

REDEMPTION

How did this passage in Job affect you? Hopefully the portrait portrayed of God was quite dissonant from the one Jesus reveals, particularly in light of the resurrection. After reading Job it is easy to understand why the heretic Marcion wanted to omit the Old Testament from his cannon. He could not reconcile the two images of God. But can we? There is a reason why this book was retained in both Jewish and Protestant scripture and this morning we're going to take a closer look at why.

To be honest, as I was preparing this sermon I chose this passage because of the redemption at the end of the book. Tough beginning, happy ending. God redeems and then doubles all that Job has lost, and Job lives an extremely long and blessed life. Nice and tidy. Fit beautifully. That was before, as Will Willamon describes, I let the text have its way with me. There was a lot more there than I bargained for.

It turns out that we don't really know who authored the book of Job. It falls under the category of Wisdom Literature. And dating it is extremely difficult -- somewhere from 800-300 BC. There are Sumerian versions of the legend which mention the name Job dating all the back to 2000 B.C. According to most scholars, the first two chapters of Job and most of the final chapter were part of a well-known folktale. The missing genealogy suggests that this was a pre-patriarchal character and the patient Job of these chapters is much different from the lamenting character in the other chapters. This explains a lot. This God seems much more like a god of the Ancient Near East.

Why would Israelites use a popular folktale? Because these feelings were universal. Haven't there been times when we're suffering that we feel like we're pawns in some sort of cosmic battle? As author Lawrence Boadt describes: "Job is a well-known figure of wisdom... This permits the author to put on Job's lips words and ideas that might shock many Israelites... The author had the courage to move beyond simple acceptance of God's will to ask hard questions of the traditional and overconfident wisdom so often found in Proverbs and sometimes in the prophets... If God does look after the just and does always punish the wicked, as the friends claim, why does the opposite seem to be our experience? God ultimately redeems this folktale.

The Book of Job is a drama reflecting a spiritual pilgrimage. It's all there. Job's righteousness. His material wealth, his large family, the respect and deference others give to him. All of the things that to the Israelites were evidence of God's blessing. Just to clarify, in Wisdom literature fear of God was held in the highest esteem. It meant a solid trust in God.

Then Job is stripped of everything. And still he does not curse God. According to John Hartley, cursing God is a major theme in this text. Job was worried about his sons cursing God with their hearts. Satan suggests that Job will curse God to his face, which means open defiance. Job's wife urges him to curse God, which will result in the release of his death. And at the end of the second chapter, Job still does not curse God with his lips. In Wisdom literature the image of the lips suggests the deepest thoughts. They felt that under duress, it was the hardest to control our speech.

Job sits in silence, suffering for seven days. And his three friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar come and sit silently with him until he begins his lament. They cannot handle his outbursts and try to fix his problem. But Job does not admit to any wrongdoing. He has done nothing to deserve this suffering. But his friends with their small constructs cannot allow for the idea of unjust suffering. Job rails against their accusations, they lecture and fix. Oh how not to be a friend!

Job then begins to demand an answer from God. Job wants to have a mutual relationship with God. The fourth friend, Elihu offers a precursor to God's speeches to Job because God will not answer to Job, Job will answer to God. This is *not* a mutual relationship. The acceptance of this and Job's awareness of the magnitude of God transform him from someone who did all the right religious things, to someone who was willing to let go of everything he valued for a relationship with God. On the surface Job may have had all of the trappings of a very blessed life, but there was something missing in his relationship with God. He has gained humility. In chapter 42 Job cries out "I admit I once lived by rumors of you; now I have it all firsthand—from my own eyes and ears! I'm sorry—forgive me. I'll never do that again, I promise! I'll never again live on crusts of hearsay, crumbs of rumor."

It is somehow through the process of suffering that Job discovers God for himself. God then upbraids Job's friends for "not being honest either with me or about me—not the way Job has." God has Job pray for them. Job is then blessed with more wealth, long life and a new family. He has been redeemed. That was the happy ending of the folktale. But Job's real redemption happened the moment he had discovered God for himself.

There is much to be learned from spending time in Job. I am grateful to the author for addressing the subject of unjust suffering. Sometimes I think we need to read Job more often to remind ourselves of its appearance both in our own lives and in the lives of those around us.

Job also teaches us about the process of dealing with unjust suffering. Our natural instinct in such situations is to go into the survival mode of either fight or flight. Yet Job does not cut off from, or curse God. Like Jacob, he wrestles with God, albeit verbally, not letting go until God blesses him. Job is looking for vindication, but he gets something more, redemption. His life is somehow transformed by the encounter with suffering.

