

Bearing Up

Menno Mennonite Church

October 10, 2021

Purpose: To explore the story of Job as it speaks to living with challenges.

Message: As we live lives of faith, we are invited to hold all things before God, even those that would bring us to lament.

Scripture: Job 1:1; 2:1-10

Synopsis: Among the problems of faith, the inconsistency between the nature of what we expect of the world and how the world runs is the thorniest. Also known as “why do bad things happen to good people?”, the problem of theodicy is with us always. Job is held up as the model of patience in such suffering, especially as it depicts the seemingly random nature of how life often feels.

Yet a closer reading of Job relates a more complete experience of grief and grieving than simply refusal to feel and to know. This is given voice and signaled initially by this brief exchange with Job’s wife, voicing the basic question of faith: “why keep going when things go wrong?”. Often dismissed as a basic foil for the road not taken over against the faith of Job, this expression lays out the options of faithful response—meek acceptance, or resistance to the reality which yet looks for the presence of God. She who has lost massively too models a grief that speaks seriously of the dislocation that we can know in that grief.

In reading Job—all of Job—we are given far more than an odd story of divine meddling but rather a realistic evolution of what it means to lament and yet live.

[note the adversary]

Job 1:1; 2:1-10 (JPS)

1 There was a man in the land of Uz named Job.
That man was blameless and upright;
he feared God and shunned evil.

2 One day the divine beings
presented themselves before the LORD.

The Adversary came along with them
to present himself before the LORD.

²The LORD said to the Adversary, “Where have you been?”

The Adversary answered the LORD,
“I have been roaming all over the earth.”

³The LORD said to the Adversary,
“Have you noticed My servant Job?
There is no one like him on earth,
a blameless and upright man
who fears God and shuns evil.

He still keeps his integrity;
so you have incited Me against him
to destroy him for no good reason.”

⁴The Adversary answered the LORD,

“Skin for skin—all that a man has he will give up for his life.

⁵But lay a hand on his bones and his flesh,
and he will surely blaspheme You to Your face.”

⁶So the LORD said to the Adversary, “See, he is in your power; only spare his life.”

⁷The Adversary departed from the presence of the LORD
and inflicted a severe inflammation on Job
from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.

⁸He took a potsherd to scratch himself as he sat in ashes.

⁹His wife said to him,
“You still keep your integrity!
Blaspheme God and die!”

¹⁰But he said to her,

“You talk as any shameless woman might talk!
Should we accept only good from God and not accept evil?”
For all that, Job said nothing sinful.

Job is a book that ought to be read with a thorough set of disclaimers to come before. Like all mood altering substances, care needs to be exercised in how we encounter these words and the ideas held within. Any story that presents the possibility that God and Satan casually subject the mortal population to, basically, a gentleman's wager, has to be treated with care and good deal of scrutiny. And rightly so. As much as Job is heralded for patient perseverance, and sometimes prescribed to the faithful as a model of how best to deal with suffering, I am not always convinced that this is what we actually find here. If we can, for the present at least, lay aside the fundamental question of **WHY** there is suffering in the world and in the life of faith, and pick up Job as a model of *How* suffer well, how to get through the storm, I am not sure that we always get the easy notions and ready advice that we might bargain for.

Because when you read the whole of the text from the vantage point of trying to find meaning and answers on that level, things are no more clear than where they were with the notion of why. Even the patience of Job—the very thing he is known for—comes into question when you look at the whole thing. Through this story, he goes through all the stages of grief—denial, bargaining, anger, depression and acceptance—in the whole of his being. He argues with his vaunted friends and with God, openly laments the day of his birth and the faith he has carried. He displays all the impatience, frustration, despondency and confusion a person of his state is prone to. While at times he does display a level of patience and forbearance that is nothing short of remarkable, that is not the whole of the book, nor entirely the defining feature of his journey. So what is there to learn from Job on the level of what does it look like when bad things do indeed happen to good people? I think there is a lot to sit with here in this book that we most often would rather avoid. We will be sitting with this over the next couple of weeks.

In my reading for this week, a thought came and struck me, and got me thinking: I imagine that it was not particularly easy to be Job's wife. This is a work of imagination because we know so little about her. Just this short testy interaction right here at the beginning, one more of the nameless and faceless women of the Bible. For such a brief, momentary thing, she has borne the brunt of much of the historic interpretation of the text—be like Job and suffer fully, and not like the one who would just as soon skip to the end and have done. Like Job, we dismiss her and her ideas and get on with the rest here.

But consider this unstated but utterly obvious point of fact: everything that has happened to Job is also happening to her. Everything that he has lost she has as well. We can imagine her

sitting in the background when the messengers who come to speak of the calamities of loss with the refrain “I alone was left to tell the tale”, her grief answering that of her husband, if not exceeding it. His children were her children. His home was her home. The servants, the livestock, the perfection that had been was her perfection too. And it must be said, a mother’s grief is qualitatively different than that of a father, though the comparison does not bear much weight. She gets condemned for not attending to her husband’s grief in this time when she was experiencing her own ordeal.

