

Job: The Story for the Ages (Act One) - Job 1:1; 2:1-10

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/job-a-story-for-the-ages-act-1

When I was in middle school, my family was returning from a trip to St. Louis. It was late at night, and we were driving in some unfamiliar territory, looking for the ramp onto the four-lane that would take us home. My dad saw the sign indicating our on-ramp was coming up, and not long after that sign, he saw the beginning of a road. Much to his surprise, after he was already committed to the turn, he could see it was a nearly 75-degree turn onto a side road, not a slowly merging on-ramp onto the four-lane. In that second, Dad realized he had two choices – either try to make the turn at our current speed, most likely, rolling the vehicle, or go straight ahead into the dark. We went straight, and for what seemed like five minutes but was more like five seconds, we were a scene from *Dukes of Hazard*, airborne, suspended in time. No yee-haws were coming from this car.

In those five seconds of flight, there were three different reactions from the four people inside the car. I'll not mention names to protect the parties involved. One person screamed. Two individuals said nothing, internally processing with amazement and shock all that was happening. And one individual was unbuckling their seatbelt midair, ready to jump to safety.

We landed down in a ravine below the road we had been on, and after a bit of bounce left to right, Dad finally got the car stopped, and we sat there stunned. *What just happened?* Now, the next big challenge came in getting out of the ravine and back up to the road. Dad drove up at a slight angle while my sister and I leaned hard to the left, certain the car would roll down the ravine. To this day, we love reminiscing about that unplanned family adventure. Chevy Chase has nothing on us.

We often wonder what it looked like to other cars --- either the sudden elevation and then disappearance of taillights as we took and then disappeared into the ravine or the sudden appearance of headlights as we popped up out of nowhere onto the road. But mostly, we laugh about our different responses when life sends us over the edge.

I wonder ... what would your response be if you suddenly found yourself airborne when you expected smooth roads? What would your reaction be if life was going smoothly and, out of nowhere and for no reason, it sent you straight over the edge?

We may think we know how we'll react, but we don't know until we're suspended in the air of hard times. But God was confident what one man's response would be when life took an unexpected turn. That man's name was Job.

The first chapter of Job describes him as "a man honest inside and out, a man of his word, who was devoted to God and hated evil with a passion." The author spends intentional time telling

us two very important things about Job. Job was incredibly blessed with wealth, privilege, and family. And Job was exceptionally pious or devout in his faith. He was a dad who got up each morning to offer a sacrifice on behalf of his sons and daughters just in case, in their ignorance, they had sinned the night before. Job's blessings and devotion to God are so exaggerated above the average everyday human; it is clear these qualities of Job are essential to the story.

The first two chapters of the book of Job switch back and forth between two scenes – the earthly scene and the heavenly scene. After we are introduced to the blessed and blameless Job, the earthly scene ends, and the lights come up in the heavenly realm with an assembly of spiritual beings or dignitaries gathered before the LORD. One of those in attendance is Satan or, in Hebrew, "ha-sa-tan." Satan is not a name here, nor is it the one we often refer to as Satan or the evil one. Instead, it is a title – the title of Accuser or adversary. In the story of Job, satan serves as the prosecuting attorney bent on our ruin and discrediting God.

God directs the Accuser's attention to Job in their exchange, declaring him as his righteous and blameless servant. The Accuser agrees. But then satan asks the critical question: Is Job devoted and blameless because he loves God, or is it because God has given Job a comfortable life, protecting him and blessing him? The Accuser puts all his money on the latter, and that if these blessings were removed, if Job's life suddenly and unexpectedly went airborne, Job would curse God. This is the accusation of the adversary – Job doesn't really serve you, God. Job serves himself and what he gets from you. Remove your blessings, and let's see what happens. Cue dramatic music.

This is a pivotal moment in the story. The Accuser incites God, questioning Job's motive for loyalty, and God agrees to the test. God grants permission to Satan to strike all Job has but with the limit; he cannot touch Job himself. With this permission and only because of this permission from God, the Accuser goes to work.

The scene shifts back to earth as Job endures wave after wave of heart-crushing news from messengers. The scripture says three times, "while he was speaking ..." Meaning while the first messenger was delivering bad news, another messenger arrived with more bad news before the messenger even finished. Wave after wave. Job is stripped of his fortune and all his possessions. All his livestock and wealth are destroyed, his servants are killed. And while that messenger was still speaking, and the room was filled with wailing and disbelief, another messenger came with the final blow, a great wind blew in and stole the lives of all ten of your children, Job. These children you prayed for and offered sacrifices for each morning are now gone.

The unrelenting waves of suffering pounded Job. Drowning in a sea of pain, Job could barely catch his breath. Yet, chapter 1 vs 22 tells us that *in all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing.*

In our text today, in chapter 2, the story picks up again in the heavenly realm, and it is a repeat of the first heavenly scene in many ways. The beings arrive before God. God asks the Accuser

where he's been. The Accuser responds he has been going to and fro on the earth. God once again brings up his servant, Job, and this time says, "He STILL persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason."

But the Accuser is not ready to accept defeat. He has a defense. Skin for Skin, he says! Job only maintained his integrity, his righteousness because nothing happened to him directly, just to those around him. Everyone knows that when it comes to our health, our physical pain, we will cave. Because you, God, said I couldn't touch him, well, that is why he did not blame you in the end. So, God says, "OK. Test him again. This time you may touch Job, but you cannot kill him. You must spare his life."

