

October 27, 2024

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Job 42:1-6, 10-17 (NRSV)

pg. 488, OT Pew Bible

¹Then Job answered the Lord: ²“I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ³“Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ⁴“Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.’ ⁵I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; ⁶therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

¹⁰And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. ¹¹Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring. ¹²The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. ¹³He also had seven sons and three daughters. ¹⁴He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. ¹⁵In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job’s daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. ¹⁶After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children’s children, four generations. ¹⁷And Job died, old and full of days.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word...

Happily Ever After?

Fractured Fairy Tales—*Rocky & Bullwinkle*...Hansel and Gretel...Goldilocks and the Three Bears...Little Red Riding Hood... “and they lived happily ever after.”

In some sense, the Book of Job is kind of a fractured fairy tale. The story of Job has all the classic elements of a fairy tale. Of course, there’s Job, the stalwart lead character—the one who maintains his integrity in spite of what his so-called friends tell him to attempt to convince him that he had sinned in some way. In the story, God is portrayed as an antagonist, the one whom allows the accuser, the Satan, to have his way with Job, as long as Job wasn’t killed. Job’s wife is yet another character in the story. She is the pragmatist, concluding that Job might as well throw in the towel on his faith and go ahead and curse God to God’s face and then die. And of course, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, the three supposed friends who come to sit with Job among the ashes only to become his tormentors.

And so now we come to the conclusion of the story—the proverbial “happily ever after” in which we find Job restored. He’s given a new house, new wealth, new children, and a long and full life. But how can we move from Job’s arduous suffering and all his arguing, pleading, complaining, lamenting, and praying just to reach the simple conclusion that “all’s well that ends well.” Certainly, everyone likes a happy ending, but is that what happens in real life? Do we always gain some sort of closure to our dysfunctional situations? Do we always find reconciliation among our broken human relationships? And, when we think about it, is this really a happy ending? For all his recovered wealth and status and family, don’t you think Job might have been plagued by thoughts of those seven children he lost, the grief still a dull throb in his heart? Did Job not remember his physical suffering each time his eyes caught a glimpse of one of the scars from those terrible sores? Can all the hurts of one’s past be simply obviated by gold and silver?

Theologian Cynthia Ozick offers these thoughts: “If we are to take the close of the tale as a given, it is not only Job’s protests that are stilled; it is also his inmost moral urge. What has become of his raging conscience? Prosperity is restored, but where is the father’s bitter grief over the loss of those earlier sons and daughters, on whose account he had once indicted God. Is job’s lesson from the whirlwind finally no more than the learning of indifference?”

There is so much going on here that prevents us from concluding that this is the prototypical Hollywood-esque happy ending. For Job, the memories of what he suffered surely didn’t merely fade away—verse 11 even tells us that he still needed comforting sometimes. And, although Job may have ceased asking the big “why” questions, the wonder and mystery of life must have been always somewhere in the back of his mind for the rest of his life. After all, since he was told that the reasons behind his original catastrophe were quite simply beyond his ability to understand, who was to say that it couldn’t happen again? I wonder if this didn’t make Job a little jumpy....as the saying goes, “once bitten, twice shy.”

It’s interesting how our senses and our memories are so inextricably linked. Sights and sounds and smells and such often take us back to a previous place in time, a moment perhaps of blessing or tenderness, or, conversely, a moment of terror or agony. Like the Vietnam vet who find himself instinctively clenching his fists upon hearing the whir of helicopter blades. I wonder if Job felt similarly—anytime that he saw storm clouds building on the horizon and heading in his direction. I wonder if he was ready to grab his children and duck and cover. Every so often, his wife and kids might see a distant look come into Job’s eyes, and they knew he was wondering about it all over again. The big questions never completely go away, not even for those dear saints among us who have suffered but who still speak so glowingly about the comfort of the Holy Spirit and of the faith they have in Christ Jesus. Even they sometimes wish they had the power to change the past and erase the scars left from previous traumas.