Mike Breen, in his book *The Passionate Life* offers an explanation of this kind of significant event in our lives. In the New Testament there are two kinds of time, *chronos* or chronological time, and *kairos*, a significant point in time that shifts our reality. A *kairos* event can be either positive or negative. We can usually spot them by the intensity of our emotions surrounding them. When these *kairos* events occur we have choices as to how we handle them 1) we can be pulled up to a dead stop and give up; 2) we can go backward to what is familiar, or 3) we can enter them as a portal into the kingdom and move into a forward process of learning. The Greek word for disciple is μαθητής, and it translates to learner. In other words, we neither fight the reality of the event nor run from it. We offer it up to God to redeem. I like how Dr. Robert Frost puts it, "There is nothing more precious to God than our praise during affliction. Not praise for what the devil has done, but praise for the redeeming power of our loving heavenly Father. What he does not protect us from, He will perfect us through. There is indeed a special

blessing for those who do not become offended at God during adversity. Furthermore, we become a special blessing to Him.”

Where do we go for truth anymore? Where do we go where someone will tell it to us straight without selling us something or manipulating us into doing something that isn't right for us. Hopefully it is the church. Churches are in the redemption business. The church doesn't want to throw out the world, it wants to redeem it. It doesn't, or shouldn't promise people lives without suffering, it should help them redeem their suffering.

We can also find truth in the Bible. We just entered into a story that places us in the stream of humanity that is thousands of years old. After seven years and two seminaries I have to confess that the bible has become a lot less literal for me, yet much more true. I find that the bible presents a more holistic approach to truth, it doesn't remove truth from its context or tradition, although there are many people who claim the opposite. It doesn't remove it from our human experience. It certainly doesn't whitewash its flawed heroes or tie up complex issues with white ribbons. Job is a very difficult book with no easy answers. Author Robert Alter explains that, until the parables of Kafka or James Joyce's Ulysses, there is a sense in which we modern people had lost the skills necessary to read the Bible. Only after artists were again determined to write reality on a number of levels, exploring the complexities of human consciousness, the mystery of time, the polyvalence of words, were we able to ask the right questions. The bible deserves our time and effort to understand what it meant then and translate it into what it means to us today. If we don't keep it alive, who will?

We can also find truth in a person, Jesus, who showed us in word and deed and resurrection that the divine will is ultimately to save, and that that includes us. Jesus was in the redemption business. Redeeming the image that people were and are holding of God. Redeeming God's gift of the law which had become graceless. How many times is Jesus quoted as saying, “You have heard it said, but I say to you...”

Resolving the problem of evil and suffering is perhaps the single most significant barrier between people and faith. Perhaps the problem has been in the lack of acceptance that suffering is unavoidable and part of human existence. That as a person of faith we do not deny this but we live constantly in the hope of Christ redeeming our suffering. Brennan Manning says that “The crucified Christ reminds us that despair and disillusionment are not terminal but signs of impending resurrection.”

May 1st will be the anniversary of my mother's death. The process of her dying changed my life. I now know it to have been a *kairos* experience. It was the first time that I had been put into the decision making process of handling someone else's life. It was the first time I was surrounded by the love and support of a faith community.

My mother was dying in the hospital in San Diego and had told the other family members previously that she would not want to be on life support. The doctor was having a hard time pronouncing her terminal. The family was in great emotional turmoil. I was the one who had to make the decision about what to do. I was in my second year at Claremont, driving there and driving down to San Diego. It was gut-wrenching. I remember coming home and planting our rose garden. Digging in the dirt and planting something living kept me going. So did God.

I had Bruce's wise counsel, Joanne Reynolds sent me a manuscript she was writing about the process of dying, which helped me to understand what was going on.

Calls and cards would come from members of my faith family. I was somehow able to speak to the nurse as honestly as I could about my mother's condition and she told me that people often changed their minds about not being taken off respirators when they were actually dying and she was quite clear that my mother wanted to keep going. So I made the decision to keep her alive for a while before we were finally able to get her into hospice care.

In the midst of this painful situation, I could feel God's care in every person I came into contact with. I was uncharacteristically clear headed, stronger than usual and gave myself the space to process my emotions. I was able to visit my mother the last day she was lucid. There she was surrounded by family, flowers and her favorite music, like the social butterfly she always was. Now my family isn't much on ritual, but I made the determination that we were not going to keep her ashes in a jar on the living room shelf, we were going to have a service, find a place for her ashes that we could all visit and I would do the service myself. It just so happened that a grave plot had just been released that was so beautiful in an amazing cemetery. We got her a beautiful granite headstone. There were only four of us present that day. It was a beautiful day. My brother had blown up pictures of her and gotten outrageously bright flower arrangements. We brought the CD player and played an anthem that our choir had sung and her favorite bosa nova kind of music. I performed the funeral service and the gardener/grave digger was standing by. When we were finished I looked at my father and saw how lost he looked. At that moment, the gardener said to my father, Do you like that kind of music, I have a CD of a local band that I think you would like. If you come back next week, bring your lunch and we'll sit out here and I'll give you a copy? It was such an unexpected act of kindness, and just the kind of thing my father needed to hear. I couldn't help but think of another who appeared outside a tomb who was thought to be a gardener. I was very happy to turn my mother over to his care.

