

Bad Things Happening to Good People

Job 3:1-4:9

February 1, 2009

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Last week we were introduced to Job. He's an unreal guy living an unreal life. He's blameless, upright, a person of absolute integrity. He has it all, big family, big money. Then he loses it. Satan bets God that Job is just in it for the stuff, that Job only worships God so he can keep what he has while he hopes to get even more. Satan takes all of Job's possessions and his children, and Job grieves. But at the same time, Job gives thanks for the gifts he had been given. This means Satan loses the first bet. Then Satan takes away Job's health, and he loses his life of pain-free living. But Job proves Satan wrong one more time, saying, "shall we receive the good and not the bad?" Job's faith is about more than just getting stuff or keeping stuff, it's anchored by gratitude for gifts already given.

The message of the first two chapters of Job is very important to me. Gratitude is the source of my religious life. I'm a religious or spiritual person because I think existence, all of this, is just so darn amazing. And what I've been given, what I experience is so good that I need to express my gratitude to God. Job's response in the midst of tragedy is remarkable, but it's possible and it's true. I've seen gratitude be a source of comfort and hope to persons living in the midst of horrible loss. Gratitude doesn't put our world back together as it once was, but it refuses to forget what was very, very good. There is healing power in that.

In chapter 3 the book shifts. It's no longer story, it's now poetry. In the first two chapters, Job's nemesis was Satan, and now he's harassed by his three best friends. The central question of the book shifts too. The first two chapters is asking about the source of our religion, "are we religious to gain God's favor so that God will protect us from anything bad happening, or are we religious because we need to express gratitude?" But starting at chapter 3, the question is about whether there's such a thing as innocent suffering. Do bad things happen to good people? Or, are the bad things that happen a sign to us telling who is good and who is not. The question is really a question about God, "is there a direct relationship between our sins and the "punishment" we receive, or is the world more complicated than that? Job will insist that he's innocent, that if he could just get a hearing before God, God would prove him right. Meanwhile Job's friends keep telling him, "the world isn't complicated, this is all very simple, it must be your fault."

First though, something happens to get Job's friends all riled up: Job speaks. For seven days Job and his friends sit in ashes in silence. But then Job speaks and curses the day of his birth. And you may have noticed that when Job curses something he doesn't do it halfway, he really follows through. For a whole chapter, 26 verses, he curses the day of his birth. He offends his friends, and he probably offends us. At the very least, he makes us really uncomfortable. He made me uncomfortable, and I knew it was coming. You can't study Job without spending time with chapter 3, it's what gets the whole debate between Job and his friends rolling, but as I sat down to read it this week I thought, "what am I doing? Are we really going to read this, out loud? It's the beginning of February. If people aren't already struggling with seasonal affective disorder, they will be by the end of worship. Can this text possibly serve us?" I wondered. And I looked for other passages to use, ways to avoid the really painful things Job says.

After a while though, I realized that my effort to avoid Job's expression of the depths of his struggle were part of the problem. Denying this part of human experience isn't going to serve anyone either. At least, it won't serve those who are in the midst of anguish and despair. Just over two years ago, my brother-in-law Steve Hukvari committed suicide. His was a Job-like story in some ways. He struggled with depression to begin with and then he lost a lot in a short amount of time, and that became too much. Since his death I sometimes think of anxiety and depression as a cancer of the mind and soul. Sometimes you catch it early and can treat it. Other times you don't catch it, or it goes untreated and then something happens, it metastasizes and it's too late. Deciding not to read this passage would feel like dishonoring his memory, denying the struggle he faced, or sweeping it under the rug.

One of the headlines this week was the story of a man in Los Angeles who killed his family and himself after he and his wife had both lost their jobs. This comes on the heels of other murder/suicide stories from Los Angeles. The financial crisis isn't just about shrinking 401k's and the tough decision on whether retirement should be delayed a year or two, it's about millions of people losing jobs, and some feel absolutely overwhelmed and don't know where to turn or what to do.

