

Sunday, November 10, 2019

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

**The GOD Problem**

Job 19:23-27a

INTRODUCTION:

Can we REALLY trust that God is good and just?

This is the overarching question raised in the disturbing and troublesome story of Job. It is an ancient story about a wealthy man who adored his large, thriving family. For an older man, Job also enjoyed optimal health. In the community, he was well respected as a kind, wise and moral man of God.

Suddenly, in one single day, his entire fortune is completely wiped out and all his children are killed in an accident. Shortly thereafter, Job contracts a painful skin disease that cause nasty, irritable soars to break out all over his body.

Job's wife, and his close friends are baffled by all this and wonder why this good and upright man is suffering so greatly. Understandably, Job is at the end of his rope. He openly accuses **God** of being unjust. **God**, he claims, is **not** operating the world according to principles of justice. His friends, however are convinced that Job **must** be hiding some kind of **sin** because **sin** is always the cause of suffering.

They hold an intervention with their utterly broken friend but Job will hear none of it. He **insists** that he is totally innocent and vehemently alleges that God has unfairly targeted him. His only chance at vindication, he claims, is to bring his accusations directly before God.

In today's reading, Job passionately argues his case to his friends.

Hear the pleading of Job from chapter 19.



**SCRIPTURE: Job 19:23-27a**

“O that my words were written down!  
O that they were inscribed in a book!

O that with an iron pen and with lead  
they were engraved on a rock forever!  
For I **know** that my Redeemer lives,  
and that at the last  
he **will** stand upon the earth;  
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,  
then...  
in my flesh I shall see God,  
whom I **shall** see on my side,  
and my eyes **shall** behold, and not another.

My heart faints within me!”



**SERMON**

Please pray with me...

*God of mystery and paradox, help us in our desire to understand. Open our minds and soften our hearts. Prepare us to receive the deeper truths you offer in this story. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. AMEN.*

The story of Job is one of the original classic dramatic stories. In fact, Job’s fingerprints can be found in all great epics; from Homer’s *Odyssey* to *The Wizard of Oz*, *Dante’s Inferno* to *Alice in Wonderland* and countless other mythic adventure stories. These are the archetype mythologies that form meaning in life. Stories that help define the deep truths found in our common humanity and symbolically represent our collective struggle to live an ordered, meaningful life of peace, in harmony with those we love.

The story of Job is *the* definitive archetype of all dramatic storytelling. We meet a happy-go-lucky protagonist, living the good life without a care in the world. Suddenly, our hero is blindsided by some kind of tragic event that is not of his own making. The bottom falls out from under the firm ground he always knew. Unmoored from his stable foundation, he stumbles blindly in the dark, inevitably free-falling into an abyss of uncontrolled chaos monsters, running wild and seeking to devour. This descent into the void is what always signals the beginning of the mythical journey. The dramatic need is to find a way back home. It is always our undoing that is the start of our remaking. Our hero will eventually emerge, bloodied and scared, but also transformed, stronger, and enlightened in wisdom. If we can trust the archetype, wrestling in the dark with chaos monsters seems to be the only way we grow. Chaos forces us to establish a new order. The disorienting bedlam of unknowing ignites sparks of profound insight. These are the labor pains that give birth to what is next. This is the perennial pattern in every drama. The story moves from order, to disorder, and finally, reorder.

Disorder comes in the story of Job as he is forced to entertain the horrible possibility that God is not reliable. Where is the God of justice when chaos is unleashed on a whim? Is it possible that God may not be good all the time? Job fearlessly demands answers to the question of innocent suffering. He is morally outraged at the God who could permit such atrocities. Perhaps you have asked the same question. This is the God problem. In the light of all of life's perplexities, such as human suffering, can we really rely on a God of justice?

How do you react to God when suffering comes?

What happens to your faith when God is silent in your pain?

"WHY??? Why me? Why now? It's not fair! What did I do to deserve this?"

These protests come wailing out of the mouth of my 3-year-old grandson and my 93-year-old grandfather. It is the universal lament. Our sense of what is fair and just starts early in life and stays firmly rooted in our psyche as we age. Every one of us wants to think we know what is just. Every one of us values and defends our personal integrity. I've not met many people who think they deserve to suffer. So, to wail out in complaint when things don't go our way is a natural and normal emotion. For people who have a faith in God, our laments have a specific target. There is an entire book in the Bible called *Lamentations*. Five long poems of emotional anguish and raging complaints to a God who seems indifferent to our pain. The *Book of Psalms* are mostly poems that put God's timing and faithfulness into question and beg for God's swift justice to hammer down upon the deserving enemy.

