

Job 1:1; 2:1-20; Mark 10:2-16

Grace and peace to you from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen

A couple of years ago I had a fellow come into my office. He was about ten years older than me. As we sat and talked, he told me how he had never gotten along with his father, who was very strict. He explained to me that he was estranged from most of his siblings, as well as from his own grown son. He himself was divorced and had relatively recently ended a ten-year relationship with a woman, and while in the midst of a new relationship with another woman, he realized that he still had very strong feelings for this other woman. He reviewed his life insurance policy, and upon determining that there was no suicide clause, he redid his will, leaving his car and some money to his son, with this woman receiving most of the rest of the money. He told me he wasn't certain that there was a God. He told me he really didn't have any reason to continue to live. He was unemployed because he had been forced into early retirement. His son could really use the new car, and his former lady friend was in a financial situation where she could truly benefit from a large increase in cash. We talked for a while (I did a lot of silent praying) and among other things I asked him if he had ever read the book of Job. When he replied in the negative, I took a fairly new paraphrase of the Bible off of my shelf and I gave it to him and I asked him to go home and read it.

Why did I choose Job? Have you ever read it? Now, admittedly, it's 42 chapters long so it's NOT one of those books that I say go home you can read it during the commercial breaks, because you just can't rip through it in an hour or so. As a matter of fact, you may not even be able to make it through a couple of chapters at a time. NOT because it is so difficult to understand, but because the book of Job will cause you to think about your faith. Now the story of Job is relatively simple and you'll be hearing the story of Job for the four Saturdays of October.

The story is relatively simple. Job is a good and faithful man. He's a family man; he's a business man and he's minding his own business. While unbeknownst to Job, this "blameless and upright" man, this fellow "who feared God and turned away from evil" as we heard in verse one. Job is on God's radar, and one day in the midst of some kind of celestial court where the heavenly beings are gathered together, Job is on God's radar so much that God almost brags about Job to those gathered there. "Have you considered my servant Job?" God says. There is no one like him on earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. Well, of course, replies the Adversary (the Adversary can also be translated as the Accuser, or as the Satan –as it is in our readings. The Hebrew word there is *ha-satan* which can be translated any of those ways.) Well of course he loves you, says the Accuser, he's got a nice house, he's safe on every side, you've blessed his hands so that anything he touches is going to turn out well. Alright, says the Lord, do whatever you want to him, but you cannot touch him.

And so a storm rises up and kills all of his children as they were gathered at one of their siblings' house for a feast. The Chaldeans came in and made a raid and make off with all of his camels.

The Sabeans come in and make a raid and make off with all of oxen and donkeys. A fire comes in and wipes out all of his crops. Job receives this news and he says, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, naked shall I return there; the LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” ‘Oh, (deleted)’ says the Adversary. And so again the Lord God says, have you considered my servant Job? And again the Adversary replies, well what do you expect, he still has his health and as long as somebody’s got his health, of course he’s going to worship you. But touch him, take away, take away that health of his and boy oh boy, all bets are going to be off, he is going to curse you left, right, up and down. And God says, okay, does whatever you want, but you can’t kill him. So Job’s life becomes afflicted. The top of his head to the soles of his feet he’s covered with open wounds, with sores, he’s in pain. His family is dead, he’s ruined financially, and his loving supportive, amazing, wife says to him “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.” (Job 2:9 NRS) There is the kind of support that you really want when you’re feeling down in the dumps. But in the midst of all of this suffering, in the midst of his trials and tribulations, in the midst of his pain and affliction, Job replies to his wife, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” (Job 2:10 NRS) Should we only expect good things to happen to us because we’re believers? Do we expect therefore, only bad things to happen to people who don’t believe?

If you’ll allow me to share with you a story I probably shared before, but I am going to do it one more time. As many of you know, our first child was born early and was only with us for about thirty-six hours. At that time I was a youth director in the congregation and Marianne taught pre-school at the same place. So there were lots of folks in that building and in that area who knew us and lots of people who came to my office to offer me consolation. But one woman in particular, a woman close to my own age, we had become somewhat friendly with, she had two beautiful children of her own. She came in to see me and while we were talking, she broke down in tears and said, “You don’t deserve to have had this happen to you.” And what I thought at the time, although I did not say it out loud, is well, you’re right. We don’t deserve it. No one deserves to have their child die. No one deserves to go through that pain and suffering, be that child an infant, a youth, or an adult. But then again, what have I done to deserve that my child live?

I very, very strongly believe that the Lord God did not kill my son. God did not take my child because I or Marianne or the two of us together did something wrong. My son died because he was born too early and his lungs weren’t developed enough to support his breathing. God wasn’t punishing us, and Satan wasn’t hurting us.

I believe that suffering happens in part so that we know that in everything that happens to us, God is with us. God is there with us in all of the good things, with a new born child, with a birthday party, with that first crush you’ve ever had, with the great job that you always wanted, and that life-long love and God is there with us in all of the lousy things that happen to us. The death of a loved one, the loss of employment, that great personal rejection, or the debilitating illness. Why then is there suffering? I believe in part because we live in an imperfect world. We live in a world where people will hate, where people will hurt one another, where accidents happen. I don’t believe that God causes those things. I do believe though that God is there with us, giving us strength to go on. Loving us, and supporting us and surrounding us with love and faith and grace.

That fellow that I had met with, I saw him several weeks after. I saw him outside in a public setting, he hasn't yet come back to talk to me privately, but I asked him how he was doing, and he said better. I didn't ask him if he read Job, but I suspect that he did. I suspect that he heard the message of suffering and as well he heard the message of God's presence. Because God is with us always.

Amen.