

Job and the Mystery of Suffering

Job 3:1-5; 6:1-4; 19: 25-7

The book of Job plumbs the mystery of suffering and evil in our lives and the life of the world. An earthquake or flood, a pandemic, the Holocaust, evil persons at the helm. Sin passed down from generation to generation through structural sin, violence and injustice. One person uses drugs and doesn't become an addict, another uses drugs and is lost in addiction. One person's life in changed in a tragic accident, another averts an accident by a whisper of inches. And where is God in all this?

When the worst happens, to you, to your family, to your community, to your world, your theology begins to change, maybe your whole religion. You may go through the "dark night of the soul" when God is nowhere to be found. Conventional religion, pat answers, early beliefs no longer work. Job was written for such times.

The dramatist Archibald McLeish wrote a play about Job named *J.B.* In it he voices the intellectual and spiritual dilemma of Job and of us all: "If God is God, He is not good, if God is good He is not God." Is God in control of everything? Then why evil and suffering? In this world there is the mystery of

suffering and evil, and there is the mystery of goodness. Some days the first seems to be winning. Job is for such days.

I

The book of Job is best seen as a drama, a play on stage.

As the lights go up, we see the main character alone. Job. You could not find a better man, the story goes. He was honest and compassionate, and God had blessed him with prosperity.

The Jewish Midrash says that all his wealth he had earned honestly. His house was open on all sides so that beggars could come in and eat. He was blessed with seven sons and three daughters and more sheep, oxen, camels and donkeys than you could count.

Now the scene shifts to the heavenly places. God is talking to Satan. Actually, the Hebrew is *hassatan*, “the satan”, and more precisely, “the accuser.” Stephen Mitchell in his translation calls him “The Accusing Angel.”

God is talking about what a good man his servant Job is. The Accusing Angel says, “Does Job serve God for nothing? With no thought of return? Test him and see.” So God inscrutably allows the Accusing Angel to do so. (Remember this is a play, not a video tape of the conversation.)

What comes next is a series of calamities which take our breath away. A messenger came to Job and said, “The Sabeans took your donkeys and killed your servants watching them.” Before he had finished another messenger came and said, “Lighting struck your sheep barn, and the whole flock was burned to death.” Then another servant rushed in and said, “The Chaldeans raided your camels, killed your camel drivers. I alone am left.” And while these words still hung in the air, another messenger came and said, “Sir, your sons and daughters were at a party. A great windstorm came and flattened the house. Everyone of them is dead.”

Job tore his robe and shaved his head in a ritual of grief, but he refused to curse God. Acting on spiritual instinct he said, “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” It was more than most of us could have said.

Then Job was struck with leprosy, sores covering his body. He went and sat on an ash heap and scraped his boils with a shard of pottery. His wife came and said: “Stop clinging to your innocence. Curse God and die.” She was living with the conventional theology that all suffering comes from sin. And she was ready to throw him overboard like the sailors on the ship Jonah took to escape God’s calling to preach to Ninevah. She too was mired in grief.

Enter now Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. When they saw him they were appalled by his appearance and with all that had happened to him. For seven days they sat with him and did not open their mouths, a wise Jewish grieving practice. We should learn. Better silence than a mouthful of words and platitudes that rarely give the comfort they intend.

But then they started talking, and then the trouble started. One said, "When you meet trouble with a truism you make trouble."

Job began first to speak, and what he said appalled them. He began to question the theology of his day—and ours too. It goes: "Good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people." Simple.

Job spoke his anguish:

God curse the day I was born.

I sit here and gnaw on my grief.

Silence and peace have abandoned me.

and anguish camps at my heart.

Job's friends were scandalized by Job's anger.

Eliphaz spoke first: "Job, my friend, you should not be so impatient with God. God is faithful and just. He will work things out. Just be patient! If you are

innocent, you have nothing to worry about. In God’s perfect plan, the righteous win, so hang in there.” (Chp.5&6).

Bildad spoke next: “God doesn’t make mistakes, Job. You reap what you sow. Your dead children must have done *something* wrong. What you need to do is to get right with God. Take a look at history. Those who forget God wither and die. Read Psalm 1. Don’t blame God, go take a look in the mirror.” (Chp. 8)

Now Zophar entered the conversation. “Job, you are obviously guilty of something. God is punishing you less that you deserve, not more. And you just add to your guilt by your complaining. God is mystery. Don’t question God. Get your heart right, Job, and God will bless you.” (Chapter 11).

