

The Book of Job rarely shows up in the Sunday readings, though it is always part of the Burial service of the Episcopal Church, but, for me at least, Job is one of the most fascinating characters in the Bible. It is his unjustified suffering that pulls me in- so much of the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures can be hard to relate to personally- not sure about you but I have never witnessed the parting of the Schuylkill, for example, but as soon as Job hauls his scabbed and scarred self onto the top of the dung heap and starts scratching away with a piece of pottery and waving a fist at God, I'm right there with him and I'm guessing you are too. We have all either been there or been with someone who has. A good friend's 3 year old son dies in a tragic accident, a young mother is diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, a gunman bursts into a school and shoots children. True stories like these make Job much more present to us than many other biblical characters. It is as if he speaks for us when he yells at God and says, "Where are you and why are you allowing this to happen? If you want to kill us off, at least make it quick. There is no reason to break all our bones one by one unless you like the sound of it."

Job, as you probably know, had not done anything wrong at all. He was faithful, admired in his village for being an upright and solid citizen. He

“feared” God and never did what was evil. He was called “one of the greatest people of the east.” He had a wife, 10 children, 7000 sheep, 3000 camels, 500 pairs of oxen, 500 donkeys and scads of servants. He was very rich, but no one begrudged him for it because he was such a good soul.

And his tragic misfortune was not caused through any fault of his own. The way the story goes, God and Satan got into a conversation about Job. God was feeling pretty proud of Job and so boasted to Satan (who was not Satan back then but was simply a perfectly responsible member of God’s cabinet, cruising the land and checking up on people- sort of a divine prosecutor but with no power except what God gave him). Satan says, “you really think so, God? I think Job just loves you because he has pretty much everything he could want. I’ll bet if it all disappeared Job would be singing a different song- I’ll bet he would even curse you.” So God said, “OK then, go test your theory. Take it all away from him.” And without warning Job’s animals were all stolen, his servants were killed defending them, his children were all killed sitting right at the supper table when a big wind destroyed his house, pulling it down on top of them.

But you know, God was right. Job shaved his head, tore his robes and lay face down in the dirt. But what came out of his lips was not a curse but praise to God, though it might have been a bit hard to hear because he was speaking with his face in the dirt: “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the Name of the Lord.”

See, said God, told you. But the Satan said,” with all due respect, you didn’t afflict Job personally, physically. Do that, and he will curse you.” So God says, “OK, go for it”. And instantly Job is covered with sores, itchy sores, over every inch of his body. Job’s wife tells him to just go ahead and let loose with a satisfying string of curses at God. But Job simply scratched himself. Then his 3 friends show up. For 7 days they are silent-speechless in the face of such suffering. Finally, Job lets loose. Saying, “Damn the day I was born and the night that forced me from the womb. Why couldn’t I have died as they pulled me out of the dark? Why were there knees to hold me, breasts to keep me alive?” Job pleads his case for 37 whole chapters. His friends, unhelpfully finding their voices, and acutely uncomfortable with Job’s aggressive questioning of God, urge him to admit he has done something wrong- they don’t even try to defend Job to God, rather they defend God to Job. Of course, both Job and God know Job is

indeed blameless. But the friends can't stand such apparently unjust suffering and so they try to cope with Job's pain by finding theories to explain it- the more he suffers, the more platitudes they serve up.

Job, ignoring them, begins his closing argument. Dragging himself upright on top of his dung heap he yells at God, "I have done everything you ever asked me to! Why is this happening to me? Answer me!"

And so God does- speaking out of a mighty whirlwind. It is not the answer Job expects- God hits the "wrong question" buzzer and says "Who is this whose ignorant words smear my design with darkness? Stand up now like a man; I will question you: please, instruct me. Where were you when I planted the earth? Tell me, if you are so wise. Do you know who took its dimensions, measuring its length with a cord? What were its pillars built on? Who laid down its cornerstone, while the morning stars burst out singing and the angels shouted for joy?" God goes on for about 4 chapters- but doesn't answer Job's question. Job asks about justice. God answers with omnipotence. And that is really the only answer people have ever gotten about why things happen the way they do. Only God knows. And none of us is God.

Some people say this book makes God look like an arrogant bully who randomly squashes an innocent man. And that any God who would do that really doesn't deserve to be praised or worshiped. Which would, I think, make Satan right; no one worships God for nothing- not to mention misses the point of the book.

Because Job, despite all he has been through, sounds anything but squashed when it is all over. "I have spoken of the unspeakable and tried to grasp the infinite," he says to the Lord. "I have heard of you with my ears; but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust." Job, you see, saw God. Which his own eyes saw, and not another. He stayed with God-he never once doubted that he would see his Redeemer- he found God to be present even in the midst of unjust suffering. The whole book of Job, for me, is a "wrong question". We ask the 'why' of suffering, which is, despite gallons and gallons of ink spilt on the subject, an unanswerable question. What Job tells us is that *even in the midst of* unjust suffering God is present and with us. And Job shows us how to be in relationship with God in the midst of suffering.

The story, as the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, is as if a flea had insisted that the lion upon which it was riding stop- stop right now- and

explain why the ride was so bumpy and hot. The flea roared and roared as loud as it could, never expecting to be heard, until one day the lion turns around and roars back at the flea. Never mind what the lion said, it turned, it looked and it roared back. And that is enough for anyone to live on for the rest of life.

What Job tells us is that the worst thing that can happen is not to suffer without reason but to suffer without God. That is, without any hope of consolation or rebirth, new life. Next to the pain of divine abandonment pretty much everything else pales and what Job really wants us to know, Jesus too for that matter, is that God never, ever abandons us. When there is nothing left, when all we have amassed for ourselves is gone and we have nothing left but a bit of a clay pot with which to scratch ourselves, what is still left is the God of all creation, who laid the foundations of the earth, who walked in the recesses of the deep, who has made all that draws breath, and who in Jesus, demonstrated that God, love, life always has the last word. The God, not of the dead, but of the living, of life.

According to Job, piety does not demand politeness. We can let loose to God. God was much happier with Job's outrage than with his friend's pious platitudes. Job stands and encourage us on when, in pain, we yell at God,

“why is this happening to me? Answer me!” Who knows, such a plea may even bring God out of hiding, with a roar that lays our ears back against our heads- and that makes the angels shout for joy..

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