

Job 1:1; 2:1-10 (NRSV)

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. ²The Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." ³The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason." ⁴Then Satan answered the Lord, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. ⁵But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." ⁶The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life."

⁷So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. ⁸Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself and sat among the ashes. ⁹Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die." ¹⁰But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

A MAN FROM UZ

A Presbyterian pastor in North Carolina tells about a woman who came to see him on her lunch break. Nicely dressed, dignified, late thirties. Her face revealed a mixture of indignation and great sadness. She shared about a woman in her Sunday School class, a teacher, who was always talking about how wonderful it was to walk and talk with Jesus. She would tell how everything she asked Jesus for she received. She prayed that her blueberry muffins would be perfect, and they always were. Jesus, she would say, is wonderful to have around. She told of rushing somewhere to do the Lord's work and she would say: "Lord you know that I am coming down here to do your work and I am running late so I need a parking space and always someone would be pulling out of the space at exactly the right time." "Jesus was so good to have around," she would say!

The woman in front of the pastor did not know whether to be angry at God or crushed because it seemed to her that God never answered her prayers. She admitted she had never pestered God for tasty muffins or parking spaces, but for ten years she had been praying for just one thing. She liked being married but she wanted to have a baby. Then she asked: "What kind of

Jesus was this who likes that other woman so much he would jump at her beck and call and grant her silly requests, but who did not like me enough to give me the one selfish thing I prayed for... a baby. It makes me angry, and it hurts!”

The book of Job reminds us of the dangers of believing in a God who rewards piety and virtue with prosperity and success. Let’s face it, this is a popular God in America today... millions of people base their whole belief system on the thought that if you think positively, wear a winning smile, show your religion publicly, wrap your words in ubiquitous God-talk, and tell people how much Jesus has given to you... then you will be a success and have peace of mind and you will be spared of all painful experiences. Many television preachers and books teach that God wants you healthy, wealthy, and wise (that is, if you send them money). Job exposes that lie for what it is. In his book *Forty Acres and a Goat*, Will Campbell derides such teachers as “soul molesters,” asserting that genuine faith doesn't manipulate God for material gain, out of fear of punishment, or the avoidance of unjust suffering. Into the midst of this distorted picture comes this incredible story of Job to remind us that life is just not that way.

Job is a drama whose ultimate subject is the nature of God. Certainly, it wrestles with suffering and struggles against simplistic ideas about God and the world, but at the heart of the matter is the deeper struggle concerning just who God is. The story was most likely written during Judah’s exile in Babylon. Although we don’t have enough information to make a precise claim, this seems to be the most plausible theory. In 587 BC, the walls of Jerusalem, the gilded palace of King David and the awe-inspiring temple built by King Solomon lay in smoking ruin. Over a series of deportations, people were pulled from their roots, leaving their homes and livelihoods behind—taken hundreds of miles away to Babylon. Lasting for two generations, the exile confronted the people of God with a huge existential and theological crisis. The pillars of their faith—the promised land itself a sign of their covenant relationship with God, a king descended from the line of David, and the Temple, where they understood to be the connection of heaven and earth, the very hem of God’s garment falling into the Holy of Holies, razed to the ground, the regular priestly round of sacrifice and offering, the annual festivals bringing pilgrims surging into Jerusalem—all of these were all gone. These horrific images left an indelible mark on their memories. One can imagine the people looking over their shoulders to catch one last, sorrow-filled glance as they trudged in chains to a strange and unfamiliar place, a place filled with images of other gods, and people speaking different languages, and following customs and traditions completely foreign to them.

The most pressing question must surely have been: why has this tragedy happened? The responses were multiple. God has punished us for our evil, as the prophets had warned for centuries, cried some. Others concluded that this YHWH, the so-called creator of sky and earth, the one who chose Israel for a great purpose, was perhaps no God at all. In ancient times, as

nations were at war with one another, it was understood that the nation's deities were also at war within the heavenly places. Thusly, was not the mighty Marduk, God of Babylon, greater than YHWH, Judah's God, given Babylon's victory and Judah's humiliating defeat? Or, as others offered, perhaps there was finally no God at all, no divine presence in the world. So why not grab for all the gusto you could, since you only go around once in life? Why not adopt YOLO as one's life mantra— "you only live once" —if there are no eternal consequences to our actions. Some did decide to move on, jettison the past, start anew, and quietly assimilate into the larger Babylonian culture. But another group held out a hard-headed hope that God still had plans for them, that there were great missions that still needed accomplishing, and that someday a new generation would have the opportunity to re-inhabit the land, re-establish the Davidic kingdom, and rebuild the temple.

