

“For No Reason”

sermon digest

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Job 2:1-10; James 1:2-13

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Like any fable, the story begins, “There once was a man”: “There once was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job.” Job was a paragon of virtue, blessed of God in every way: seven sons and three daughters, 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 donkeys, and servants everywhere. In addition to family and fortune, Job has fame. He is respected: “the greatest of all the people of the east.” As the story along with the common wisdom goes, Job got exactly what he deserved. Life was a simple equation: a good life brings good fortune and happiness; an evil life brings down calamity and suffering. The measure of the man, of any person, is obvious and perfectly reasonable. Check the net worth: the size and behavior of family, the size of the estate, the level of public respect, the condition of health. In the land of Uz, one could easily reason from the evidence of good or bad fortune, of gain or loss, to the secret life of virtue or vice.

Now, in this perfect world of simple cause and effect, there was a heavenly council, a game of the gods on the order of the best or worst of Greek mythology—with the exception that the myth of Job had been incorporated into the Jewish culture and had come to belong to the People of God. So the council of gods became a convocation of the heavenly hosts with “the LORD” JHWH, God of the Jews, in charge and the Satan (HSTN), the accuser, the adversary, standing in the inner circle. In the Jewish mind, the Lord JHWH was in control of all events in heaven and on earth and the ultimate source of a perfect justice of rewards and punishments in human life. The Satan emerges in the twilight of Jewish thought to explain how the good God could allow evil to fall on a good man in a world of perfect justice. So it seems, God does not do bad things to good people; God *allows* bad things to be done by the Satan, the Adversary, with the good purpose of proving the virtue of the good man.

The story appears to have grown like Topsy. It came from nowhere, or possibly somewhere outside of Jewish culture, and raised the logical question that has become familiar to us in Rabbi Harold Kushner’s book. The Rabbi is convinced that the question, “why do bad things happen to good people?” is the “one question which really matters.” (*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, p. 6)

From our perspective, the chant of Nickles, the Satan, in Archibld MacLeish’s play *J.B.* is right on target: “If God is God He is not good. If God is good, He is not God.” Either God is in control or not. If God is in control of the universe, how can injustice reign? If God is not in control, how can humans worship this god who is not God? The story emerged in Jewish life to be told around campfires of families and friends as they worked to sort out the nature of their God: Is JHWH God or not? Is JHWH good or not? However, hanging in the background of this either-or determination of the nature of God is the agonizing possibility that the issue is beyond our simple human power of reason. Could the existence of evil in this world and the suffering of innocents be as irrational as it seems and far more complex than our question?

Job does not show up in the historical literature of Israel. He is mentioned without explanation in Ezekiel and analyzed in Jewish Midrash, the commentary on scriptures. The best scholarship views the biblical book as a work in progress that was probably imported from another culture and began as a provocative story passed orally down the generations. Once it was written, the readers could not leave it alone, so editors added prologue, epilogue, and the long oration of the friend Elihu. Readers were never satisfied with the “message,” whatever that was; so they persisted in tweaking the conclusions. Midrash elaborated the virtues of Job so that he was born circumcised. It rescued the wife, who counseled “curse God and die,” as a wonderful spouse responsible for physical and emotional support. Finally, the Midrash explained Job’s suffering, like the friends, as a punishment for hidden sin: Job is an Egyptian lord who refuses to take a stand in the demand of Moses to Pharaoh, “Let my people go,” so God got him.

The scene is obscene. In the first conversation between God and Satan, Job becomes a pawn in the hand of Satan and loses all of his wealth and finally suffers the death of seven sons and three daughters in one ill wind. Scene 2 opens with Satan challenging the Almighty to get to the heart and skin and bone of the matter, to bring on a life-threatening disease to Job: “Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives.” Afflicted with sores all over his body, Job sits in ashes mourning his pain while he scratches his sores with a piece of broken pottery, and his wife throws in the towel: “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.”

Job carried forward an Old Testament, perhaps Oriental, theme that life is a test. The rules of the test are set forth in the covenants between God and Israel. The Grand Judge sits on the bench of the eternal court to measure and evaluate the performance of the pathetic little creatures called human running the maze called life. It all seems a bit arbitrary, more about power than grace; and it leaves us wondering: Is this the meaning of life? Is God just tapping the microphone to see if the system is working? Testing 1-2-3.

