

July 1, 2018
Job 1:1-22
Communion Sunday

Ry O. Siggelkow

“Faith, Suffering, and the Mystery of Life”

The Weather in Space by Tracy K. Smith

*Is God being or pure force? The wind
Or what commands it? When our lives slow
And we can hold all that we love, it sprawls
In our laps like a gangly doll. When the storm
Kicks up and nothing is ours, we go chasing
After all we're certain to lose, so alive--
Faces radiant with panic.*

When Alisa, Orv, and I met to plan our summer worship and came to the decision to take up the Narrative Lectionary's suggestion that we focus on the Book of Job in the heat of a July, I have to admit that I wondered whether this was not in fact a little test from Satan, looking for me to “curse God” in my heart. Job in July? Really? At that point, in the wake of an April blizzard, I could only imagine what it would feel like to work through this text while the heat index was rising to 107. Well, I no longer have to imagine it. But such is my lot. I can only say, “Praise be to God,” that Alisa and Donna will have to wrestle through this text themselves over the text two weeks, and while I do not wish for them to be afflicted with loathsome sores and ulcers like Father Job, I have to admit I would take a little delight in witnessing a bit of sweat dripping from their brows.

Job is a *difficult* text. It is difficult for a number of reasons, theological, moral/ethical, but also in its formal literary structure. While it has often been hailed by biblical scholars as a literary masterpiece, theologians and preachers and poets find in it either a wealth of wisdom or a wealth of trouble, and not only for poor old Job, but for God too! who, at times, I think we have to admit, appears pretty sinister, or worse, even tyrannical, in his dealings with Job, and in his permission to allow Satan to play such a nasty game. The book is met variously with opposition and admiration. And if I am honest, I find myself torn between these poles, at once the book evokes a deep sense of repulsion in me, while the preacher in me wrestles to find something of the truth of the gospel in it. At any rate, one cannot glibly dismiss the questions that book raises for us. Nor can one read this book without being struck by its deeply personal character, rooted as it is in a profoundly personal experience of suffering -- “the work is written,” as Gutierrez puts it, “with a faith that has been drenched in tears and reddened by blood.”

In its literary and theological context, the Book of Job should be understood within the wider context of what is sometimes called the “wisdom literature” of Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament, and within the broad context of related literature from the world of the ancient Near East. In terms of its basic narrative plot, most scholars accept that the Book consists of two basic parts--a prologue and an epilogue in prose which together constitute a discrete story framework, and an extended dialogue in poetic form. The Peruvian theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, describes the book's structure as framed by the opening

(1:1-2:13) and the closing (42:7-17) prose of the book, resembling he says, “the side panels of an altarpiece.” The extensive central section of the book, from chapter three to chapter forty-two, excerpts from which we will be examining over the next four weeks, are written in poetic verse. Without these prose sections which serve as bookends, however, it is not possible to grasp the meaning of the polemical dialogues of the book. In this first section (and through verse 13 of chapter two) the author provides us with a few broad narrative brush strokes.

In this first chapter, Job is introduced as the paragon of piety, virtue, and wisdom, a hero at the pinnacle of his success. He is described as blameless, upright, righteous and honest, a person of great integrity who fears God and shuns what is evil. Job is the model of a righteous wise man who epitomizes the advice of Proverbs 3: “Be not wise in your own eyes; fear Yahweh and shun evil” (3:7). Job is, we are informed, the greatest human being among the people of the East. Job has an ideal family: seven sons and three daughters, ten children in all. 7, 3, and 10 are all numbers in the literature of the Hebrew scriptures which signify completion, perfection, and wholeness. The completeness of Job’s family is but a visible expression of his inner completeness and wholeness. So too, Job’s vast wealth and “very large household,” his many animals, are but expressions of the sheer completeness of his world.