Every time I look at my beautiful rose garden I think of that experience, it was a *kairos* moment in my life. God redeemed my suffering and turned it into a garden, but I had to make the conscious decision to let God in and to look for, *to seek*, and to claim the redemption in the midst of my fear and suffering.

Let us pray.

SCRIPTURE READINGS From *The Message* Job: 1:1-12; 1:20-22; 2:3-10

Job: 1:1-12

Job was a man who lived in Uz. He was honest inside and out, a man of his word, who was totally devoted to God and hated evil with a passion. He had seven sons and three daughters. He was also very wealthy—seven thousand head of sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred teams of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and a huge staff of servants—the most influential man in all the East!

His sons used to take turns hosting parties in their homes, always inviting their three sisters to join them in their merrymaking. When the parties were over, Job would get up early in the morning and sacrifice a burnt offering for each of his children, thinking, "Maybe one of them sinned by defying God inwardly." Job made a habit of this sacrificial atonement, just in case they'd sinned.

One day when the angels came to report to God, Satan, who was the Designated Accuser, came along with them. God singled out Satan and said “What have you been up to?”

Satan answered God, “Going here and there, checking things out on earth.” God said to Satan, “Have you noticed my friend Job? There’s no one quite like him—honest and true to his word, totally devoted to God and hating evil.”

Satan retorted, “So do you think Job does all that out of the sheer goodness of his heart? Why, no one ever had it so good! You pamper him like a pet, make sure nothing bad ever happens to him or his family or his possessions, bless everything he does—he can’t lose!

“But what do you think would happen if you reached down and took away everything that is his? He’d curse you right to your face, that’s what.”

God replied, “We’ll see. Go ahead—do what you want with all that is his. Just don’t hurt him.” Then Satan left the presence of God.

A brief synopsis of what then transpires: A messenger comes to Job and tells him that the Sabbeans have attacked and stolen the animals and field hands and that he was the only one left alive, then another messenger tells Job that bolts of lightning struck all of his sheep and shepherds. Yet another messenger arrives and tells him that the Chaldeans raided the camels and massacred all the camel drivers. Then the final messenger comes and reports that a tornado struck the home of the eldest brother where all his children were having a party and the house collapsed on all of them and they died.

Job 1:20-22:

Job got to his feet, ripped his robe, shaved his head, then fell to the ground and worshipped: Naked I came from my mother’s womb, naked I’ll return to the womb of the earth. God gives, God takes. God’s name be ever blessed. Not once through all this did Job sin; not once did he blame God.

We return to heaven where God again commends his friend Job to Satan in chapter 2:3-10: “Have you noticed my friend Job? There’s no one quite like him, is there—honest and true to his word, totally devoted to God and hating evil? He still has a firm grip on his integrity. You tried to trick me into destroying him, but it didn’t work.” Satan answered, “A human would do anything to save his life. But what do you think would happen if you reached down and took away his health? He’d curse you to your face, that’s what.”

God said, “All right. Go ahead—you can do what you like with him. But mind you, don’t kill him.”

Satan left God and struck Job with terrible sores. Job was ulcers and scabs from head to foot. They itched and oozed so badly that he took a piece of broken pottery to scrape himself, then went and sat on a trash heap, among the ashes.

His wife said, “Still holding on to your precious integrity, are you? Curse God and be done with it?”

He told her, “You’re talking like an empty-headed fool. We take the good days from God – why not also the bad days?” Not once through all this did Job sin. He said nothing against God.

Call To Worship: Psalm 51:10-17

God, make a fresh start in me,
 shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life.
Don't throw me out with the trash,
 or fail to breathe holiness in me.
Bring me back from gray exile,
 put a fresh wind in my sails!
Give me a job teaching rebels your ways
 so the lost can find their way home.
Commute my death sentence, God, my salvation God,
 and I'll sing anthems to your life-giving ways.
Unbutton my lips, dear God;
 I'll let loose with your praise.
Going through the motions doesn't please you,
 a flawless performance is nothing to you.
I learned God-worship when my pride was shattered.
Heart-shattered lives ready for love
 don't for a moment escape God's notice.

PRAYERS

INVOCATION:

Lord, is it only seven days since Easter? Oh how our lives have come crashing in. So often we rush all week and rest only after we are exhausted. How different our lives could be if we looked at Sunday as the first day of our week, approaching what follows with the peace and wisdom you bring. Operating out of discernment and the fullness of your love for us. We ask for your help now God, to enter into your stillness and allow you to begin shaping in us a Genesis week. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen

OFFERATORY:

Everything we have is a gift from you Lord, our offering reminds us of how abundantly you give to us. We humbly ask that it be dedicated to the most important endeavor of all...furthering your kingdom. Amen

CLOSING:

Lord, can it really be true that you are there, waiting for us, ready to redeem our suffering, when we call out to you for help? Is it wrong to admit how very much we need you? How we cannot bear to trudge through this life without your love and grace. Please let us feel your presence in our lives as real and tangible, teach us your ways, help us to live in your light. We pray in the way that Jesus your son taught us saying...

Let us pray.

 We pray the prayer your son taught us....