

PERSONAL TRAGEDY

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Scripture: Job 2:1-8

Here it is spring time again. We had a few hot days and it put me in the mood for tennis. I don't play as much as I used to, and certainly not as well as I used to; but I've played a lot of tennis. Once upon a time I was actually "fair to middling." That was, oh, I'd say about a hundred pounds ago. "I hit a few balls," as they say. That was back in the day when Jimmy Connors claimed to be the number one player in the world. But I'm here to tell you, in all that time that he claimed to be number one—he never beat me. Why, I was a lot better than Pete Sampras, too. When I was in my prime, I would have beat him easily. Of course, he was only three years old when I was in my prime.

Now, with all **those** ancient stories out of the way, I want to talk about the Book of Job. The Book of Job is unusual compared to other biblical literature in many respects. For one thing it is a thoroughly personal story. Most Bible stories put the central figure into context—Old Testament stories in the context of the history of Israel, New Testament stories in the context of the disciples or the Church. Most of the Bible is about "The People of God" and individuals whose actions and reactions have an impact on the destiny of "The People of God." This story focuses on Job as an individual person and on Job's personal relationship with God and on Job's personal tragedy. In form, it is a classical short story. It has a beginning a middle and an end. With tools of modern scholarship we can figure out some hints about when and where it was written in this form, but the story itself is deliberately vague about Job's place in the history of Israel. The names of the characters are unfamiliar and somehow foreign: Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, Elihu.

The plot is quite brief. It begins with a formula like the phrase we use to tell fairy tales to children so they will know we are not telling them about real things. We say, "Once upon a time," and children instantly catch on that there is not really a dragon, a witch, or an enchanted forest. "Once upon a time there was a man named Job." The author describes him in terms of his goodness, his righteousness, his faithfulness and his success. Then the scene shifts to the heavenly court. The Lord is receiving reports from his divine messengers. He calls on one of those divine messengers known as The Adversary or The Satan. That's a way of translating the word Satan from Hebrew, it means "Adversary."

"Where have you been?" says the Lord. The Adversary answers, "Oh, just wandering around on the earth." "Well," says The Lord, "Since you were there on the earth, did you notice Job?" (As if to say that anyone with half an eye open would notice that one earthling stands out from all the rest.) "Oh yes," answers The Adversary, "I saw your little 'pet person,' Job. He isn't loyal to you without some reason. You've made his life pretty cushy.

He loves you for all the prosperity you've given him. If it wasn't for all his **stuff**, he would curse you to your face." "So that's what you think?" says The Lord, "Then you just go ahead and mess with his 'stuff' all you want, just don't afflict him directly. You'll see how faithful he is."

So The Adversary brings some tragedies into Job's life. First his wealth was decimated. The commodities market collapsed, his barn burned down, his camels were stolen, his store went bankrupt, his car was re-possessed, his mortgage was foreclosed, his credit cards were revoked, his insurance was cancelled, his 401k was wiped out, and his dog died. But that wasn't all. He was just going over all his losses when a servant runs up to him and says, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house, and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you."

Job reacts the way any perfect saint would react: "...The Lord gave, and The Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

Then comes the passage that we heard for our Scripture reading today. It begins word for word in the same way as the previous scene in the heavenly court. "One Day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord." The Lord calls on The Adversary, the Satan, "Where have you been?" The Adversary answers, "Oh, just wandering around on the earth." "Well," says The Lord, "Since you were there on the earth, did you notice Job?" (Just as if The Lord didn't remember their earlier conversation and didn't know exactly what tragedies had befallen Job.) The Adversary says, "Yeah, I tested him pretty good; but you didn't let me touch him directly. Your 'pet person' will renounce you in a second to save his own life. Let me put the fear of death into him, and he will curse you to your face." So The Lord says, "Fine, you do what you want; just spare his life." So there is Job afflicted with sores all over his body. He sits in the junkyard and picks up a broken piece of pottery to scratch himself. His wife comes to him and says, "Why don't you just curse God and die." Job turns her away, "We must take the bad with the good," he says. Then his three best friends show up. They are grieved to see Job suffering and they sit with him there in the junkyard for a week with no one saying a word. Surely Job has endured the greatest imaginable personal tragedy—and he still maintains his faith in The Lord. People have lost faith in God over a lot less than Job suffered. Anyone whose faith depends on finding a pattern of obedience to God and receiving material rewards from God has lost that faith whenever they come up against their first recession.

