

Journey with Job: The Challenge of Integrity

Job 1:1, 2:1-10

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Today, and for the next few weeks, we'll be swimming in deep water. The church has given us four readings from the book of Job. It is a demanding book, tucked between Esther and Psalms. Like the book of Ecclesiastes, it is brutally honest about life and its troubles. Job is a "once upon a time" book. It's theology in story form. And even though it's 2500 years old, its concerns are every bit as timely today.

Julia Sweeney has a bone to pick with God. Many of us laughed when she performed on "Saturday Night Live." Her famous character was an ambiguous nerd named Pat, and in 1994, she quit the show, moved to Los Angeles to break into movies.

Unfortunately, she says 1994 was "the year that I became Job." Her first big movie failed even before it opened. Then her little brother was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer, and both he and her parents moved into her home. With all this difficulty, Sweeney found a therapeutic outlet in stand-up comedy. She eloquently told personal stories of suffering, transforming pathos into deep comedy.

Then, in early 1995, Sweeney was diagnosed with cervical cancer. She began chemotherapy and a series of invasive surgeries. Three weeks after her diagnosis, her brother died. He was 31 years old, she was 35. Sweeney's cancer went into remission, and she turned her stand-up material into a full length monologue, *God Said 'Ha!'* It became successful, both on stage and film, and she again turned tragedy into success.

All though this time, Julia Sweeney, a lifelong Catholic and regular churchgoer, remained true to her religious roots. In 1997, she told a reporter that she found comfort in prayer, and as late as 1999 she was still attending Mass every Sunday. But then Sweeney lost her faith. She now has a monologue called *Letting Go of God* which has played on Broadway. All through the years of her troubles, she joked that God was playing a practical joke on her. Now she says she has given in to a little voice inside her head that has been whispering, to her horror, "There is no God."¹

This is, of course, no laughing matter. People can joke about suffering, but it isn't funny. They can come up with optimistic slogans and say "look on the bright side," but when you've lost everything and you are covered with sores, it is a tragedy, not a comedy.

When I knew we would hear the book of Job this month, I began to try it out on some people. I'd tell them something and ask, "What do you think?"

Somebody said, "That's an awful story, because the answer to the question, 'why do people suffer?' is 'because God and Satan had a bet.'"

¹ "Julia Sweeney Says Ha!" Matthew Baldwin, *Sightings*, 5/25/06

“Well, wait a second,” I said. “Job doesn’t know anything about that bet. It happens in heaven, not on earth. Besides, it’s not technically a bet. It’s a test that God allows.”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter,” said the critic. “I don’t want to think that God’s up there, testing people to see if they’ll stay faithful.”

“Now, hold on,” I said. “This is a story. It’s not true, it’s a story. It’s a piece of fiction.”

Somebody else said, “It seems pretty true to me. We’ve had some suffering in our family, and I don’t know how to explain it. If we’re being punished, I don’t know what we’re being punished for. We’ve tried to be good people, and if somebody is gambling on us up in heaven, then the people down here are going to lose.”

Then somebody else said, “I don’t understand this at all. You mean to tell me that Job did nothing wrong? Obviously he must have done something wrong – that’s why he lost everybody except for his nagging wife.”

“Well,” I said, “God said Job was blameless. Everybody in heaven agreed on that. Job never did anything to deserve his suffering. He had three friends who showed up and said he must have done something wrong, but the opening chapters insist he was a good man.”

“Maybe so,” said someone else. “But a few chapters later, he’s yelling at God and saying, ‘Where did you go?’”

Keep in mind: the story of Job is not a factual biography. It begins with the words “once upon a time.” It’s an imaginative piece of fiction. And like any good fiction, it’s true in the sense that it holds up a mirror to human experience. We see something of ourselves within it. What we see in Job is somebody who suffers for no earthly reason. He loses all the good things of his life, and it has nothing to do with his behavior.

His friends will try to comfort him with easy answers, but they just won’t do. The friends probe around with spiritual flashlights to see if there is some secret sin that Job has committed and forgotten, therefore causing all his trouble. But they don’t know what we know: that God is immensely proud of Job and his faithfulness, and God is willing to see how faithful Job will be. Can he stick it out to the end, without the comfort of money, the support of his family, or any real encouragement of his friends? Can his faith stand without any scaffolding?

And that is a very real question. As somebody puts it,

The book of Job reminds us of the dangers of believing in a God who rewards piety and virtue with prosperity and success. This is a popular God in America today. Millions of people base their whole belief system on the thought that if you think positively, wear a winning smile, show your religion publicly, tell people how much Jesus has given to you,

then you will be a success and have peace of mind and you will be spared of all painful experiences. But into the midst of this distorted picture comes this incredible story of Job to remind us that life is just not that way.²

Once upon a time, in the land of Uz, there was a man who was wealthier than everybody else. He was deeply religious. He honored God in every way. Yet unknown to him, there's a conversation offstage, and Satan (whose name is really "the Accuser") says to God, "Job is good only because you've given him a lot of good stuff. You've built a fence around him to protect him. Take that away, and he'll crumble."