The Prologue to Job makes the problem of human suffering look like a practical joke gone awry. Job

appears to be a Near Eastern folktale patterned after a text known as the Babylonian Theodicy. The drama and poetry belong to the ancient world of Uz, wherever that is. To give finality to the set-up pictured in the Prologue, the Lord God of Israel take on the appearance of the all-too-human gods of the ancient pagan world. I am far too pious to settle with a god who plays "Let's Make a Deal" with the Satan, with the evil, of our world. This is one of those times when every neuron in my head protests. People like Job cannot be dismissed as test cases to prove a point.

Yesterday the radio interrupted with that annoying tone, followed by the explanation, "This has been a test of the emergency broadcast system. If this had been a real emergency, you would have been instructed. . . ." I have become so familiar with the test, I sometimes wonder if I would pay attention to a real emergency. On the one hand, testing and measurement is the way we get things done around here. If you cannot test it and measure it, you cannot build it. On the other hand, to set the human relationship with God on the plain of testing seems to put us in a category somewhere near the value of a laboratory rat.

My old preaching professor Gordon Clinard warned his students not to choose a text out of the Bible that is unworthy of the good news. This is one of those texts, Dr. Clinard's prime example. It does not say who God is; it simply repeats the common understanding of God. In spite of the lack of simple explanation in the balance of the story, people in ancient and modern times persist in claiming a world of perfect justice. The story is not a proclamation of a grand conclusion about God; it is a question raised against the common wisdom that acquiesces to the divine right of playing games with human suffering. The good news here is that there is no good news here. Job is not gospel. Job is speculation, perhaps wonder, about God rather than a Word from God.

Who among us has not been in a time and place where the challenge to divine justice is the only word that seems appropriate? There are times when something inside of me wants to scream at the heavens, "what in the world are you doing?"

Sometimes irreverence is appropriate. Samuel Ballentine is aghast at the whimper of God to Satan, "you incited me against him to destroy him for no reason," and observes that nowhere else in the entire Old Testament is there a statement like this: "Job 2:3 is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where this construction is used with god as the object of the verbal action. God says to the satan, *you have provoked me.*" (*Interpretation*, Vol 57, No 4, p. 358). God admits to an unreasoned action against an innocent, no, *righteous* man. Could the message imply a reason beyond all reason?

Carol A. Newsom hits the nail in introducing Job: "Why does Job, and by extension any person, reverence God?" (*The New Interpreter's Bible*, IV, p. 334ff.) I suspect that evoking a sense of outrage was intended by the writer. Paint God in popular strokes and place Job squarely in the middle of the duel between good and evil, and gather around to see how the rat performs. The entire book specifically permits something disallowed by the pious—the questioning of God. The practice is not really new. Read the Psalms. I find more genuine honesty toward God in the prayers and songs of Israel than I have ever allowed myself to express.

Christianity, Judaism and Islam all flow from the one God of Abraham, but somewhere the three religions took different paths. The Allah of Islam is the God of power and authority who demands blind submission. The trial of Abraham in Genesis 22 has stood throughout the ages as a point of controversy in our reverence for God. Would God put any of us to the test by demanding the death of a child? Soren Kierkegaard was haunted by the radical obedience demanded by God in the call to sacrifice Isaac: "It was indeed absurd that God who required it of him should the next instant recall the requirement." (*Fear and Trembling*, p. 46)

Winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize Elie Wiesel survived Auschwitz to tell and retell the story of the unjust suffering of his people. By his own admission he came out of the camp angry at a god and a religion that would tolerate a god who stands by passively allowing an Adolf Hitler to prevail. His book on biblical characters *Messengers of God* concludes with "Job our Contemporary" and raises all of the right questions about the god who allows such injustice in the world or who passively participates in torture. He has no patience with the suggestion of an uncaring, careless god and suggests another conclusion: "Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there lived a legendary man, a just and generous man who, in his solitude and despair, found the courage to stand up to God. And to force Him to look at His creation. And to speak to those men who sometimes succeed, in spite of Him and of themselves, in achieving triumphs over Him, triumphs that are grave and disquieting." (P. 235)

Something like Elie Wiesel's response comes through in James: "Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him." But don't miss the judgment: "No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one." *This*, my friends, is the word of God. Amen!