

IN THE NAME OF GOD-FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN

Any lectionary by definition poses certain problems. Unless we return to the all-day worship of the Puritan church, heaven forbid, we simply do not have the time to read, on Sunday morning, all of any of the average length books of the Bible. And yet to read any less, with rare exception, is to run the risk of straying far afield from the context. Particularly today, in the Old Testament lesson from Job, we have to go back before our lectionary portion in order to try to draw meaning from it. The passage begins with God answering Job. What had Job said to God? Well, quite a lot, and therein lies the whole story.

Job is unique among books of Scripture. I believe it is safe to say it is the only book written entirely as fiction, though that is not to say it contains any less truth than some of the more strictly historical books, e.g., Joshua, Ezra, Mark or Acts. More important, Job deviates significantly theologically from the rest of the Bible. The only real similarity Job has to the rest of the Bible is that we don't know who wrote it, but only that it was written around 500 BC by a Jew.

Our hero, Job, is introduced to us as a pretty perfect fellow, as full of virtue and free of vice as any character in Scripture prior to Jesus of Nazareth. As such he is noticed by one of the Heavenly Chorus, the Satan, a sort of legal prosecutor figure and the forerunner of the New Testament Devil, or Evil One. One day God says to the Satan, "Hey, where have you been?" "Oh, roaming about the earth." "Well, did

you notice my man Job? A tremendous guy. Fears God and shuns evil.” Satan says, “Sure, he is, he has absolutely everything. Just stretch out your hand and touch something of his though. He’ll scream like a struck pig and curse you to your face.”

Well, the stage is set and God authorizes the Satan to test Job’s faith, and was it ever tested. He lost absolutely everything, wife, children, cattle, possessions, reputation, health. Then his three busy-body friends came to see him, to try to help him, and orthodox believers that they were, they simply assumed that God was punishing Job for sin. Valiantly and persistently they tried to get him to see this and repent, but Job wouldn’t budge.

To be sure, Job recognizes that he may have sinned as we all do. He doesn’t claim for a minute to be perfect in any way in the eyes of God. But by George neither has he done anything to warrant God in singling him out. Of this he is certain. Job perceives his own case as a clear miscarriage of justice and begins to question whether God is either good or just.

It is interesting to see the change in all of this in the way Job speaks to God. In the beginning he could not be more deferential:

Naked came I from my mother’s womb

And naked I shall return.

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.

When the wholesale calamities befall him though, his respect and restraint leave him. He curses the very day he was born and cries out for death as a blessed release. He accuses God directly of being unjust and of condemning the innocent:

Are not my days few? Cease then,  
And let me alone, that I may take comfort a little,  
Before I go whence I shall not return.

God was now Job's declared enemy. Nowhere else in the Bible do we find such language used by man toward God. Only Job storms right up to God and accuses him face to face.

Well, suffice it to say, Job's three friends were scandalized. Remember that they weren't in on the beginning of the story. They still thought Job was truly being punished for wrongdoing, whereas we, the readers, know that God is merely testing his faith.

Job feels above all that man must be honest and candid with God. If he makes you mad, say so! God never asked for a yes-man or woman. Also, God understands that we tend to speak rashly when under great strain.

Job didn't really mean all he said against God. Too many times in the midst of his outcries against God, Job was simultaneously reaching out to God, for what he most wanted was the restoration of his relationship with God. He turned away from his three friends, realizing he would find neither sympathy nor true love there, and began to look to some sort of posthumous vindication:

But as for me I know that my redeemer lives  
And at last he will stand up upon the earth.  
And after my skin, even this body, is destroyed,  
Then without my flesh shall I see God,  
Whom I shall see on my side,  
And my eyes shall behold, not as a stranger.

Here Job knew, if but for a moment, that it was to God he must turn, not to men, and that God would not in the end let him down.

But then, displaying that ambivalence we all feel under such circumstances, whether in our relationships with God or with other men and women, Job again hurls passionate and indignant declarations of innocence at God, defying and rebuking him for his injustice.

Finally God answered from the whirlwind:

Now it is my turn to ask questions...

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?

Tell me, you are so well-informed?

Who decided its dimensions?...

Who pent up the sea behind closed doors?

Etc., etc., Tell me all about it!

In other words, just who do you think you are anyway Job? God doesn't let up, but clobbers Job with two whole chapters' worth of sarcastic rhetorical questions. The

point of all of them being that Job has gone too far in his criticism of God. Job has made the serious mistake you and I not infrequently make in talking and acting as though he knew exactly how a just and fair God ought to behave. Fine, but just and fair by whose standards, ours or God's? We, and Job, edge awfully close to a kind of mirror-worshipping idolatry there. Goodness, we say with Job, should be rewarded and wrongdoing punished.

God's answer, in his almost bitter and ceaseless questioning of Job, is to redirect Job's emphasis from his own problems to the wider spectrum of God's creation of the earth and all that therein is. Then he got closer to home and urged Job to put his money where his mouth was:

Array yourself with honor and majesty.

Look on the proud and humble them.

Tread down the wicked where they stand.

Then, I will admit that your own right hand can save you

The colloquy between God and Job then ends with a strange confession from Job. We might have expected a loud, "Whatever," but no, now Job is satisfied, for the first time, he says:

I know that you can do all things.