Indeed, Job belongs among the great patriarchal figures of Israel, among the faithful Noah, the hero of the flood epic, among Daniel the wise ruler of a Canaanite epic. What all of these figures have in common is their potential to mediate salvation by virtue of their great righteousness. The periodic feasts celebrated by his family both accentuates Job’s piety and his role as mediator. He lacks nothing. Job is the head of his household and like Abraham is a kind of perfect priest offering sacrifices for the sins of his children. It is concerning that great sin -- to curse God in one’s heart -- for which Job offers sacrifices on behalf of his children before God, and which Satan, in this first chapter, seeks to provoke Job to do. Satan predicts that Job will curse God in his heart if he is pushed to the limit. “Does Job fear God for nothing?” Satan inquires. Satan’s challenge to YHWH, the wager, is clear.

According to Gutierrez, the book of Job is, most fundamentally, “built on a wager made with regard to talk about God.” The wager is this: can human beings have faith in God, truly believe in God, without expecting anything in return? Can faith be disinterested? That is, does faith rest on a tacit logic of exchange -- the logic of a *quid pro quo* -- a this for that? Is faith always caught up in some form or another with the logic of reward and punishment? If I do this, then God will bless me. If I fail to do this, then God will punish me. Certainly, as we will see in the coming weeks, this is the theology operative among Job’s friends. And yet, even if we refuse this doctrine of retribution, the question remains: if suffering befalls me, if I encounter great trials in life, will I still believe, will I still love and praise God? Or will I curse God? And if I do, will this not demonstrate precisely the truth of Satan’s wager, that faith in God is, in the end, self-interested? That faith in God is conditional on whether God is good to me, conditional on whether my life is perfectly complete and whole, full of blessing and without suffering. Satan does not so much question Job’s good works or his righteousness in this story, but his *motivation* for doing good works. If Job is to be regarded as a truly just man, then he will not curse God when suffering comes his way. Thus Satan proposes his wager: “Lay a finger on his possessions: then, I challenge you, he will curse you to your face.” God, on the other hand, we are led to believe, is confident

that Job's righteousness is disinterested that is motivated, first of all, by Job's submission to his God and not to external realities, and so God willingly accepts Satan's challenge.

The author of the book clearly understands the figure of Job as a kind of paradigm of faith, pointing up the potential universality of the themes raised in this book. The author is telling us, it seems, that a utilitarian faith -- that is conditioned on prosperity and achieving a life free from suffering -- is no real faith at all, lacking as it does in depth and authenticity; indeed, for the author it seems as though there is something satanic about such a faith. If Job's faith falters amidst suffering, then it will be revealed that his faith was ultimately not faith in God, but in a no god, a god of his own construction, that is faith in an idol.

And so, God accepts Satan's challenge because God trusts in Job's faith. At this point in the story, after we are given a description of Job's greatness and after we are given to listen in on the dialogue between God and Satan, the scene changes and we find ourselves moving from the heavenly realm back down to our earthly realm. And then, Job begins to receive bad news. The testing begins. He receives news of the destruction of his animals, the death of his servants. The "fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them." Then another messenger sends news to Job about the death of his sons and daughters and the loss of his possessions. A "great wind" had come across the desert and struck the four corners of the house, collapsing on his children. In response to this news, Job in apparent despair, dramatically tears his robe, shaves his head, and falls to the ground. Beaten and broken, he nonetheless praises his God: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." And we are told Job in response to this news committed no sin and he did not reproach God. At this point in the narrative, YHWH is winning the bet. Though beaten down, Job remains steadfast in his faith.

In one respect, it is quite simply a deeply troubling scene -- here we have two apparently non-earthly characters, God and Satan, conjuring up a little game, a little experiment. Poor old Job. Undeserving of such suffering, innocent, even righteous, thrown it would seem arbitrarily into a disaster. And yet, it is not so unfamiliar to us in the end, for in many respects it is but a description of the great mystery of life, a mystery that so often can drive us to cynicism, disillusionment, and despair, for life is never free from suffering, life never quite goes according to our plans. Life is always a mystery to us, especially when we experience suffering. Theologians and preachers and scientists and doctors of all sorts try to explain the mysteries of God and the mysteries of the world to us, but they always fall short. Harry Emerson Fosdick says that the mystery of life is not something to bemoan, but something we should be thankful for. "Suppose there were no mystery," Fosdick writes, "That would mean that you and I can comprehend the universe completely: but that, in turn, would mean that the universe is so thin and small that it can be comprehended by little minds like ours. The universe is far too marvelous for that. It is high; it is deep . . . I would rather live in a world where my life is surrounded by mystery than live in a world so small that my mind could comprehend it."