Another headline told us that 128 U.S. soldiers killed themselves this last year, and the final number will probably be even higher. That's a sizable increase over last year. Military officials and the media always seem to be puzzled by this. But anyone with mental health training will tell you that being placed in a situation where you have to kill someone or risk being killed yourself, will damage your mental health. There's no way around it. Then add the strain on relationships caused by extended tours of duty and difficulty integrating back into civilian life and you start to hear the voice of Job from chapter 3.

We can't deny that the feelings expressed in the third chapter of Job are feelings that many people struggle with. It's disturbing and frightening to hear this, but denying this anguish and trying to avoid it isn't helpful. On the contrary, expressing these emotions, and hearing these emotions is helpful. What's hopeful and helpful to me about the third chapter of Job is that we find it in our scriptures to begin with. Even the worst of life, even our most disturbing thoughts are held in a sacred place. Lament and complaint and painful statements about suffering making life unbearable are not off limits. People who struggle with anxiety and depression, people whose suffering feels completely overwhelming are not cut out of the fold, they are not denied their standing in the community. They are given a voice. Job 3 is their voice, as is chapter 20 in Jeremiah where the prophet curses the day he was born. Psalm 22 is their voice, as is Jesus from the cross when he asks God why he's been forsaken. If these expressions of deep suffering and anguish are in our sacred and holy book, then they are appropriate words for worship. And if these words are spoken in worship, then feelings of anguish and desperation aren't denied, but acknowledged as real. And when we know these feelings are real, then our compassion will deepen. And when compassion deepens here, then the church becomes a place where healing can happen, and hope can take root.

I'm glad Job speaks. I'm glad he expresses his painful words. We need to hear him, and listen for him in our world right now. If we don't listen we're going to be just like Job's friends. And if we learn anything from Job, we learn that Job could use some new friends.

Job's expression of anguish and despair offends his friend Eliphaz. Eliphaz can't take it anymore, so he speaks. "Excuse me Job, I don't want to hurt your feelings or anything, but I just have to say something. You've given advice to other people who were suffering and you always seemed to know what to say, but now that you've had a couple bad breaks, you seem impatient."

Then Eliphaz actually says these laughable words, "think now, Job, who that was ever innocent ever perished?" The words drip with irony, Job is staring at him as he says this, sitting in the ashes and scratching his sores, probably even waving at his face, saying, "what about me?" But Eliphaz is walking around concentrating on his speech now. He doesn't have any time to listen or to consider how someone else's experience might change his point of view. He continues, "as I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed."

Eliphaz, bless his cold and stoney heart, is telling Job, "come on Job, just admit it, this is really all your fault. Everything happens for a reason, and the reason you're dealing with all this suffering is you're a big bad sinner. God is just Job, and God repays everyone in this life for what they have done." In Eliphaz's defense, what he is saying is thoroughly Biblical. I was reading Psalm 62 this week and at the end it says, "Once God has spoken and twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay all according to their work." Job is a place where the Bible is debating with itself and we're going to have to choose what we believe is true about God and the world.

Eliphaz's point of view certainly has its appeal, especially if things are going well for us. For Eliphaz, the world is divided neatly into good people and bad people. The good people have done good things and they have good things. The bad people have done bad things and bad things have happened to them. Simple.

But Job just wants us to listen. All Job wants from his friends is that they listen. "Just listen to me and hear my story, and let my experience challenge what you believe about the world. Listening and understanding will provide more hope to me than you think. Being open to other possibilities because of what I say, even changing what you think will bring healing, just listen to me."

As the book goes forward, Job will challenge Eliphaz's simple worldview of good people and bad people, and it's about time. Eliphaz still speaks today, listen for him. Job will defend his right and his need to express what suffering is really like. He'll defend his need to have people listen, and it's about time.

If we can be brave enough to hold the whole of human experience from "filled with joy" to "filled with despair" before God, then the church can be a place of hope and healing. The Bible holds it all, which suggests that God can too, and that as a community we are called to as well. May we find ways to listen and understand, and by doing so be a source of hope and even healing. Amen.