God says, "Job will be faithful no matter what you take away or what you do to him." So Job loses everything: all of his possessions, his holdings, his servants, even his seven sons and three daughters all die. And then his health is attacked. He is so afflicted that his wife says, "Why don't you curse God and get it over with? How can you hang on? Why do you persist in your integrity?"

And he says, "Lady, you're a fool, and you're talking trash." This is an amazing moment, and honestly it doesn't last long. In a couple of chapters, Job will be moaning, and howling, and arguing with God. Sometimes people will speak of the "patience of Job"; actually if you read the book, he's not patient at all – pretty soon, he will complain to God and say "Where are you?" Job doesn't have a lot of patience; what he has is endurance. And if you listen to what he says today, you can hear why he persists in his integrity. In these two chapters, he speaks only twice, and then very briefly. And it's because of what he says that we are here today.

Here's the first thing Job says: that we enter this world empty-handed, and we leave it empty-handed. And in between, life is a gift. Everything that rightly comes our way is a gift. God is the Giver. For some mysterious reason, sometimes God takes back some of the gifts. But they weren't ours to begin with; they were gifts. In the grace of God, our hands were filled. And the real test in life is not merely what we do with our gifts – whether we can increase them or share them; oh, that's important – but the real test in life is whether we can remember that all we have are gifts, that everything comes from God.

As the Lord says of Job, "he fears God." He has a proper reverence. He knows where the butter from his bread comes from, just as every morning he prays for his daily bread.

And the second thing that Job declares is that God is free. God can do whatever God wishes. In Jewish thinking, Satan is not a very important character. This is one of the few places in the Bible where he is mentioned at all. Jews and Christians believe there is only one God, and that God has no equal. Certainly there are evil forces out there which work against God's purposes. But God is the creator, the ruler, and ultimately the savior. In the words of the psalmist, "the world is firmly established." At the end of Job's long journey, when God finally speaks, God says, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (38:4)

² Bob Bohl, <http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=400>

That raises the question: why does God do this? Or to put it in another way, why does God allow this to happen? And the only responsible answer is to say we don't know. As old Job says to his cranky wife, "***Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?***" If there is only one God who is the source of all life, we can question God's gifts, but chances are we're still going to receive them. Like it or not, here they come; and sometimes, there they go.

God is good. And God is free. Most of our deepest human questions come when the freedom of God makes us question the goodness of God. We can go along for years trusting that God is loving and merciful, and then God might allow something to happen, and we wonder if God really is loving and merciful. The challenge of faith is to hold on to a loving God even when it looks like that isn't the case.

And as Christians, we have another story to lay down alongside this one.

Along came Jesus. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, embraced the outcast, criticized the self-serving. And the world that was made through him nailed him to a tree. He suffered until death, and right before died, he prayed one of the psalms, "My God, my God, why have you withdrawn from me?" His death was the worst thing the world has ever done. Little did we know that his death would cancel all sin, and he lives again to stay with us in our suffering. God is free to allow great suffering to happen. But the great secret of faith is that, behind all of it, God is still good. And to hold onto the goodness of God is to have the integrity of Job.

One of my friends told me about a man named Bob. He was the pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Florida. One Sunday he made a difficult announcement that his congregation wasn't ready for. They knew that his sermons had been increasingly full of stories, and some of them rambled a bit. They also heard him preaching for a number of Sundays on the healing power of God. Bob was six-foot-seven, a former All-American football player, and had been the pastor of that church for fourteen years. On that particular Sunday the congregation filled with tears as he told them he had Alzheimer's Disease and must resign at age fifty-two. Listen to what he said:

"As a Christian I belong completely to Christ. My life is not mine but Christ's. Today my work draws to a close and I can say with Paul, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. At fifty-two, I stand at the finish line in victory, because God set the distance I was to run."

Even at six-foot-seven, Bob was no match for Alzheimer's Disease. But a great power than disease was at work in him. His faith had such integrity that his final word to the congregation was this:

"Pray for Betty, my wife, as I turn guardianship over to her. I will not suffer nearly as much as she will. Pray that I don't inadvertently disgrace our Lord, this church or the people I love. Finally, when I get to that stage where my mind is gone, pray that the Lord will take me home quickly. The glory of being with Christ makes me gasp with joy."³

³ Thanks to Bob Bohl for this story, previously cited source.

Faith like that prompts us to say many things. We can say that a suffering Messiah is a clear sign that God is present in our pain; and that's true. We can say that Christ is risen, and suffering does not have the last word on us; and that's true, too.

But the one thing I want you to remember over the next four weeks as we journey with Job is the one thing that isn't always obvious, and it isn't always clear, yet it is the foundation on which the world has been created, and it is the reason why all of us are included in God's story. Here's what I want you to remember: God is good.

For what does the Psalmist say? "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."