

Reverend Jim's Sermon for October 20, 2024

Have you ever had a day when one thing goes wrong and it feels as though your whole world has fallen apart? Anyone ever had a day like that?

The Book of Job is the story of one poor guy for whom *everything* went wrong. His life was as good as one could imagine. He had a loving family, in fact several loving families. He had wealth and prestige, and he even had a clean conscience. He treated others kindly, and he went to the temple everyday to pray. He slept well.

And then everything fell apart. It all started with a conversation between God and the Devil. God was actually bragging to Satan about Job, he said, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?"

The devil said to God, "The only reason Job loves you, is that he thinks that you are responsible for all the wonderful things in his life. If you took his wealth and comfort away from him, he would come to hate you."

And the Lord said unto Satan: "I'll make you a little bet. Torment Job as much as you want. You have a free hand. Make him as miserable as you can short of killing him, and I'll wager that he will remain faithful to me."

So the Devil began to torment Job. He took everything away from him; his family, his wealth and his health. He visited on Job every tragedy that a human could experience. And, yet, somehow Job remained faithful to God. He wasn't happy about all the pain and suffering, but for Job there was no alternative to faithfulness. When Job's wife urged him to curse God, Job said: "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?"

The book of Job goes on with a number of long discourses between Job and various friends on the nature of evil, why good people suffer, and what is the proper response to tragedy and crisis. In the end Job's friends decide that the tragedies visited upon him can't be coincidence. He must have done *something* horrible to deserve it. But Job says, Look I'm really a very righteous fellow.

And then Job goes to God and asks him why he is being punished. Why has this happened to him? He becomes insistent that God explain himself.

In today's reading we have God's answer. It is an answer that does not necessarily sit well with us. It goes against our grain. And for this reason, it may be worthwhile paying particular attention to it.

God's answer to Job, coming out of the whirlwind no less, is simply this: "I am God. It is I who created the universe, and I can do what I like. Who are you to question me?"

God says: "Who is this that darkens my counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question *you*, and *you* shall declare to *me*. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding, surely you know!"

The Chapter goes on for another 30 verses along this vein.

"Have you commanded the morning since your days began and caused the dawn to know its place. "Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep?"

This whole chapter is terrifying and yet beautiful. It is an image of the divine that is unmatched anywhere in scripture. If anything in the Bible can give us pause it is the 38th chapter of Job.

This is not an image of God that we Anglicans typically subscribe to. It is certainly not the warm and fuzzy God that I tend to preach about. This is a very ancient view of God, God the creator of a vast and complex universe. A somewhat distant God.

The idea of a mutual love between God and humans develops later, with the prophets and with Jesus. But the God of Job is a God whose message is simply this: "I am God and you are not. It is not for you to know why things are the way they are."

Now there are a number of ways to look at this Biblical passage, which, you might be surprised to know, is one of my favorites. I am going to suggest a couple of lessons from this scripture that might be helpful. The first, is that all religious faith boils down to this: There is a God, and it isn't me. Why is that helpful? Because it frees us from the responsibility of saving other people.

There should be great comfort, at least for those of us ordinary folk and who don't want to run the world, that we are not responsible. . . for anything . . . except ourselves, our own words and behavior. We may make ourselves responsible for doing certain jobs, for organizing an event, or helping someone move, but other people's feelings, and the big stuff, like hurricanes and tornados are God's responsibility.

God's answer to Job can sound harsh, I am in charge, not you. But this is ultimately a message of freedom. You only have to worry about yourself. You don't have to solve the problems of the world. You don't even have to solve the

problems of the person sitting next to you. You have enough of your own business not to get into mine, God says. Someone, me, is in charge.

This is no small thing. I suspect that a great deal of the world's problems are the result of people not understanding this, of people getting into business that is not theirs, people thinking that they are going to save the world. We see that all around us right now. Staying in our own business takes vigilance and effort. But we can't save the world, and the good news, we don't have to.

Another lesson buried in God's answer to Job is this: Yes, sometimes bad things happen to good people. We can be really good, honest, hardworking, fair minded etc etc. We can pray daily and do nice things for people, and difficult, painful, stuff is still going to happen to us. It isn't because we are bad. Look at what happened to Jesus. And when Job asks God what gives with this. God says. . . Look, I created the world of which you are a minute part. I am not going to explain myself to you.

There are certainly things that we bring on ourselves through our bad choices, but much sickness, accidents, bad luck, disease all these things are what happen to human beings. They are a part of the human experience and part of the path we are given to tread.

I was with my 26 year old niece this past weekend, who in the past year has lost her mother, (my baby sister) and her only sibling. At one point during the weekend I said something about working on not feeling self-pity. She said "Self-pity? What does that feel like?" I said "Oh, like poor me, like why do these things have to happen to me?" She said. "Oh, that sounds like a really stupid waste of time and energy." "It is," I said, "But I still struggle with it."

After God's answer, Job, who had remained faithful throughout all his trials, was returned to his normal life with even more wealth than before. Things do sometimes work out, and faith is sometimes rewarded. But whatever our circumstances or conditions, we know that God knows what we need and cares for us, and more importantly perhaps, that God cares for the people we love.