

Calamity, Hope and Courage

a sermon by the Reverend Dr. Susan Veronica Rak
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So, who here has read the Book of Job? I have to say, I thought I knew what it was about and then found out, much to my delight, that I didn't *really* know Job at all until I took a course in seminary - a whole semester just on Job. People thought, how strange, how depressing... but it was anything but.

We read it as scripture, but not as proof of anything. It is a teaching tool - a book in the Wisdom tradition that does not lay out a law or finely detail a theological position. It is one of the books in the Tanakh that invite us to think, to ponder life and its meaning. And here is how it begins:

Once upon a time, in the land of Uz, there was a man named Job. He was a man of perfect integrity, who feared God and avoided evil. He had seven sons and three daughters; seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred donkeys; and also many slaves. He was the richest man in the East. Every year, his sons would hold a great banquet, in the house of each of them in turn, and they would invite their sisters to come feast with them...

One year, on the day when the angels come to testify before the Lord, the Accusing Angel came too.

The Lord said to the Accuser, "Where have you come from?"

The Accuser answered, "From walking here and there on the earth, and looking around."

The Lord said, "Did you notice my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him: a man of perfect integrity, who fears God and avoids evil."

The Accuser said, "Doesn't Job have a good reason for being so good? Haven't you put a hedge around him -- himself and his whole family and everything he has?"

You bless whatever he does, and the land is teeming with his cattle. But just reach out and strike everything he has, and I bet he'll curse you to your face."

The Lord said, "All right: everything he has is in your power. Just don't lay a hand on him."

Like a prologue to a great movie, the story's plot is set in motion. Job, the most prosperous, luckiest man around is delivered the biggest pie-in-the-face ever. He was wiped out in the biggest crash to hit one investor: A bunch of Sabeen bandits run off with all Job's sheep and oxen and asses and camels and donkeys. The hired hands were all slaughtered. His seven sons and three daughters and their families were feasting in a great house when a hurricane hit with such force that all was destroyed and all within perished.

One fell swoop - all gone.

When Job hears the terrible news, he collapses and says

"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there;

the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed by the name of the Lord.

Job accepted this calamity and has not cursed God... this God who on a bet let this happen - or so it seems to us. So far so good, for God at least. Yet the angel who challenged him was not done.

The Lord said to the Accuser, "Where have you come from?"

The Accuser answered, "From walking here and there on the earth, and looking around. "

The Lord said, "Did you notice my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him: a man of perfect integrity, who fears God and avoids evil. He is holding on to his innocence, even after you made me torment him for no reason. "

The Accuser said, "So what? A man will give up everything he has, to save his own skin. But just reach out and strike his flesh and bones, and I bet he'll curse you to your face."

The Lord said, "All right: he is in your power. Just don't kill him."

Now stay with me here... no, this is not a true story. It is an allegory, a teaching tale that is called a "Wisdom Book"... it offers us insight and understanding of our own predicament even as it is wildly fanciful as it is horrific.

(As UU minister Laura M. Horton-Ludwig noted "Not for nothing did Virginia Woolf once say: —*I read the book of Job last night; I don't think God comes out well in it.*")

The Accuser covers Job with terrible sores, from his head to his feet. Job sits down in the dust and picks up a shard of broken pottery and scratches his sores in his misery. This is all very sad, tragic, pathetic. But Job is not alone - he has four friends - sometimes called "comforters" - that show up in the course of the story. The first three - Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Namathite - intend to comfort him and so they came and sat with him for seven days, in silence.

Then, out of his pain and sorrow, Job speaks... he curses the day he was born; wishes the sun would just cease shining or that his heart would just cease beating. He wishes he were dead. Job's wailing, understandable as it may be, disturbs his silent friends. And there is this question hanging there - the elephant in the living room, as it were:

What did Job do to deserve this punishment? For indeed, God rewards the just and the good. Given this level of suffering, Job's act must have been a whopper.

Is it all really his fault?

So the three friends offer their counsel, trying to understand why this happened. One by one they speak, and Job answers each one, lamenting, questions and pointing out where their criticisms lack merit. First comes Eliphaz.

—See, you have instructed many;
you have strengthened the weak hands.

Your words have supported those who were stumbling, and you have made firm the feeble knees.