No matter what your theology, we all have fairly strong opinions about right and wrong, what is fair and what is unjust. Morality, fairness and justice is a hair-trigger emotion in most of us. If someone cuts me off on route 2 a switch gets flipped and I go insane!

We seem to have this deep conviction that law and order is the only thing that keeps the lid on chaos. Fairness is what the social contract is all about. Follow the rules and the good life will prevail. For people of faith, this social contract extends into a covenantal understanding between us and God. Despite all evidence to the contrary, we still want to believe that if we are good then God will be good to us. We will be protected from suffering if we follow the rules. For many of us, the well-being of our faith is predicated on a transactional agreement, a mutual exchange that we trust is binding and reliable.

And then it happens; the diagnosis is incurable, the betrayal undeniable, the bankruptcy unavoidable, the unexpected death so final. Where is your God when disaster, pain, and suffering visit you?

Job's faith in God was based on this same idea. Good things happen to good people. Life is ordered on a moral cause and effect equation. Job was a good person who never offended God, and yet, through no fault of his own, he lost it all; his wealth, his health, his family and his social status. On top of this physical and emotional suffering, now his entire concept of God is on shaky ground. The God of his understanding had failed him and Job's sense of justice demanded that God must be held accountable. Ironically, Job's faith, or more accurately, what Job had faith in, actually compounded his suffering rather than bring him comfort. He was so certain that his idea of justice was God's idea of justice that the only hope he had left was to challenge God and vindicate his integrity.

“For I **know** that my Redeemer lives,  
and that at the last

he **will** stand upon the earth.”

And he was right! Only not in the way he thought. Not only does his Redeemer live and stand upon the earth, but more to the point, we know that his Redeemer also dies. In the Gospel story, God enters into our pain. The Redeemer lives and the Redeemer dies. God understands innocent suffering.

Toward the end of Job's story, God does appear in response to the summons issued by Job and treats his accuser to a 3D-Imax, virtual reality tour of the cosmos. The celestial veil parts. Aboard God's magical mystery tour of the universe Job is caught up in jaw dropping wonder. He is awed beyond words. He sees past, present and future as one. It becomes fearfully evident that this is the One God who is the very connective tissue and life force that animates a vast interconnected web and has the power to hold it all in place. Job is let inside the mystery that we know as the good news of the Gospel. Our suffering is not our own and my life is not only about me. Job is awakened to a much larger picture, one that far surpasses even life and death. He returns home again, bloodied and scared, but also transformed. He is moved from the injustice of “my suffering” to the greater integrity found in solidarity with “our suffering.”

If my Redeemer lives and my Redeemer also dies, then I can endure any suffering knowing that God is still with me. Having walked this path more than once, I can tell you that when you are in the middle of that dark valley it is hard to imagine the way home, but keep walking. You are not alone.

Job gets no explanation or justification for his innocent suffering, but he is justified by God for his fierce honesty and unrelenting courage to question the God of his understanding. His epic adventure is rewarded with a deeper understanding of the cosmic reality of our oneness in both joy and sorrow. He is home again, bloodied and scared, but also transformed by hard won wisdom, and enlightened by compassion.

This is the God who is with us in our suffering, loving us, walking with us, comforting us. I do not believe God is the cause of suffering or “allows” bad things to happen. The God of my understanding would never “allow” us to suffer. What Job learns is that this is the God who *is* always good, the God who is somehow able to transform horrible, innocent suffering into new life.

It turned out that it was Job’s undoing that were actually the birth pains of his remaking. The universal Truth here is that chaos has a place and a purpose. New order always emerges out of chaos. The poet/mystic Rainer Rilke wrote it perfectly...

“No one ought ever love their suffering,  
but no one ever loves without its pain;  
and as we die, we come to wondering  
if there was something we could not yet see—  
that winged Thing  
that merges with Earth’s suffering  
to make us what we otherwise would never be.

There is another epic story in the Bible. It is the good news we call the Gospel. The Gospels teach us about a God who enters into a violent, oppressed and despairing world to bring new life from that darkness. What I take away from both Job and the Gospel is that God walks with each one of us, in solidarity with every challenge we face and every suffering that comes. In this Good Friday world, my hope remains, because I know that Easter is coming, and that winged thing that merges with Earth’s suffering will make us what we otherwise would never be. Thanks be to our reliable God! - Amen.