And then there is the author of Job, a probing mind who simply refused to accept any easy answers—any responses that partook of old ideas that, to him, had been forever rendered foolish and impossible by the horrifying shock of exile. He set out to take to the woodshed those who continued to parrot pious platitudes that were designed to shut up any who dared to scrutinize and question the "tried and true" replies that so many people clung to in their misery. The author of Job was not afraid of confronting the harsh realities staring him in the face: everything must be questioned, even God and God's ways, if we are to remain fully alive in this new world. If we are to maintain a connection to the one living God, we must question all that we think we have known about God in the past. And so, he sets puts his thoughts and feelings into the wisdom story that is before us...one could describe as "a riches to rags" story.

According to the story, Job was the wealthiest man in town, a deeply religious and pious man, a man who feared God and turned away from evil, and through no fault of his own, God and Satan make a kind of crummy deal and Job is the brunt of it. God was very proud of Job and one day in a conversation between God and Satan, God said: "Have you considered my servant Job, there is no one like him on Earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil." But Satan taunts God saying: "Job is weak... put forth your hand... take away everything you have given to him, and he will curse you to your face." So, God and Satan enter this meaningless bet... God said: "Job will remain faithful no matter what you take away from him or what you do to him!"

Job is magnificently righteous and hence completely innocent of any deeds that could possibly elicit the horrors he is about to endure. The writer thus announces that the supposed connection between human evil and divine punishment must be reconsidered; Job will not find himself on an ash heap because he somehow deserves it. Clearly, the universe does not operate in that way at all.

Job is stripped of everything, his possessions, his holdings, even his children, seven sons and three daughters all die, and ultimately his health is attacked. Job is afflicted with loathsome sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. He ends up on the trash dump of the city. Job's response is famous: "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." In the face of calamity, Job utters an astonishing statement of piety. Hence, the oft used phrase, the "patience of Job." But that's not really an accurate description of Job, as we shall see over these coming weeks.

After further catastrophes deprive Job of his health, leaving him only with a smelly robe and a broken piece of pottery with which he may scrape his foul sores, his wife urges him to get it over with and "curse God and die." Even though the Hebrew text actually reads "bless God and die" (perhaps a pious copyist could not bear to place the words "curse" and "God" in such close proximity), it seems clear that Mrs. Job's intent is for her husband to stop the monstrosity of his life, a life she can no longer bear to witness. Job's wife is not a bad person; she merely can no longer stand to watch the man she loves suffer so cruelly.

But he disagrees with her and calls her a "foolish woman." And rather than answer her demand for him to curse God with a powerful statement as he did at the end of the first chapter, he now asks a question, one that will lead us into the heart of the story: "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?"

If God is author of all, good and evil, just what sort of God is God? Job's so-called friends Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and later, the young Elihu, believe that God is the author of all, and as such, is punishing Job for some awful thing he has apparently done. Good people, they say, don't end up on ash heaps with terrible diseases. But we know what they do not; Job is not on the ash heap due to some supposed evil deed. To the contrary, Job is the most righteous man we know. This fact also makes it quite clear that these friends are convinced beyond doubt that he is nothing but evil. Their so-called "empathetic silence" in chapter two may simply be their silent hope that this sinner will soon die, as all sinners in their reward and punishment world must do.

Much to their increasing chagrin, Job does not die, but starts to talk and talk and talk. He will have none of their simplistic views of God and the universe, and his story will lead us to the questions all people of faith should consider. Perhaps the main question is this: if God does not reward the righteous and punish the wicked, then just what is God doing anyway? The rest of the story will get at that question in some fascinating and unforgettable ways. But that remains for another sermon. Stay tuned!