But now it has come to you, and you are impatient;
it touches you, and you are dismayed.

—Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?

Or where were the upright cut off?

As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same."

Eliphaz starts out trying to support his friend, but then his judgements give way. He sees Job as someone that needs fixing. Just look inside, examine your conscience - there must be something you have done and we'll just fix that and all will be well. God rewards the innocent and punishes the guilty and surely you are innocent, Eliphaz suggests, despite whatever it is you have done.

"You are lucky that God has scolded you, so take his lessons to heart."

Job still does not buy it, and offers a fresh lament of his innocence when Eliphaz is finally done.

"What have I done to deserve this? —Make me understand how I have gone wrong. Tell me: what have I done to deserve this pain?"

Bildad, the second of Job's friends, says:

How long will you go on ranting, filling our ears with trash?

Does God make straightness crooked or turn truth upside down?

Your children must have been evil: he punished them for their crimes. But if you are pure and righteous and pray to God for mercy, surely he will answer your prayer and fulfill your greatest desires.

So this is what you say to a friends, laden with grief and covered in sores? Bildad figures Job must have done something - broke some rule or committed some crime. He is a "law and order" kind of guy. God does not pervert justice, Bildad claims.

Again, Job does not try to refute this friends claims, but addresses God... although he has been scared, terrified by these events, he has not given up. "I am not silenced before darkness," Job says, "before the throne of gloom..." He does not give into Bildad's assumptions and says, "I'm damned if I say you are right; until I perish I shall not turn away from my integrity."

And the third friend, Zophar, has had enough of Job's words [for the passages of Job's protestations and laments are lengthy - windy words, one friend describes them - but they are really quite magnificent...]

[Y]ou say, 'My conduct is pure, and I am clean in God's sight.' But oh, that God would speak, and open his lips to you....

Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.

Zophar, it seems, is not worried about Job's possible weaknesses that prevent him from pleasing God or the rules he might have broken that brought about this punishment. Zophar figures Job just doesn't get it - he is an inferior being and will never understand the ways of God.

Come now, repent of your sins - open your heart to God
wash your hands of their wickedness and banish crime from your door.

With friends like these, who needs enemies?

But can you see, in these outrageous examples, human examples we might see every day of how people try to help, or justify actions, or condone wrong-doing? Is this the kind of comfort we crave from our friends when we're in trouble? Is this the kind of help that gives us courage to overcome hardship?

Hardly.

But perhaps these friends are as scared as Job is by all this horror. Maybe this is how they talk themselves out of the paralysis of that terror. They're scared of what's happening to Job. They're scared it might happen to them. The poet and translator Stephen Mitchell says:

the friends aren't really speak[ing] to Job at all. They speak to their own terror at the thought of Job's innocence.

If they believe in this all-powerful God who controls what happens to every person. And if they think Job really is the good person they've always known him to be, and God does this - what does this say about God?

It's easy for us, who may hold these texts at arms length and with great amounts of skepticism, to make of light of such concerns. They don't neatly fit into the realm of rationality and reason. However, we are often brought low by the tragedies and sadness of life. Sometimes our stiff-upper-lip surrender to the mystery "it-is-what-it-is" attitude gives way to the terror. I know it does, I have seen it, felt it myself. Then what?

So, back to Job...

After all this, a fourth "friend" shows up - Elihu. Now this fellow is a preening, young fool. Actually, he does not pretend to be Job's friend at all, but took up the chance to prattle on about his knowledge of God. He goes on and on about what he knows to be true about God through his precious knowledge,

How often have we tried to solve problems by throwing "expert", in-depth analysis at them? And how does that usually make us feel?

But Job's lamentations are no mere collection of weeping and moaning. He is full of questions, full of doubts and wonderings. He keeps trying to figure it all out. Does that sound familiar at all? It should.

Job, who may seem like a blind fool or a hopeless rationalist who demands to know to some, is very much the humanist we all are. Job represents, as Elizabeth Swados says, the "seduced, duped and tormented innocents" of mythology... Their human counterparts suffered and endured, convinced and transcended in war zones and camps everywhere, including Eastern Europe, Germany, Cambodia, Central America, Somalia..." and countless other places so painful to name.