At the beginning of the story, Satan's question was, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" The idea was that those who have it easy, those who find themselves in the upper echelon of society, who have it all in this life, must find it easy to believe in God. Take all those things away from Job and he'll lose his faith and say nasty things to and about God. Job proves this wrong in the story, but what was really taken away from Job in the end—and what was not really restored to him when his money and family were given back—was his rather simple faith, his rock-solid confidence that he knew "what was what." At the end of the book, Job admits to how much he really doesn't know, and that the answers he once thought he had, have been dashed into the dust. He has learned that the easy answers are often wrong and that many questions will remain unanswered.

I think the book of Job challenges our culture's assumption that every issue has an answer; that every problem carries with it the possibility for resolution. We tell ourselves that if we really work hard at it, the answer will appear, and the problem will be resolved. In our life of faith, this assumption expresses itself in the expectation that fervent study and prayer will reveal all the answers to all our spiritual questions. But no matter how hard we try, sometimes our best efforts end up in frustration. The wisdom we glean from the book of Job is that not all the things that trouble us can be resolved. As to the question of "why"—there is no single answer that can put an end to that question once and for all. But the key thing is, Job's faith still points us toward the One who does have the answers and who can help us live through the questions. The One who enigmatically beats death at its own game. The One who takes the worst that humanity can unleash; and turn it into a final victory over the grave.

In a way, Job has less to go on at the end of the story than at the beginning. Job loses his rigid, shallow, and innocent faith that was based on the confident assurances of a despotic deity who rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. But he winds up trading that kind of faith for a different one, a faith that places oneself in the hands of a God who defies convention and understanding. As Job himself declares in verse three: "Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things to wonderful for me, which I did not know." Job acknowledges that he doesn't have the ability to comprehend all God is doing in the world. He recognizes that his finite words cannot give expression to vastness of God's infinite power and wisdom.

Ultimately, Job could no longer view God in the same way. Job could no longer accept a cause-and-effect kind of faith, one that believes that if one does everything right, one will be blessed beyond one's imagination. And that, when one does wrong, one will find the pain of the ensuing suffering unbearable. Job no longer claims to have the answers, but rather must learn to trust in the One who does. From this point on, Job's faith must bear the weight of mystery.

At the end of Job, despite what looks like such a happy ending, Job was forced to live with a whole new set of questions, a whole new outlook on life and on God, without some of the certainties to which he had clung earlier in his life. In an essay in *Christian Century*, Martin Copenhaver wrote that the “happy ending of this story begins to look more like an act of extraordinary faith. For Job to resume his life as it was before is to risk losing it all again. To have twice as much as before is to double the risk. To embrace his wife is to embrace his life, in spite of potential suffering and unanswered questions. To have many children and no answers or assurances can be a profound expression of humility and trust.” Like a Holocaust survivor whose greatest act of courage is to bear children after the cataclysm, Job chooses against all odds to live again. Job (and his wife) choose to bear children into a world full of heart-rending beauty and heart-breaking pain. Job chooses to love again, even when he knows the cost of such love.

As people reading the story of Job through the lenses of the resurrection of Jesus, we may discover ourselves in a similar situation as Job. Ultimately our faith brings us to the foot of the cross, to that terrifying instrument of execution on which God’s own Son was impaled and murdered. As Christians we recognize the cross as essential to our restoration. We accept that and sing about it and talk about it, often without batting an eye. But if the death of God’s Son doesn’t strike us as at least as wildly improbable and terrifying as anything we read in Job, it’s possible that we’ve become over-familiar with the image of the cross. The cross washes away a great many of our own certainties, the things we might otherwise think are true about God, about life, about sin, about what is needed to fix what’s broken in this world. If sin and evil really put Jesus Christ through all that, then matters are far more complex than we would have ever thought if left to our own wisdom.

The only hope for a truly happy ending for us is that we serve a God of all grace who is rich in mercy and compassion. And for all the ways the cross of Jesus knocks us off our feet, that same cross tells us that our God is indeed exactly the God of grace we need to someday usher in a cosmic happy ending.