

Job 42:1-17

Hebrews 7:23-28

Mark 10:46-52

We've wallowed in Job's misery for over thirty chapters, at least that's what it would be if we'd read the whole thing and listened to him and his friends debating all the theories of "when bad things happen to good people."

We proclaimed solidarity with Job's call for a hearing before God and then we shrank before God's ruling on the matter that went on for over two chapters. We didn't get to read the part where Job answered God after God's catalogue of creation, so I'll share it with you. Job gets two verses after God has gone on and on for 71, and Job says: "See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further."

Then God starts up again and gives Job another 52 verse lambast, some of the most interesting verses in scripture. Among them the claim that God controls chaos and evil, personified by Behemoth and Leviathan. God also offers Job her job. A safe bet because God knows Job will turn it down. And Job does in fine form saying, "I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

And that's the end of the poem. Remember a month ago, before Fall Break—can we remember things before fall break?—before fall break we started reading Job and I explained that there was this magnificent poem sandwiched between the beginning and end of an old folk tale. The end of the tale, today's reading, does much more than give us a "happily ever after" ending. It demonstrates that Job was right and his friends are lousy theologians.

But what was Job right about? He's certainly not right about his claim to be worthless and he has no business despising himself. The epilogue sets us straight on how valuable Job is to God and how valuable Job is to his friends.

Before Job lived happily ever after, he prayed for his friends, the ones who had vilified him. He prayed for them because God refused to listen to their plaintive unfaithfulness. Job took on the responsibility for the restoration of their “right” faith because his faith was deemed acceptable by God. It’s hard enough to take care of our own faith, isn’t it, much less be responsible for the faith of those around us? Oh, but we are. How we live our lives and what we say reflects on God. If we go around criticizing people all the time, behaving in ways that are unforgiving and harsh, then it will seem as though the God we worship is ruthless and cruel—Bildad’s God. If we go around picking fights and responding to every slight against us with violence, then it will seem as though the God we worship is angry and vindictive—Zophar’s God. If we go around setting up impossible standards and inventing absurd rules, then it will seem as though the God we worship is demanding and irrational—Eliphaz’s God. If we go around sharing what we have with others, inviting the loner to belong, reacting with patience and care, then it will seem as though the God we worship thinks that we matter—Job’s God.

Job mattered a great deal to God, but you wouldn’t know it by the way Job’s friends talked. Job’s friends also matter a great deal to God, but they didn’t know it until Job showed them a different way of being in the world.

He showed them the way of thanksgiving and wonder, a change that occurred in Job as he continued to wrestle with the God he knew he knew, rather than the God his friends kept trying to introduce him to. Job repents of his arrogance, his belief that just because he had done nothing wrong, he deserved a better life than everyone else. He came to understand that life is not about what we deserve; it’s about what we do with what we are given. With war, famine, and pestilence all around us, it’s easy to conjecture that God ought to do something about this mess. When faced with divorce, disease, or death it’s natural to demand relief from our misery. It would be a disservice to God, however, to claim that there is some kind of perverted divine purpose to misery. Job finally realizes by the end of his story that God’s purpose continues to work in the world *in spite* of the

pain and misery and especially in spite of humanity's misguided attempts to play at being God ourselves.

Job's life is not restored to him because he's good enough to deserve it. In fact, his life is not restored—those children who died; they're still dead. That loss of livestock; still gone. The barns and the houses, still flattened. Things for Job do not return to the way they were. In fact, they get better. He has twice as many sheep, camels, oxen, and donkeys. He also has seven sons and three daughters, the exact number he had at the beginning of the story. But Job's life is not the same as it was at the beginning of the story and neither are the lives of his friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar.

Job moves beyond himself, beyond his joy and his pain, to understand the divine presence of God not only in his own life but throughout all the world. He shows his friends the difference between retributive justice and restorative justice by praying for their restoration when they deserved retribution. Job comes to understand the crucial distinction between reward and grace. Job finally comes to know God. May we know Job's God with the same level of humility and hope. Amen.