



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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The Problem with Job

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 7, 2012

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Job 1:1; 2:1-10 and Mark 10:2-16

The Book of Job is often referred to as one of the finest pieces of literature in the world. Honestly there are portions of it that make me cringe, but I too love it—if for no other reason than its audacity in approaching arguably the biggest religious and spiritual issue of all ages: why bad things happen to good people. Several years ago when we conducted the Parish Life Project, the overriding theological question identified was how we deal with the presence of suffering in our lives and the lives of those whom we love.

Does Job give us a definitive answer? Well, no, it does not for me. The polemic is interesting and literary, poetic, even, but it leaves me more troubled than resolved. That may be okay, perhaps even what the unknown writer intended. If you haven't ever read it or haven't read it in awhile, read it; you will find it fascinating whether or not it resolves anything. With many scholars, I view the book of Job as a fable, an ancient work of fiction; we might call it a parable. Let me give you a one-minute summary of the story:

- Job is an exceptionally good man, blessed with 10 children, 500 oxen, 500 donkeys, 7000 sheep and no doubt a partridge in a pear tree!
- Satan, *hassatan* in Hebrew, which really means accuser or adversary, approaches God about this exemplary man. As the fable goes, God asks Satan about Job, and Satan claims that Job is only righteous because God has blessed him with such a bubble of good fortune. After a while, God gives permission for Satan to mess up Job's life to test the premise, to see how he does when life crumbles around him.
- Satan gets to work. Job loses all his possessions and his 10 children die. He becomes covered in disgusting and painful boils and is visited by three worthless friends.
- Despite all this, he does not curse God, worshipping and praying instead, claiming that the "lord gives and the lord takes away."
- Finally, pushed beyond measure, his proverbial patience worn paper thin, he curses the day he was born.
- Then God smacks him around verbally, reminding him that he, a mere mortal, is nothing compared to God—"Where were you, Job, when I formed the world?"
- And finally, in the epilogue to the book, God restores everything Job had, indeed increasing his wealth and giving him new children.

So there it is. It is a fascinating account of an ancient writer's struggle with this perennial dilemma. Clearly there are good parts—at least three for me. Beyond a doubt we are reminded that we are different from God and that knowing God is filled with awe, some fear, and much mystery—good things to know. Second, the ending demonstrates God's desire for our restoration—a complicated but hopeful conclusion. And finally, the story unmistakably challenges the gospel of prosperity argument, which is so alive and well in American Christianity today. You know the notion: God blesses righteousness with good things, good material things. The premise usually gets pretty specific: give to the church and you will be materially blessed. If only it were so, or even if only I could say it with a straight face, what a stewardship program we would have! The incredible popularity of Joel Osteen, many before him and no doubt many to come after him notwithstanding, I can't make that promise because I don't believe it, and my experience of life does not support it.

Beyond those points, it gets hard for me. Had I written Job, I would have composed a different ending—no doubt ending its run on the list of the "best books ever written." I would have ended it with Job still bereft, still living in the reality of a lost fortune and largely gone family—but living as a man who now understood that he was not alone in the midst of this misfortune but held in the arms of God, made whole only by the presence and love of God. In my story there would be no claim that God caused such calamities to test Job. I don't think

that God tests us, and I certainly don't think that God deputizes some devilish creature to do so. Life tests us, but God sustains us. Like the original Job, the Job of my novel would not be a Pollyanna; far from it, he would weep and wail with each new disastrous event. But he would cease asking *why* because he has found not God's will in the events themselves but God's presence in his life, a presence so sustaining to him that nothing could ever separate him from God, a presence that even allows joy in the midst of the pain.

It was Rabbi Harold Kushner who wrote the seminal book of the modern age on this issue, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. You may recall that he knew in a deeply personal way great loss. One of his children died at the age of 13 after a long and arduous illness. Many years after his blockbuster book was first published, the rabbi reported that a faithful person said to him, "Don't you think it is possible that you went through the loss of your son so that you might write this book which has brought comfort to millions of people?" Rabbi Kushner said, "No, not at all. If that was God's plan, it was a bad bargain; and I wouldn't want to deal with a God like that."

Nor would I; and, yet, in the shambles of the broken moment, even theologically sophisticated people find themselves wondering, "Why, why is this happening to me?" Most of the time we catch ourselves before saying the remainder of what we are feeling but we feel it nonetheless: "I am a faithful person, I give, I love my neighbor, I go to church, I seek to know and follow Christ. I try to do it all right. Why, O Lord, is this happening to me?" All these questions, known to us all, are based on the erroneous assumption that God has caused whatever is occurring.

Questioning God like this, sometimes in rage, more often in stark despair, is completely understandable and—dare I say—acceptable to God. But the joy that comes in the morning following a night or years of nights of such sorrow only appears when we realize and accept that life happens—it happens in good and extravagant ways and it happens in little disappointments and huge tragedies. Christians—people of any faith—are not exempt from the natural give and take of life; and there is no evidence in my life to support the claim that either grace or punishment is retributive. Retribution in either direction—reward or punishment—is a human concept, I believe, not the creation or desire of God.

Suffering happens. The question is not why, it is not why did God let this happen to me, it is not what is God trying to teach me. In fact, the only authentic question is "Why not me?" I'm human, and the human experience is one of suffering and joy and all stops in between. This is the crux of my theology, and I believe it with all my heart; but it is hard, really, really hard. There's a little boy in me that still wants to believe that God has a magic wand, poised and ready. But nothing about life supports that proposition.

So what good is God to us, we honestly wonder. If God is not in the business of delivering us from our troubles, what kind of God is God? Many claim that I am dead wrong—and they may be absolutely right—that God is utterly and traditionally powerful, that God chooses to intervene in some circumstances and not in others, curing some and not others, spreading riches here and not there, and that what looks like capriciousness is actually not, but wisdom much beyond ours. That doesn't work for me; if it does for you, I don't question it. I do, however, passionately argue for another kind of Almighty power, a power that can take the most impossible situation, not removing it, but walking with us through it. I've seen it—so many witnesses to this incredible power—people who have suffered unspeakable sadness, people who after a long time of grief and the emotions that go with it have not only survived but have known joy again. I cling to it; in fact, my faith rests upon it.

Grace and goodness depend upon a good God, not a good outcome. Suffering happens and the presence of God is enough—*always* enough to sustain us.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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