She could not be blamed if she might be wondering if it is she who was being tested and subjected to the whims of fate. And now her husband is exhibiting signs of illness. Perhaps her comment was less a critique of Job’s attitude to it all, outward though it may be, as much as it is a simple wish to embrace the seemingly inevitable and final heartbreak out of the way so she can proceed with her own process of grieving and loss. Whatever the case may be, at this point in the story Job had not ability to encounter her pain as well. What ever the case, Job’s wife words speak the truth of their suffering and remind us that such things need to be recognized when the time is ripe.

They are co-sufferers in all of this together despite the fact that, so far as we can discern from the text they did not talk about it spare this one occasion. Job expresses his pain, but not here or now with his wife. His discussion comes later among his vaunted friends, friends who, observing the situation from afar diagnose that the problem must lie with something Job has done to deserve what he has gotten. Job’s wife knows better. Her question does not find fault in his actions, only questioning his reactions: still you persist in your integrity? In doing that, Job’s wife reveals the fundamental question really at play here: how does one persist with integrity in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

That is a far more complicated and important question than simply “what ought I do in the face of suffering” generically. Approaching something with integrity—a quality that the Hebrew makes a big deal of through the 2 chapters setting up this story—is more a matter of remaining consistent to the core of who one is and what one says much more than it is about being perfect on every occasion. In the exchange in the heavenly courts, Job is said to persist with integrity, something which I think he continues in by in large throughout what follows, even when the going gets tough and the temptation is ever present to simply say screw it and move on to happier pursuits. Integrity is not about being perfect; it is about being consistent. Reading Job

and Job's wife through that lens helps us learn from their world, their experience that is not so much about aspiring to the impossible, nor breaking away from faith when trouble does come when it will.

Some friend of ours taught us something that Emily and I have sat with ever since in our life together. She teaches in a French immersion program in an elementary school in Winnipeg. She happened on an expression which is escaping me anymore that has to do with the simple statement of saying I am sorry. What matters here is the difference in meaning, intoning "I am sorry" meaning "I have empathy for what you are going through" rather than what we expect when we say that "I take responsibility for that and regret what happened." Many times in our lives, there are times that this is precisely what is needed—empathy, sympathy, and compassion (whose etymology means *to suffer with*). We hesitate to speak our pain, our suffering because we assume that there needs to be someone, ultimately, who needs to be pronounced responsible. Sometimes what we need far more is an indication of compassion with what we are going through to continue to find the way of integrity in speaking of what which we carry the best way we know how. Knowing that we are not alone in the suffering can sometimes be an incredible balm far more than apportioning the responsibility for it all. Even now we find ourselves expressing both "I am sorry (empathy)" to clarify our meaning or simply asking for empathy when we find ourselves frustrated. It helps us remain true to who we want to be and in that we remain true to who we are as a matter of integrity.

It is not easy to persist with integrity when the world around you stops making sense. We all know those for whom one crisis of faith for another lead them to through in the towel on the project of faith entirely. Holding on to your values and principles when things are rough, or, worse yet, though principles can feel completely at odds with the moment, can seem pointless or even foolish. Trusting God when God seems to allow the things of the world to proceed unimpeded can appear naïve, and can even attract the ridicule of those around you, and can cause us to question as well. Sometimes, simply daring to speak the question, to acknowledge the pain, to wonder out loud the most un-wonderable things possible can be far more an act of faith than simply suffering in silence. Asking a question of a God with whom we may struggle with at times retains the notion that there is someone there to question at all. There is integrity in expressing the completeness of our emotions, and not pretending that everything is OK when it is not.

We can be true to ourselves, true to our faith even while we speak the challenges of our lives. Speaking the truth requires integrity, promises fulfillment, and opens the conversation in a real way that can lead us ultimately to restoration. Pain turned in on itself can be corrosive, doing far more harm as we seek to continue to carry that which we were not meant to bear alone. Bearing up in challenge does not mean that we somehow become immune to the need to feel, to grieve, and to challenge that which has been. Job's wife with her few lines accomplishes much: she opens the conversation that moves the mere compliance with what is into, in time, resistance which, of itself, is a product of hope. We do well to give ourselves space to speak of that which challenges that we might be fully known, and in being so known, start healing in the long term. It allows other people to come along side in sympathy and compassion, carrying some of what we would struggle with alone together as the journey toward healing continues.

May we read these words and be inspired to greater acts of sympathy, compassion, resistance, and integrity, no matter what we are facing, knowing that God meets us even in the midst of our challenges, come what may.