

“PERSISTING IN INTEGRITY”

Job 1:1; 2:1-10

A Sermon by John Thomason

Woodbury UMC

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During our 5th Sunday service a week ago, we explored together the ecumenical lectionary, which is the scriptural basis for nearly all of our worship services. The lectionary follows the liturgical calendar rather than the United Methodist calendar, so the lectionary readings for this 20th Sunday after Pentecost have no direct connection with today’s denominational observance of World Communion Sunday. But there is an indirect connection. World Communion Sunday affirms the unity of the Church throughout the world, and today’s Old Testament lesson reminds us of one facet of human experience which all Christians, indeed all persons everywhere, have in common – the experience of pain and suffering.

This lesson begins a series of three readings from Job, one of the most challenging books in all the Bible. The story of Job may be based on an actual historical character, but the book in its final form is a parable which addresses difficult issues like human suffering and divine justice.

I trust the outline of the story is familiar to many of you. A man named Job is pictured in the first verse of the book as the epitome of piety – “blameless and upright” (1:1). Then the scene shifts to the heavenly court and a discussion between Yahweh and Satan, one of the heavenly beings. When Yahweh describes Job as a paragon of virtue, Satan argues that of course Job fears God and is righteous because God has blessed him with a large family and many possessions. Yahweh accepts this as a challenge and allows Satan to test Job by taking away everything Job has – both his family and his property – but without laying a hand on Job himself. Chapter 1 ends with Job bereft and mourning, but maintaining his piety.

Here begins the main body of today’s reading. Again, Yahweh repeats to Satan what he had said earlier about 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” (2:3). So Satan issues another challenge: if you “touch his bone and his flesh . . . he will curse you to his face” (v. 5). At this point, Yahweh allows Satan to heap sores upon Job “from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head” (v. 7). As he sits among the ashes scraping his sores, his wife ridicules him for his integrity, recommending that he “curse God, and die” (v. 9).

It is precisely here that the parable of Job raises perplexing questions. Why does God allow suffering – or at least the suffering of virtuous people – to take place? Job is portrayed as the very model of righteousness and faithfulness, yet he loses everything. You and I have seen people we know and love suffer this same fate, and we ask why. To make matters even more perplexing, God is portrayed here not only as allowing these terrible calamities to fall upon Job, but even setting the whole chain of events into motion! Let’s call a spade a spade: the story of Satan’s challenge to God and God’s acceptance of the challenge is a monstrous game, a cruel joke at the expense of Job. Yahweh seems to be defending his own honor at a high price, literally taking it out on Job’s hide.

Here it's helpful to remember that the Book of Job is a parable – a parable that responds to the question of human suffering in ways that many of us frankly find unsatisfactory. And the plain fact is, a lot of religious responses to the problem of evil and suffering are unsatisfactory. The 17th Century philosopher Blaise Pascal once observed that “it is the pathetic fate of God to be everlastingly misunderstood.” I read about the leader of a Bible class for men who always began each year's study of the Scriptures with this stipulation: “Whatever we think or say, boys, let us be sure we keep clear the character of God.”

I won't mince words with you: if the writer of Job seriously believed that God conducts cruel experiments on human beings, I believe he misunderstood God. If he believed that God sends pain and affliction on the righteous, I believe he defamed God's character. The God you and I worship and serve – the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ – doesn't play hideous games with his children and certainly doesn't inflict suffering upon innocent people.

And yet, the opening scene of the story of Job depicts God as being mischievous and mean toward an innocent man. Just as remarkable, this man remains faithful to God even when God appears to be unfaithful to him. For Job, it's a matter of integrity – and above all else, Job is a man of integrity.

Yesterday marked the 10th anniversary of the death of my father, Johnny Thomason. I offered a verbal tribute to my dad – a kind of eulogy – not at his funeral when he couldn't hear it in person, but five years before he died, on the occasion of his 80th birthday. I described him that day as “a man of integrity.” By that I meant that he was honest to a fault. He never cheated anyone out of anything, as a businessman or as a family man. He had a code of ethics and he lived by it consistently. And this is what integrity means: not just being honest, but being consistent – practicing what one preaches and doing so unwaveringly, keeping faith with one's convictions when it would be easy to forsake faith.