I have said that which I didn't understand,

For I had heard of you only, but now I see you face to face.

Notwithstanding his earthly calamities, Job has seen God on his side in the end, and that was enough. Once assured by God's love for him, he required nothing further.

The best scholarly guesses are that Job was probably written about the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, i.e. roughly 2500 years ago. I think it has considerable relevance here and now though. Just to name two issues confronted in Job, both death and pain are still with us. Job calls to mind the oldest theological question there is, that of the relationship of God to evil and pain. It has been said, to the point of becoming a cliché, that any attempt to deal with the question must call into issue either God's compliance or God's benevolence. In other words, either God couldn't stop the horrors of Auschwitz or didn't want to. Either conclusion make us pretty uncomfortable.

We can approach the question at almost any point between the sublime and the ridiculous. In the novel Catch 22 for example, Yossarian asks:

Good God, how much reverence can you have for a Supreme Being  
who finds it necessary to include tooth decay in His divine  
system of creation? Why in the world did he ever create pain?

At the other extreme, how do we explain birth defects, crib death, children killed by death squads in Nicaragua and El Salvador, Auschwitz, the Dodgers leaving Brooklyn? Where, we ask, was God while Dr. Mengele was carrying out his insanely

cruel genetic torture and experiments in the camps? How could a loving God let that happen to innocent children?

One possible answer to that question I suppose is to say, "It is God's will." I give away my bias against that approach when I note that such a response is often delivered in a nauseatingly pious fashion to someone for example who has just seen her house, children and husband blown up in a furnace explosion. And, of course, it has been used to justify the Holocaust. Do we gain anything from worshipping that sort of God? Who needs him? We prefer the victims to the executioners and naturally assume God agrees with our moral choice, but to try to explain the Holocaust or any super evil as God's will is I think to side with the executioners rather than with the victims. We have to be very careful not to impose our own 21<sup>st</sup> century rational Christian Western value judgments on God, for we are supposed to be created in God's image and not the other way around. But there comes a time where to function at all in terms of morals or ethics, we have to take a stand and tiptoe carefully around that precipice of arrogance, and venture to believe that the Holocaust is at least as much of an offense to God's moral order as it is to ours. How else can we respect God as the source of moral guidance?

Pretty soon though, with that sort of reasoning, we get into Job's dilemma. We yell at God and are then challenged with the question, "OK, just what do you know about how to run the world?" Sometimes maybe it is too difficult even for God to keep cruelty and disease and chaos from claiming innocent victims. Can we

though, without God, do any better? But there we go, questioning God's omnipotence. There is quicksand all around us here.

But, you say, God can and does work miracles. We have seen evidence of them through all of history. Interesting and inspiring though they are, are they really that helpful to us or to Job in this search? I think for example of the child who was asked by his mother what he had learned in Sunday School that day, and he told her:

The Israelites got out of Egypt, but Pharaoh and his army chased after them. They got to the Red Sea and they couldn't cross it. The Egyptian army was getting closer. So Moses got on his radio and called in air support, but the Israeli Air Force bombed the Egyptians, and the Israeli Navy built a pontoon bridge so the people could cross." The mother was shocked. "Is that the way they taught you the story?" "Well no, "the boy admitted, "but if I told it to you the way they told it to us, you'd never believe it."

No matter what we were taught as children from Daniel to Jonah, does God really reach down to repeal the laws of nature or of physics so as to make exceptions for nice people? I have never seen a lot of evidence of it. I have though seen considerable evidence of terrible things happening to lovely people. The good seem to die young, while some of the jackasses of the world seem to live forever. We can't

explain evil and pain and death any more than we can explain life itself. We can't control them, or, sometimes, even postpone them. All we can do is try to rise above the question, "Why did it happen?" and move on to the question "Now that it has happened, what have we learned from it, and where do we go from here?".

The element of choice, or what is sometimes called free will, just may be a key to our analysis here. We have the freedom, and it is a gift of God, to do right or to do wrong, whatever right and wrong are. Think about it. Unless we are free to choose evil, it doesn't make much sense to say that we are free to choose good. It would be an illusion, not a choice. I have no idea why it happened, but I do know that at one point way back there in the evolutionary creation process, God had a new kind of creature emerge, different from frogs and tigers, a morally free person who could choose to be good or evil. The result of that act of God has been an awful lot of nobility and cruelty ever since. All of us learned when we were very young that if we want to hurt someone or something, God isn't going to stop us. What God does is to tell us, or remind us, that what we are contemplating is wrong, that we will regret it, and hope that if we ignore him yet again, maybe we will at least learn the hard way. Notice I am not saying that God could not stop us from doing evil, but only that if God did stop us, we would then lack that moral freedom which is so essential to our humanness. So where was God in Auschwitz? That's the wrong question. It wasn't God who caused the terror of the Holocaust, but human beings choosing to be cruel to fellow human beings. Do you think the same sort of

reasoning and analysis is applicable to the hurt we cause each other daily in human relationships? I do too.

And, lest we forget, the wind and sea don't obey us, they obey the Christ of God.

Amen.

St. Luke's

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