

Job 1:1; 2:1-10

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Mark 10:2-16

### A Little Bit of Patience

The Book of Job is an interesting compilation of stories. This may be old news to those of you who have had some intro to Old Testament somewhere along the way or perhaps some of you who had a really good Sunday School teacher somewhere along the way who took the time to explain the different genres of biblical writing. For our purposes today, we all need to know that the first 2 chapters of Job and the last chapter are different from all those chapters in the middle. You can see this if you just look at how the words are placed on the page: chapters one, two, and forty-two are prose and everything in the middle is poetry. The first part, the part we're reading for today, comes from an old folk tale—a sort of once upon a time story. Once upon a time stories are always true springing from the fertile ground of ordinary human experiences and overlaid with extraordinary details that seek to explain the inexplicable. Such is the story of Job—a person who has a run of bad luck in an otherwise idyllic life. Why does this happen to Job, a person who is “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil?” Why does this happen to anyone, righteous or not? How do we explain the mystery of suffering or as Job confesses later in the book, “justify the ways of God”?

So, what exactly has happened to Job? First, in the part we didn't read from chapter one, all his children die in a series of unfortunate events and now in chapter two, Job himself develops awful sores all over his body. I don't know about you, but two or three sores can put me over the edge. My whole body covered would probably incite me to curse God and die or, at least, lie down and die. I'm sympathetic to Job's wife, who's probably the one taking care of him and who sees the whole thing unfolding up close and personal. Few of us want the people we love to suffer, even when the end to suffering can only

come through death. Besides, as my Hebrew scholars in the room can attest, curse is used in this instance as a euphemism for blessing, further supporting my point that Job's wife can't stand to see him like this.

So, we know WHAT has happened to Job, but we still need to know WHY. The real heart of the entire book, fable and epic, is Why? And I might as well give away the end of the story today because who knows if we'll still be preaching on Job by the end of October when the lectionary leaves him for Isaiah. Why? is still the question at the end of the Book of Job. Why? is still the question right at this very moment.

In the ordinary part of this story Job suffers, he suffers a lot. In the extraordinary part of this story we are privy to a scene from the heavenly court. The Lord is holding forth and all the heavenly beings are present before the Lord. Satan is among them. The Sa-tan, the adversary, not the demonic personification of evil that fuels our imagination because of literary developments in later Judaism and early Christianity—to say nothing of Paradise Lost. To project that understanding of Satan onto this figure would be like giving George Washington the starship Enterprise to cross the Potomac. You all learned about anachronisms in the third grade, so you know what I mean. That's not this Satan.

This Satan has a particular task among the heavenly host, assigned by God. The job is “going to and fro on the earth and walking up and down on it” in order to report to the Lord. Satan reports to the Lord that he believes Job is only good because he has a good life. If he had a bad life, he'd be a bad guy. It's Satan's job to play devil's advocate—no pun intended. Where do you suppose the phrase comes from in the first place? Satan and the other heavenly beings are like the Wesley Pastor's Team who come together to challenge and support one another in an effort to make good decisions. Satan suggests they all consider the possibility that Job can be just as mean and vindictive as anyone else given the right circumstances. Sociologists and psychologists, to say nothing of philosophers and theologians, have considered the same question for millennia.

Have at it, God says. Let's find out. In the first round, people die, starting at the outer edge of Job's acquaintances and ending with those closest to him, his own children. Some are murdered, some are killed by storms. And Job says: "naked I came from my mother's womb and naked shall I return." In other words, I had nothing when I was born and I'll have nothing when I die. But we all know how painful it is when the nothing happens to us while we are still living. We know this is hard for Job.

Court is in session again and the Lord asks for a report. What did we learn from the events surrounding Job? Did the bad things make him a bad person?

--Nothing happened to him, the adversary testifies.

--Skin for skin, the advocate suggests.

--Does personal, physical, pain change the substance of our being? Good question say all the sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, and theologians.

--Have at it, says God. Let's find out. And the sores appear.

Pain of the heart now compounded by pain in the flesh. "Shall we receive the good and not the bad?" Job wonders. His friends show up and things are so bad they have the good sense to sit there with him for seven days and seven nights without saying one word. But lest you think Job is a super human, let me remind you that Chapter 3 opens with Job cursing the day he was born. And lest you think his friends maintain their pastoral good sense, let me point out to you that all three of them in turn suggest that Job is only getting what he deserves.

These first two chapters, drawn from an old folk tale set the stage for a 39 chapter discussion of theodicy—the defense of God's goodness in view of the existence of evil. It's a question worth pondering if your faith is ever going to move beyond a Pollyanna version of the sweet by and by. But it's not a question with one, simple, right answer. It's multifaceted, it's challenging, it's even confusing. But there is one place where we start to peel back the layers, the place where God meets us, incarnate in the one we call the Christ. Here we meet God, not in the heavenly court pondering academic questions about how humans might behave in particular situations. Here we meet God in the

situation, as a human. Immanuel, God with us. Come to that place, come to this table whether you know the answers or not. Amen.