IV

“With friends like that”, the saying goes, “who needs any enemies?” Job called them “worthless physicians.” Then Job turned to God and unleashed his anger. “You, God, are responsible for my pain. It makes no sense to me. You use me for target practice. You act like a tyrant, a wild beast, a ruthless warrior. I am torn apart by grief, destroyed by my affliction.” Then Job’s scream filled the air: “*Earth, do not absorb my blood! Let the cry of it wander the earth*” (Chapter 6-7, 9-10, 12-4,16).

Hearing this, his friends begin to attack him. “Job, you’ve just forgotten your sin. God sees everything. Stop making God your enemy!” Then Eliphaz quoted scripture and twisted the dagger more deeply into Job: “God brings down the proud and saves the humble.” (Chapter 22).

Then Job’s anger turned to sadness as he remembered his former intimacy with God: “Once God and I were as close as close could be. There was a time when his lamp shone on my head and by his light I walked through darkness. The friendship of God was on my tent. God was near, my friends were near, my children were all about. But now my wealth is gone, my friends are gone, my children are gone. Even God is gone. I look everywhere for Him, but he is nowhere. I speak to God, and God no longer answers. (Chapters 23,29-30).

Then he once again defends his innocence and with the last scrap of faith left he says:

I know that my Redeemer liveth (My “Advocate”, my “Defender”). And at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side....”

(19: 25-7).

There is the mental and physical anguish of suffering and there is the deeper anguish that fears that God has turned against you, that your suffering is the judgment of God, that God had abandoned you and left you desolate.

V

I hate to bring this up, but there is one more speaker to afflict Job with his words, a brash young theologian named Elihu. He is insufferable. You want to take his glasses off and stomp on them.

I have something to say on God's behalf: Let a man lose himself in adoration of God and he will have no room for self-pity.

Then he closes with words that are an unwitting self-condemnation. "God does not regard any who are wise in their own conceits." (Chapter 32-37).

Finally God breaks in and begins to speak from the midst of whirlwind. God answers Job's questions in the form of a series of questions with images so intense that Job not only hears God's voice, he *sees* God's voice:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? ...Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep?...Where is the way to the dwelling place of light?...Have you entered into the storehouses of the snow?...Has the rain a father?...Do you tell the

antelope to calve, or ease her when she is in labor?...Do you deck the ostrich with wings?...Do you give the horse his might? (Chps. 38+39)

It was like the vastness and wonder of the universe passing by his eyes, the dwelling places of light, the store houses of snow, the constellations of the heavens.

Job answers in a whisper:

I have spoken what I did not yet understand. I heard you with my ears; yet now my eyes see you. Therefore I must be quiet, comforted in the limits of my being.

Some have accused God of being a Cosmic Bully here, but maybe you needed, like Job, to be there. Job needed more than answers, he needed God. And God was there. So with us, we want answers, but more than that, we want God.

VI

Now God turned to Job's friends and said, "My anger is kindled against you because you have spoken falsehoods against me. Your answers were more false than Job's questions. His doubts were truer than your beliefs." I saw recently these words: "I'd rather be in a religion where questions have no answers than where answers cannot be questioned."

VII

The final scene. As the curtains are raised, we see God blessing Job with new wealth, and new children, seven new sons and three new daughters, not to replace their loss but to bring Job new comfort and joy. The story tells us that Job named his three new daughters “Dove”, “Cinnamon”, and “Eye Shadow”. After so much unfathomable loss, his life was being restored. God was not ever his enemy but his friend.

Job peered into the future and asked for a Redeemer, an Advocate, Defender and Friend. So Jesus came and comes to us as Redeemer, Advocate, Defender and Friend. Paul wrote these words to the church in Rome they themselves looking into a fearsome future:

What can we say to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ...Who shall separate us from the love of God? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31, 35, 37-40).

Somedays it may be hard to believe this, but there is someone believing it for you. There are days words are not enough, even words as glorious as these. But this is

the good news Jesus came to tell and to live. I hope you can glimpse this good news today, and feel a bit of it.

We can also be such good news to others. When those around us suffer we can go to them and *be* the good news, not by our words by our presence, the presence of that love from which nothing will ever, ever separate us.