Moreover, faith does not clear up the mysteries of human life -- why some people suffer more than others, and why God seems to allow it to happen. The apostle Paul knew that in the present, "we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully

understood” (1 Cor 13:12). Faith does not provide us with a clear-cut formula for resolving these mysteries; there is no ready-made answer to all the questions of life. But life is not a mystery because God is in heaven arbitrarily playing games with our lives. And if this is so, we are right to protest such an arbitrary God. And while our faith in God and the world is challenged by the suffering we see and hear and experience throughout our lives, we nonetheless are given by the Spirit to abide in the light of the world, that light which illuminates our present darkness, a light that is characterized, according to Paul, by those gifts of faith, hope, and love, offered to everyone of us, even those of us with little faith.

To be clear, unjust innocent suffering is to be resisted; God does not ask us to resign to suffering; nor are we to simply throw up our arms when we hear of children and parents being separated at the border. To say this is simply one of life’s mysteries is to shirk responsibility. To accept suffering does not mean that we simply submit ourselves to it. Indeed, liberation from suffering is perhaps the greatest theme of the Bible, as we see in the exodus narrative, where God delivers the people of Israel from slavery and oppression, out of their collective suffering, arbitrarily imposed by rulers. And yet, there is an acceptance of suffering that is proper to faith. It is not the kind that says, “put up with it, tolerate it, bear it.” That is stoicism. We are not called to tolerate the intolerable; to bear the unbearable. That is stoic tranquility rather than an acceptance of suffering that is proper to faith.

An acceptance of suffering that is proper to faith must take as its starting point the symbol of the cross of Christ, including Christ’s cries of God-abandonment, Christ’s cries of lament and protest against the Father: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Suffering can, indeed, bring us to the point of wishing that the world did not exist, of believing that non-being is better than being. But this kind of despair leads much too easily to a hatred of life, rather than an affirmation of it. Such resignation is broken open by the love made real by the resurrection of the Crucified, in whom we are given to accept the mystery of life in a faith rooted in the hope of the ultimate triumph of love that holds within itself, indeed, bears within itself, our experiences suffering. As Dorothee Sölle puts it, “To be able to believe means to say ‘yes’ to this life, to this finitude, to work on it and hold it open for the promised future.”

The Universe as Primal Scream by Tracy K. Smith

*5pm on the nose. They open their mouths
And it rolls out: high, shrill and metallic.
First the boy, then his sister. Occasionally,
They both let loose at once, and I think
Of putting on my shoes to go up and see
Whether it is merely an experiment
Their parents have been conducting
Upon the good crystal, which must surely
Lie shattered to dust on the floor.*

*Maybe the mother is still proud
Of the four pink lungs she nursed
To such might. Perhaps, if they hit
The magic decibel, the whole building*

*Will lift-off, and we'll ride to glory
Like Elijah. If this is it--if this is what
Their cries are cocked toward--let the sky
Pass from blue, to red, to molten gold,
To black. Let the heaven we inherit approach.*

*Whether it is our dead in Old Testament robes,
Or a door opening onto the roiling infinity of space.
Whether it will bend down to greet us like a father,
Or swallow us like a furnace. I'm ready
To meet what refuses to let us keep anything
For long. What teases us with blessings,
Bends us with grief. Wizard, thief, the great
Wind rushing to knock our mirrors to the floor,
To sweep our short lives clean. How mean
Our racket seems beside it. My stereo on shuffle.
The neighbor chopping onions through a wall.
All of it just a hiccough against what may never
Come for us. And the kids upstairs still at it,
Screaming like the Dawn of Man, as if something
They have no name for has begun to insist
Upon being born.*