

The Story of Job
Job 19: 23 – 27a

(preached October 6, 2024)

Life is full of mysteries. Life is full of things to wonder about: for example, we might wonder, why is a boxing ring square? Or, driving on the highway, we might wonder, how do they get the deer to cross the road at those yellow signs?

Life is full of mysteries. Some of those mysteries are fun to joke about, but some are more serious. Some are harder to understand. Some mysteries stir us up with hard questions. Fortunately for our spiritual lives, the Bible doesn't shy away from hard questions. The Bible doesn't give simplistic, easy answers to hard questions. Instead the Bible gives us a space where we can explore hard questions. The Bible gives us stories we can enter into: stories of people in all kinds of situations. Hearing the stories, we can reflect on what we might do in their shoes. We can reflect on what God is doing in those situations and in our lives.

The Bible doesn't shy away from hard questions. One of those hard questions is what theologians call the question of theodicy: the question, why do innocent people suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people?

The book of Job, in the Bible's Hebrew Scriptures, explores this question in compelling, poetic language. The book of Job is a divinely inspired story: a folk tale about a good and prosperous man who loses his family, his home, his health - everything but his integrity. Job loses everything, except for his ability to turn to God and ask, why?

The passage we heard this morning is a very small part of a long and beautifully crafted book. The book of Job is poetry: lengthy verses filled with powerful images. When you first read it, you might get bogged down in those lengthy verses. It helps to remember that when the story of Job was first told, people lived in what we might call an oral culture. They didn't have radio or TV or the internet. They shared their knowledge in spoken words, in stories. Of course we can't know for sure, but I imagine that in the evening when their work was done, they would gather around a fire and tell stories. They were not in a hurry to tell these stories. They embellished them with colorful details. They told them again and again.

Eventually, some of those stories were written down. In the case of Job, what was written down took the form of a lengthy poem. Remember, the people who told Job's story were not in a hurry.

It can be hard for us preachers to preach on the story of Job. All that poetry is hard to summarize in a sermon. But today I'm going to preach on the story of Job as a whole, because the story has much to say to us. The story of Job can help us explore the question, why do bad things happen to good people? It's a difficult question. Maybe you've asked it yourself. You see on TV the ravages of a hurricane or the horrors of war.

You see people who have lost their homes, have lost everything. You might ask, why do those people have to suffer that way, losing all their possessions, even losing their loved ones? Why do bad things happen to good people? The story of Job helps us wrestle with that question. We can tell by the way Job's story begins that it's not a historical account. It's more of a fable or a folktale.

“Once upon a time,” the book of Job begins, “in the land of Uz, there was a man named Job. He was a man of perfect integrity who feared God and avoided evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred donkeys.... He was the richest man in the East.”

Job is a devout and prosperous man, but then catastrophe strikes. In a series of violent accidents, Job loses his sons and daughters, his sheep and camels and oxen, his home, everything he has. But Job continues to be faithful. He shaves his head and tears his robe in anguish, but he continues to worship God. He says, “the Lord gave and the Lord has taken; may the name of the Lord be blessed.”

Soon calamity strikes again. Job loses his health. From the top of his head to the toes of his feet, he is covered with itching, painful boils. All his possessions are gone and he sits on a pile of dust, surrounded by the rubble of his home. In misery, Job picks up a piece of broken pottery to scratch himself. His wife is still alive, but she isn't much help. She asks him, “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die!” She has no use for his integrity. But Job doesn't curse God. He doesn't lose his faith. He tells her, “We have accepted good fortune from God; surely we can accept bad fortune too.”

Job's days follow one upon another, full of pain and misery. Then three men appear. They are friends of Job's who have heard about his trouble. The three friends: Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Namathite, have gotten word of Job's catastrophe. They make the journey to offer comfort and consolation. They arrive at the ruins of his home and sit down with him in the dust. For seven days they are completely silent. No one says a word, “for they [see] how great his suffering is.”

You might think this visit from his friends would cheer Job up, but, just when things can't get any worse, they do. The friends begin to speak. Each one offers what he thinks will be an encouraging word, but their words only rub salt in Job's wounds.

You see, the friends try to find reasons for Job's misfortune. They try to find a cause, something Job has done to bring on such calamity. They say that he must have sinned and now is being punished by God. This is a kind of conventional wisdom, and it is part of our tradition; you can find it in the Bible's book of Proverbs. One proverb puts it this way, “the perverse get what they deserve, and the good, what their deeds deserve” (14.14).

Sometimes you and I think that way today. We say things like “what goes around comes around.” We like to find a reason why bad things happen. So, often when something bad happens, we decide it must be somebody's fault.