The curtain opens again back on earth as the Accuser inflicts Job with painful boils from head to toe. Today's text ends with Job sitting upon a pile of ashes outside the city, scraping his wounds with a broken piece of pottery. His wife arrives, weighed down by their shared grief. She has experienced it all with him up to this point. The loss of their wealth and status, the loss of their children. Now, she watches her husband in pain and misery and voices what the Accuser has been betting on this whole time "*Why persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.*"

But Job, in his immense pain, remains righteous, declaring, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this, Job did not sin with his lips. Job did not sin with his lips. The final phrase makes me pause. It feels a bit like when someone says, "I didn't lie. I just didn't tell you everything." Job did not sin ... with his lips, but is there hesitation in his mind or heart? Are these painful tests beginning to wear on his devotion? Is this some foreshadowing of some hard conversations to come between God and Job? Perhaps. You'll have to keep listening to the rest of this series.

Let's be honest ... these first two-and-half chapters of Job are difficult. Pastor J.S. Randolph Harris says, "*The book of Job is a complex work, exploring the intricate intersection of divine sovereignty, human faith, and innocent suffering. It is also a troubling work – troubling for the unsettling questions it poses to a neatly arranged, tidy faith.*"ⁱ

While we are in the know to the heavenly (and disturbing) conversations between God and the Accuser, Job is not. Job never learns of the reason for his great suffering. He maintains his innocence to the end, and God continually affirms his integrity. In a culture like ours that highly values cause and effect, the story of Job is troubling. We prefer answers to the mystery. We prefer clear rules and expect everyone, including God, to play by these rules. But God does not.

Countless people among us and around us in the world find themselves beside Job in the heap of ashes, in pain, with questions. Parents lose children. Hurricanes flood communities already drowning in waves of hardship. Disease and cancer don't pass over the houses of the faithful. Disaster, disease, and death rain down on the just and unjust alike. If God is so good, why do bad things happen to good people, is a question repeated through the ages. To ask the question "WHY GOD" is not evidence of weak faith but rather a result of bold faith and invested faith. God invites the questions, welcomes the questions.

But what if we don't like or even receive an answer, like Job?

Author and pastor Eugene Peterson wrote, "One of the surprises as we get older, however, is that we come to see that there is no real correlation between the amount of wrong we commit and the amount of pain we experience. An even larger surprise is that there is often something quite the opposite: We do right and get knocked down. We do the best we are capable of doing, and just as we are reaching out to receive our reward we are hit from the blindside and sent reeling. This is the suffering that first bewilders and then outrages us. This is the kind of suffering that bewildered and outraged Job, for Job was doing everything right when suddenly everything went wrong. And it is this kind of suffering to which Job gives voice when he protests to God."ⁱⁱ

I have had more than one conversation with individuals going through tough times where they ask, "Why is God doing this to me?" "What have I done?" I, too, have been tempted to box God into this transactional way of thinking at times. It is a common and unfortunate belief in Christianity today as we note the pervasiveness of the prosperity gospel worldwide. Your blessings are a reward from God, and if you are not blessed by the world's standards, then indeed you have done something wrong to bring this upon yourself. Just this past week, I heard the story of a man whose two-year-old daughter died from a chromosomal defect at birth. And a pastor's chosen words of comfort to this grieving father was this question, "What sin is in your life that caused this?"

The story of Job challenges this transactional view we have of God. Job's experience does not support it. The author was clear to set the stage for us from the beginning – Job was beyond reproach, blameless before God, and yet great, unimaginable suffering rains down on him from above.

Paul Capetz, professor of historical theology at United Theological Seminary, summarizes it this way, "*In the world as designed by God, suffering is not always the consequence of one's sin, and virtue does not always entail happiness.*"ⁱⁱⁱ

This may frustrate and anger some. If you've been taught a transactional relationship with God, you might feel duped and wonder what's the point of it all.

Perhaps the more pressing question for us to consider is not why there is suffering but why we choose to love, serve, and worship God. When we are faced with the mystery of suffering, when airborne in the mess of life, when life doesn't play by the rules, when blessings are not promised nor received, even while we voice our protest to God over the injustice of it all, will we still endure with God?

The Accuser is betting we won't. I wonder what we would say.

As God's Spirit helps us ponder this question, there is one sure thing. God's love for and presence with us remains regardless of our answer. At no time in Job's journey – not in the

suffering nor the grieving, not in the questions nor the anger – did God abandon Job. Why? Because our relationship with God is not transactional. Hear this: God's faithfulness to us is not conditional on our faithfulness to God. In one breath, we cry in frustration that we don't get what we think we deserve, and in another breath, we cry in gratitude that we don't get what we think we deserve. This is the divine mystery and mercy of God.

While many are tempted to end the story here, the story of Job is far from over. This is simply an intermission until next Sunday. There are still 40 more chapters with rich poetry and lessons on suffering and the sovereignty of God. Job is an invitation not to run from hard or uncomfortable questions or emotions but instead to lean in with God. God not only can handle it, but God also welcomes it. This is what it means to endure with God. My friend, if you are angry with God, if you feel like the Accuser has had free rein in your life, if God has felt hidden from you, if you've ever asked the question of why there is suffering if God is a such a good God, you are not alone. This story is for you and me.

The back page of the Playbill is for all of us to keep the conversation going. It's meant to stir our thoughts, to lead us toward a deeper faith. Share these questions and conversations with your friends and neighbors. Sit in the questions with God. And don't miss the next three Sundays as our interim pastor, Keith Herron, walks us through the rest of this fascinating and challenging story. Unlike the road my family took unexpectedly, there is still much more runway in this conversation.

ⁱ *Daily Feast: Meditations from Feasting on the Word: Year B*". Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, 485.

ⁱⁱ Peterson, Eugene H. (2011-03-11). *The Message Numbered Edition Hardback* (Kindle Locations 22152-22157). Navpress. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Daily Feast*, 484.