We think of Job as long suffering and patient. He is that. But he isn't totally without complaint. After a week sitting quietly with his friends the first thing he said was to curse the day of his birth. "I wish I had never been born," he says. And he says it in some of the most beautiful poetry of the Old Testament,

*“Let the day perish in which I was born,
and the night that said, ‘A man-child is conceived.’
Let that day be darkness!”*

Job’s friends tentatively and respectfully raise the possibility that he really deserves this personal tragedy. That really gets him angry. “I did not sin in any way shape or form and this personal tragedy is totally undeserved,” he proclaims. The friends have all the answers, Job’s got all the questions. He continues to challenge his friends and God. The friends come at it from various angles. They believe that “b.s.” about living righteously and then God will provide material blessings. Righteousness leads to prosperity, sinfulness leads to catastrophe. (You may recall the New Testament verses when the Disciples ask Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind.”) Job’s friends each take a turn to tell Job that maybe he forgot that he sinned, or maybe he sinned inadvertently; but it is not possible for an omnipotent and good God to allow an injustice to occur.

There we have it: “theodicy.” That’s the technical name for it in theology books, “theodicy.” The toughest of all theological nuts to crack. If God is all powerful and God is all good, why do bad things happen to good people? Either God is not strong enough to overcome evil, and therefore is not really omnipotent; or else God does evil, and therefore is not really all good.

Who’s got an answer for that one? Why do bad things happen to good people? Whew. I was hoping that Robinmarie would cover that in the Children’s talk. ...She was probably hoping that I would cover it in the call to worship.

You’ve all heard this question before. And you are here—part of this worship, part of this faith community—despite that question. Lots of people outside the Church will not join with us because they can’t find a satisfactory answer to that question; but I believe you’re all here **despite** that question. You are here because you have the humility and the courage to persist in faith **despite** the fact that you don’t have a clear answer to that question.

If you really had a good answer to that question you would have told everyone else by now and we wouldn’t have to wrestle with it anymore—we could just be satisfied with your answer. Those who can’t be among us because of this question lack the insight that brings us together and the insight that ultimately answers Job. We are here confessing that we don’t have all the answers, but we trust that God’s ways are greater than our ways. God can untangle the relationships between righteousness and prosperity—sinfulness and catastrophe. We don’t need the final answers because that’s God’s business, and we choose to **believe** because we do not **know**. We **know** a lot, and we are eager to **know** more; but we don’t **know** the full nature of God’s omnipotence and goodness.

The author of the Book of Job gives Job a better answer than any of us has ever heard because in this book God personally comes to Job and gives an answer. Anyone here ever get the answer straight from God? In the Book of Job, it goes something like this: God thunders at Job from the Whirlwind. “Who do you think you are to question **Me**? How about if I question **you**? Where were **you** when **I** created this universe? Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God better be able to answer God.”

(whisper) And that's not all.

The Lord has a few words for Job's friends. “**You** with all the answers, **you** are the ones who really make Me mad! **You** didn't tell the truth about Me. Job got it right. I knew he was righteous all along from before I put him into the hands of the Adversary, the Satan. He was right when he said he didn't sin. He was right to say that his suffering was unjust. He was right to raise those questions with Me. You guys should have been questioning, too, instead of thinking you were so great that you could comfort this man with **answers** in the midst of his personal tragedy.” God was offended by the arrogance of Job's friends who thought they had all the answers.

Lyle Schaller is one of the world's leading authorities on Church management. I saw him give a seminar once and he was wearing a tee shirt—the front of it said, “Question Authority.” I thought that was a daringly humble thought from such a great Authority as Lyle Schaller. Later he turned to write on the newsprint behind him and I saw the back of the tee shirt. It said, “And when Authority answers, you listen!”

The fine art of our faith is to question Authority, even the Authority of God, just like Job did, and then to recognize that God is the Authority so we listen for God's answers. People with all the answers have been getting it wrong for a long time.

You know, now that I think about it and turn my thoughts back to spring time and playing some tennis, I don't play The Game because I have answers to all the questions that tennis raises about coordination, speed, power, strategy and stamina. I play The Game because I enjoy all the questions that The Game of tennis itself—and my Adversaries, those Satans on the other side of the net, continue to raise. You know, in all humility, I guess maybe there's a reason why Jimmy Connors was number one in the world and I wasn't. I guess maybe there's a reason why Pete Sampras is in the tennis Hall of Fame and I'm not.

Will you pray with me?