Job's friends go on at length, but their message is basically that Job must have done something wrong, for these awful things to be happening to him. His trouble has to be the result of something he did. "C'mon, think back," they say. "Search your memory. Rack your brains! Surely you did something to make God mad."

But Job isn't buying it. He tells his friends that their efforts to comfort him have been wasted. He knows that what has happened to him is not the result of anything he did. In our passage for today, he proclaims his faith that his redeemer lives, and that he will yet be put right with God. You may recognize his words from Handel's *Messiah*. "I know that my Redeemer lives." Job insists that he will be vindicated.

Job stands by his faith in God. Then, finally, God responds. Amazingly, the Lord God, Maker of heaven and earth, speaks to Job. God responds: not with answers, but with more questions. God asks, "Who is this whose ignorant words smear my design with darkness?" God asks. "Stand up now like a man; I will question you, please, instruct me. Where were you when I planned the earth? Tell me if you are so wise. Do you know who took its dimensions, measuring its length with a cord? Who laid down its cornerstone, while the morning stars burst out singing and the angels shouted for joy?" (38: 1 – 7).

In beautiful poetry, the words of God continue. The message is very simple. God says, "Job, this marvelous universe I have made: it's not about you! You and all the rest of the human race, you're not the center of the universe. This glorious cosmos I have created, the world and all its wondrous workings, all this does not revolve around your needs. I did not create the world to meet your expectations." God goes on to say that God doesn't have much use for the conventional wisdom of Job's friends. God tells the friends, "I am very angry at you, because you have not spoken truth about me, as my servant Job has" (42: 7).

God's response to Job is awe-inspiring. But Job's question is not answered. Job's struggle is not resolved, not wrapped up neatly. Job remains convinced that he didn't do anything to deserve the bad things that happened to him. But now he has heard the voice of the living God. He walks away with a renewed faith, a stronger faith. And we get the feeling that God is proud of Job for maintaining his integrity. God is pleased that Job has spoken truth, and shared, openly and honestly, what was on his mind.

The book of Job ends like this: "Then [God] returned all Job's possessions, and gave him twice as much as he had before. All his relatives and everyone who had known him came to his house to celebrate. They commiserated with him over all the suffering that the Lord had inflicted on him... And the Lord blessed the end of Job's life more than the beginning... He lived to see his grandchildren and great-grandchildren. And he died, old and full of days" (42: 11 – 17, selected verses).

The book of Job does not give easy answers, but we can learn a lot from his story. First, we might learn something from his so-called friends. From them we might learn

what *not* to do. When we meet Job in someone who is going through a bad time, we might remember that it doesn't help to tell them, "You must have done something wrong, for this to happen to you." It doesn't help to tell them, "Think about it. You must have messed up in some way." From Job's friends, we can learn to do the opposite of what they did. When a friend is hurting, we can sit quietly and listen. We can listen while they vent and lament. Simply by our presence, we can show them they are not alone.

Second, what can we learn from Job himself? What might he have to say to us, when disaster strikes? If you're looking for easy answers here, you're going to be disappointed. If you've always believed that what goes around comes around, Job's story can throw you for a loop. It can make life seem unpredictable, uncontrollable. It can make you want to ask, "Why, God, why? Why are you doing this? Why are you letting these awful things happen?"

Job doesn't offer us easy answers. Instead he offers truth about the painful situations we might experience. The book of Job doesn't declare that the wicked always get what's coming to them, and the good are always rewarded – far from it. His story can be disconcerting. But Job can show us the question to ask when disaster strikes. Job can help us see that, when disaster strikes, the question of *why* is not the question to ask. Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, says that the question to ask isn't "Why are you doing this to me?"

Instead, Kushner says, the question to ask might be, "God, see what is happening to me. I know you love me; so, can you help me?" [When disaster strikes], we can turn to God: not to be judged, not to demand judgment against those who have hurt us, but to find comfort and strength" (Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, p. 44).

From Job we can also learn to maintain our integrity. We can speak honestly to God of our pain and anguish. We can speak in the confidence that God does not condemn us. We can affirm our conviction that our redeemer lives.

Finally, one more lesson we can draw from Job. It's not spelled out in the pages of his book, but we can live it out wherever we find ourselves. When disaster strikes, and the question arises, "where is God in all this?" - when that difficult question arises, we can respond that God can be found, not in simplistic answers, but in the love that grows in the hearts of those who come to help. God can be found, not in conventional wisdom, but in the compassion that compels us to reach out to those who suffer. When that compassion fills our hearts, God draws out the best in us: the best of our integrity, the best of our faithfulness.

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Pentecost 20