



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Awe *and* Immanence

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 21, 2012

The Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Job 38:1-7, 34-41 and Mark 10:35-45

I am not sure what is going on with Job and me. I have been a priest a long time and frankly haven't paid the Book of Job a whole lot of attention. And now I am preaching the second sermon on him in three weeks' time. One of you many therapists out there ought to try to figure this out! I am sure it is deeply significant and probably has to do with my mother.

The truth is Job has to be revisited from time to time, as it has been through the ages. Though ancient and as you will see deeply problematic, it addresses the most timeless question of the universe: why do bad things happen to good people. I have read numerous compelling attempts to make it useful to us. One of the best-known ones is Carl Jung's fascinating treatment of Job. He argues that in this book we see the dark side of God. Although Jung's work has dramatically affected my life, his work in this area misses the mark for me—though I know many smart people do not agree with me. In the end his claims just don't work. In my book, God does not have a dark side. How else might we understand it?

In the unlikely and unthinkable case that you may not have been here two weeks ago, here are the basic tenets of the story—which by the way I believe, as others do, is a work of ancient fiction—instructive, inspiring in its way, but a fable and one to be understood with all the pros and cons of that genre:

- ❖ Job is very righteous, always has been—and quite blessed. He has 10 children, all above average and very good looking, 500 oxen, 500 donkeys, and 7000 sheep.
- ❖ Satan, the adversary, tells God that Job is righteous only because he is surrounded by such abundance. In the first clue for me that this is probably fiction, God gives Satan permission to mess up Job's life to test his premise. That's dark, and once again my God has no dark side.
- ❖ Ever effective, Satan does a grand job. Job loses everything and all his children die. Painful, disgusting boils cover his body, and several friends—the kind none of us would want to know but probably do—visit him, making it all worse.
- ❖ After a long time of holding fast to his faith, finally he curses the day he was born.
- ❖ His doing so is the setting for today's lesson: God is mightily displeased and reads Job the riot act, albeit in beautiful and poetic language, but with a message that clearly puts this uppity mortal in his place.
- ❖ And then finally next week we shall learn from the epilogue that God restores Job to fullness beyond expectation, including ten new children who are indeed better looking and even more above average than the previous crop.

Today we confront a royally ticked-off God, who bellows at Job out of the whirlwind, demanding that Job "man up," stop his whining, and answer some questions. "So, I will do the questioning here, Job. Who made the world? Was it you or was it I? Is it you who makes it rain, Job? I don't think so." And on it goes: God is God and Job is not.

There is nothing wrong with being reminded of that fact; indeed there is a good bit right about it. God is God, and we clearly are not. In fact that conceit about the nature of God acknowledges a critical truth for me: God is indeed mysterious and beyond our understanding. In fact, it is the search for God, incomplete and often unsatisfying as it is, that brings God most fully into our lives. To know God is always to journey toward God. In this sense God is, for me, beyond a doubt transcendent, unknowable.

Fifty years ago the world of theology was shocked by Gabriel Vahanian's book, *The Death of God*. A French theologian, Vahanian claimed that modern people have lost any sense of God's transcendence, that we have in fact recreated God as cultural artifact, if anything. To be clear Vahanian was not arguing that God was dead but that secularism had rendered God

somehow unnecessary in our lives, that a God without transcendence is unimportant to us and therefore in effect dead.

I mention him because it seems that he would be arguing for us to read and reread this portion of Job to remind us of God's transcendence: "Where *indeed* were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" But that is the rub for me. I do not buy the idea that modern people reject God because they don't conceive of God as transcendent. Quite the contrary, I think they stop believing in God because they believe God to be **utterly, completely** transcendent, capricious, and—dare I say it—*mean* like the God presented in this section of Job. What creates trouble for many people who are tottering on the brink of abject disbelief is the view of God as a puppeteer who manipulates our lives and circumstances. My fear is that an unexamined view of Job, which is replete with images and notions that live broadly and deeply in our culture, contributes not to faithfulness but to apostasy.

In nicer language than the hard but poetic words of this chapter of Job, we often hear that God's ways are not ours and that we just don't understand. If that does it for you, stop listening right now. If it doesn't, stay with me for a moment. We do not have to believe that God controls the world in the manner in which a beloved but ancient piece of scripture suggests. How helpful would it be for us in a moment of heartbreak to be "told" by God not to question, to "man up," to remember that he is in charge and that we are not? The answer for me is not very much help at all.

While writing this week, I remembered a very sad story from my youth that I believe resides at the bottom of this struggle for me. A family close to my own went through a horrible sadness when I was around 15. One of the sons of the other family had just gotten married at 21; he was smart, just graduating from college; indeed the world seemed to be his oyster. One morning he went to class, had an aneurysm and died. His family, particularly his mother and father, of course were devastated. Always more religious than my parents, after his death, they became increasingly more outwardly religious. I had—we all had—the immensely sad experience of watching their lives shrivel from the grief and despair that overcame them. Every conversation with them included the increasingly incantational reciting of these words: "It is not ours to question, there is reason for everything, who are we to argue with God," even though every atom of their bodies and souls was crying out against what had happened. It wrecked their lives, and I never remember a day of real joy for them after it. Far from being critical, I have no idea what I would do under similar circumstances. I am simply decrying the lack of relief their faith brought them and wondering if a misreading of Job may have led in part to their pain. They lived their lives ascribing devotion to a transcendent God when what they desperately needed was an immanent one, a God who was intensely present to sustain them, not a distant, awesome God.

This then is my point: we are a people in need of a new understanding of sacred scripture, one that is honest and forthright, respectful and questioning, and especially one that is expanded, elucidated and mitigated by reason, experience and evolution. Even among progressives, there is intense effort to make scripture work for us when in some cases the stretch is too great. If Job is viewed as an ancient story that reflects an ancient peoples' tentative, superstitious views of God, is it worth anything to us? Yes, I think so but not in a prescriptive way as a manual for understanding suffering. It shows us that the search for meaning is as old as stories and that the desire to make sense of life is holy and good and that God exists in the search.

Who can know? None of us, finally. I may be totally wrong; maybe God does dangle us here and there, teaching us this and teaching us that. But I think not. *Life* dangles us here and there; and while in my paradigm we can't depend upon God to get us out of every hard moment, God is always immanent, as close as our breath, a friend reminds me. And, yes, that kind of intense presence is transcendent, too deep, too awesome for words—but real and more important than anything in the world.

In the name of God: *Amen*.