"An unexpected illness or injury can come off like a bad joke. A mourner can feel like the victim of a conspiracy of invisible forces."

Whether we name it as such or not, whatever that conspiracy is starts to feel like the bet between Satan/the Accuser and God.

The questions linger... why do people suffer? Why do we suffer? Why is life so hard sometimes?

And so it is always a surprise to encounter Job speaking so courageously throughout the text:

"Be quiet now—let me speak; whatever happens will happen....

[God] may kill me, but I won't stop; I will speak the truth, to his face. Listen now to my words; pay attention to what I say.

After each of the friends hold forth, Job continues to ask for justice; he asks to be heard; he asks to understand. This is Job's challenge to God: *explain yourself!*

He doesn't get an answer right away. For pages and pages, his friends berate him and tell him, you're wrong to complain. You're wrong to say you're innocent. You're wrong to say God is unjust. Finally, Job says:

"oh, if only God would hear me,
state his case against me,
let me read his indictment.
I would carry it on my shoulder
or wear it only head like a crown.
i would justify the least of my actions;
i would stand before him like a prince."

Then the unnamable answered Job from within the whirlwind... And this is the amazing part of the book. God doesn't offer an excuse. No spread out palms or shrugged shoulders here. No "Oops, my bad, Job."

Although some interpret this powerful Voice from the Whirlwind a rebuking or boasting, I find it a matter-of-fact statement of the mysteries of the universe, the unfathomable that we can never know. We can glimpse it on a slide under a microscope or in the power of a raging storm or a mysterious picture from one of those amazing telescopes trained on the outer rims of the universe. And the voice in the whirlwind says

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me,
if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?
Have you ever commanded morning or guided dawn to its place -
to hold the corners of the sky and hake off the last few stars?"
And Job is silent... and the Unnamable spoke again
Have you an arm like God,
and can you thunder with a voice like his?...
—Can you draw out Leviathan with a fish-hook, or press down its tongue with a cord?
Can you put a rope in its nose,
or pierce its jaw with a hook?...
...Who can confront it and be safe?
—under the whole heaven, who?

The words that come out of this whirlwind may seem boastful. Maybe this God comes off a bit of a tyrant, a bully, or a raging egomaniac? Well, this is an ancient Creator god, after all. And I don't want to parse this with too fine a knife. This "unnamable" God draws out a magnificent picture of creation and power and fierceness.

Yet Job, in hearing and seeing all this, does not cower or over his face or do any of the fear and trembling associated with being in the Creator's presence. Job says:

I know you can do all things and nothing you wish is impossible,
i have spoken the unspeakable and tried to grasp the infinite.

I had heard you with my ears; but my my eyes have seen you. Therefore I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust.

Some translations [I am using mostly Stephen Mitchell's poetic one here] end this with "Therefore I despise and repent of dust and ashes." Sometimes it is translated as "relent" - like Job is crying "uncle." But I don't think so.

The story wraps up pretty quickly here. Job has been the center of the story, but has watched and commented on it as it unfolded. There is no solid excuse offered for his suffering - it is what it is.

So, too, for the restoration of his fortunes [at the end of the story, he is given back all that he had and more...]. The Accuser [Satan] does not make another appearance... what did this angel think about how things turned out? The Accuser and the Unnamable never do settle up.

And we assume Job gives up his desire for control.

This "clown" Job knows that for some things there are no reasons, there are no faults. Life can be dangerous and arbitrary, and time is not of our making. Job keeps his face to the unknown... what more can he do?

This is the lesson for us... not to know our place [ashes and dust], not to cower in fear of an angry unnamed power. But to face the unknown. to understand with the intellect, and be able to see life before us in all its terrible beauty and shattering hurt, and still hold our hearts open.

Job says that after all this, he perhaps spoke without understanding... and what he understood is that there is nothing to understand.

In all this, the Creator, unnamable god has given him insight, revealed the magnificence and majesty of the universe - galaxies, stars, creatures great and small, the essence of life. Job stands in awe. Yet through it all, Job spoke the truth as he saw it, from his knowledge. He held his integrity in the face of brutal questioning.

We come away from Job not knowing "why bad things happen", but rather how we can be human in a world filled with the good and the terrible.

This, in itself, is a marveling and a wonder.

Amen and blessed be.