But this would not be the only instance in Scripture where we find conflicting, or apparently conflicting, messages. And the concept that faithfulness to God will be rewarded with material prosperity is one that is still very much a part of our world. In fact, in the lingo of my profession, it is called the “prosperity gospel,” and one can find multiple living examples of it on television, not to mention elsewhere on the internet.

But many of us rightly struggle with the concept that if you live a good and a faithful life you will be rewarded with good health and prosperity. We struggle with it because we know too many instances where that is not true, sometimes instances of people very close to us. To speak only

for myself, I know too many people who have lived good, faithful lives, lives marked by humility, hard work, generosity, and, yes, faithfulness, persons whose lives have been cut short by a car accident, or cancer, or some other disease, to make the equation that living a good and faithful life brings with it prosperity and longevity. Indeed, someone I count as a good friend has had enough misfortune in his life to do any three or four of us. Time after time, when things appeared finally to be going well for him, something has happened to reverse that apparent good, if all too brief, turn of fortune.

The question behind the book of Job for its initial audience was whether one sought to be faithful and to serve God in hope of a reward—God will bless me if I do that—or whether one sought to be faithful and to serve God because it was the right thing to do. There is a difference, of course. Is one's effort to serve God a *quid pro quo*, a "I'll scratch the divine back if God will scratch mine," or is being faithful and seeking to worship and serve God something we do "for God's sake alone" [Paul E. Capetz, in Bartlett and Brown, p, 126], quite apart from some reference to our own selves and our own personal well-being.

In the book of Job, Job is a righteous, good, faithful man who continues to be faithful, despite his misfortunes. In the subsequent chapters of this book, Job resists the suggestion of three friends who hear of his misfortunes and come to console him. Their "consoling," if I might call it that, consists of insisting to Job that he has obviously sinned in some way to deserve the misfortunes that have come his way. And Job will later in the book protest to God that God is treating him badly. He will make his complaints to God, and in that way he is part of a tradition of lament, of a willingness to complain to God and to say that what is happening is undeserved and not right.

I would note that it is not only in the book of Job that we see challenged the concept that some negative thing is the result of sin or wrong conduct. Jesus challenged this understanding of his

disciples when they asked, after seeing a man who had been born blind, “Who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind” [John 9:1-2]? Jesus’ answer was that neither of them had sinned. Luke’s Gospel, chapter 13, recounts an occasion when Jesus was told by some in a crowd around him about some Galileans who were killed on Pilate’s orders while they were sacrificing in the temple. Jesus responds by saying that they were no worse sinners than any other Galileans, and he then adds that eighteen people killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them (Siloam being a section of the city of Jerusalem) were likewise neither better nor worse than other residents of the city. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus reminds his followers that God makes the sun “rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous [Matthew 5:45]. So, Jesus, too, reflects this understanding that we see in the book of Job, an understanding that sought to counter the notion that misfortune or ill health was God’s punishment.

We shall soon celebrate the sacrament of communion. This sacrament is one that reminds us of God’s graciousness, of God’s efforts to reach out to us in love not as a matter of our deserving, not because we have somehow earned it, but as a matter of grace, gift. And the God who reaches out to us in this way, invites us to love and to serve both God and others, not so that we might be blessed but because we would show love, respect, and reverence to the one we call God. May we do so. And to that one who made, to the one through whom we have come to know that God most fully, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that God with us now and always, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

### **Resources**

Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown, eds. *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4 (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2009).

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/> [Accessed October 1, 2024].