Job is pictured as a man of integrity, a man of consistency, and there is much to admire about these qualities. When Satan questions Job's motives for being righteous, he remains righteous. When Job loses his family, his possessions, and finally his health, he remains faithful. Even when his wife, the only family member he has left, chides him, “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die,” he refuses to lose faith in God. Of course, we often refer to “the patience of Job,” but later on in this book Job actually loses patience with God, questions God, and complains bitterly to God. But he never turns away from God, never gives up on God, never stops relating to God.

Many of you have heard the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who was incarcerated and then martyred by the Nazis during World War II. He continued to write essays and conduct correspondence throughout his years of confinement, which were published after his death as Letters and Papers from Prison. In one of his reflections, Bonhoeffer observes that when people experience affliction and feel that they are suffering unjustly, they often stop “talking with God” and start “talking about God.” In their anger over their painful circumstances, they turn a cold shoulder toward their Creator. They talk to other people about what they perceive to be God's action or inaction, but they refuse to bring their complaints directly to God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer certainly would have known this temptation, yet he somehow resisted it. He suffered separation from his family and friends and teaching career, but he never separated himself from God. Facing his own execution, he might have felt justified in

talking bitterly about God, but he chose instead to keep talking with God, to remain in relationship, even when that relationship was full of question marks.

Friends, I can think of no better response than this to the problem of unjust suffering. When trouble and calamity come our way, you and I can ask “Why?” a thousand times and never get a satisfactory answer. We can question God, complain about God, even get angry with God. But the one thing we should never do is to stop talking with God. We should never assume that God doesn’t notice or care about our pain, that God doesn’t listen or respond to our heartfelt prayers. When our suffering persists, we can persist in our integrity. We can remain faithful, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer did, as Job does.

So let’s give credit where credit is due: Job is a man of integrity; he is consistent in his convictions. But his determination to be consistent also leads him to reach conclusions about God which are highly questionable. Job understands that all he has in life is a gift from God; therefore, the loss of these gifts must also be seen as God’s doing. After he loses everything he says, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” (v. 10). In other words, if his family and fortune come from God, so does his suffering. If he affirms that it is the Lord who gives, then he will affirm that it is the Lord who takes away. Job’s very integrity, his sense of consistency, demands such a conclusion.

As I look out on your faces this morning, I cannot help but wonder how you interpret the tragedies and losses in your own lives – particularly those that are unexpected and undeserved. You work hard, become the model employee, build a promising career, and then wind up in the unemployment line when the economy goes down the tubes. You do all the right things as a parent, or at least do the best you know how to do, nurturing your child in faith, hope, and love, and then see your child waste his or her inheritance in some far country. You take care of yourself physically, eat a proper diet and exercise regularly, avoid behaviors that are harmful, and then receive a diagnosis of cancer. Perhaps you’re not head and shoulders above the rest of the world in piety or good deeds, as God describes Job; but you are a person of sincere and steadfast faith, you love God and neighbor with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength – and still the sky falls on you. Do you interpret the trouble that comes your way as Job does? “The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away . . .” (1:21). “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?”

Friends, this response may demonstrate consistency, but as I understand God, this response is unsatisfactory. I have experienced many blessings in my 70 years of life – caring parents, two marvelous daughters and now a precious grandson, a more than adequate income, several wonderful churches to serve, including this one. On many occasions I’ve acknowledged God as the giver of every good and perfect gift. I’ve thanked God for my blessings. But I don’t blame God for my difficulties, and I don’t blame God for your difficulties either.

Robert McCracken tells the story of a little girl who suffered from an affliction in both eyes. She went to see a specialist and was told that her condition was irreversible and that she would lose her sight. At once she exclaimed, “Is God going to take away my eyes?” How would you answer that question? I would answer, “No! You may lose your eyesight, child, but it will not be God’s doing. God is not in the business of taking away your health and happiness.” I have no easy answers for why bad things happen to good people, but one answer I rule out categorically: I don’t blame God.

Why is it that many people still persist in believing in a God who brings blindness and bereavement to innocent people? In part, it's because they've always believed that way and they're determined to be consistent. And I'm all for consistency, up to a point. Surely you and I want to be consistent in loving and trusting and obeying God, in the best of times and the worst of times. But integrity sometimes demands that we be inconsistent, that we change our minds about God, that we put away childish, unworthy ideas of God and affirm God for who God truly is – a loving Father who wills only the best for his children. How I wish that Job had known that great truth about God. He didn't; you can; please do.