

Rediscovering the Goodness of God
Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Matthew 6:25-33
November 22, 2009

Today we conclude a series on the book of Job. Last summer as I was planning worship themes for the next few months, I decided to preach through Job, something I have avoided in my 24 years of ministry! I figured that I should be ready to take on the challenge. Have I ever been humbled! I feel like Job when God finally spoke to him as we heard last Sunday, “Who are you to think that you, of all people, could finally discern the definitive message of the most ambiguous, mysterious wisdom book in the Bible? For centuries rabbis, priests, scholars, saints, and lay people have studied and prayed the words of Job, uncovering a multitude of meanings and mysteries, and yet you think you can figure it out once and for all time?” I have been humbled, put in my place as merely a semblance of dust and ashes. I repent, I have changed my mind; I will not be the one to uncover the ultimate meaning of the book of Job! I am a mere human. God is the Almighty Creator, the Source of Life, the Fount of Wisdom. I will defer to the mysterious guidance of the Holy Spirit in seeking to understand the book of Job and any other divine scripture.

As we prepare to close the book today, let’s review the story. The Adversary is a member of God’s cabinet who scouts out people who are disloyal to God. God brags about the loyal faith of Job and is willing to bet that Job’s love for God is not based upon any expectation of reward. The Adversary tests Job in order to see if he fears God for nothing. The major question asked by the book is, “Is my love for God unconditional, or do I expect something in return for my love?”

In great catastrophes Job loses his livestock and children. Eventually Job himself is stricken with a skin disease from head to toe. His becomes a miserable existence. Job’s friends come to convince him that he has done something terribly wrong in order to deserve such suffering. Job argues with them that he has committed no wrong. Job argues with God, for his anguish is not merited. He cannot make sense of his suffering in the framework of the reward and punishment theology of his culture. He has not done wrong comparable to the punishment inflicted upon him. Job’s lament to God is an expression of his love for God in spite of his agony. Job feels abandoned by God. Even more than release from his pain, Job deeply desires God. He begs not to be alienated by God, but to experience God’s presence in the midst of his pain.

Finally God responds to Job’s lament. God directly reminds Job that Job is not the center of the universe. He calls upon Job to shift his perspective and to put God at the center of the universe. God is far greater than anything humans can imagine or create, and yet God cares for each and every creature in its uniqueness.

Having been put in his place by God's majestic message, Job is humbled. Job says, "I'm convinced: You can do anything and everything. Nothing and no one can upset your plans" (*The Message*). God has not explained Job's suffering, yet God has not abandoned Job. Job has held out for a word from the divine heart, and although it does not fit his expectations, this is exactly what he receives. When he finally stops his complaint and listens to God, he hears from God. It is a life-changing experience of God's presence. Job confesses that he used to live by "rumors" of God, by what his religious tradition taught and what he heard from others. Now Job has a direct and personal experience of God's presence, even in the depths of his darkest night. Now Job knows God firsthand with his own eyes and ears. Job will no longer attempt to argue with God.

Job's response is very ambiguous, leaving scholars speculating without certainty about its meaning. Job may be acknowledging that his legal model of a world of justice and fairness is inadequate. Earlier he could only attribute the pain and sorrows of the human condition to the arbitrariness and perhaps the hostility of God. Now he recognizes that his understanding has been limited. The vulnerabilities of human existence are not the punishment of a loving Creator. Within creation there are chaotic forces world which have been restrained but not fully eliminated. In this sense, he repents, or has a change of mind and understanding regarding the human condition and the nature of God.ⁱ

Job's quest for justice is met by a personal encounter with God, whose presence surpasses justice. This doesn't appear to be a just compensation for Job's excruciating losses, but the message is that a model of justice is not God's mode of operation. God's role is to be a compassionate caregiver. Compassion supersedes justice.

We see this in many of the gospel stories of Jesus' ministry. The religious leaders bring to Jesus a woman caught in adultery. According to the commandments, such a woman should be stoned. Jesus responds, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." One by one, her accusers walk away, unable to condemn her because they, too, are sinners. (John 8:1-11) Compassion supersedes justice.

In the parable of the prodigal son, the youngest son demands his inheritance from his father and squanders it in a self-indulgent lifestyle. He returns home destitute, seeking to be a servant to this father. In an act of grace, his father offers him a royal homecoming, much to the chagrin of the elder, loyal, faithful, steadfast son. (Luke 15:11-32) Compassion supersedes justice.

Justice is good, but in God's realm generosity, liberality, compassion, and gratuitous love triumph. The bad news is that we do not get what we deserve. The good news is that we do not get what we deserve. God is not fair, God is gracious.

We want protection, justice, and assurance. “The only thing that can save us is the embrace of the Other.” “Job meant to hold on for justice. Instead, ‘I am with you always’ turned out to be enough.”ⁱⁱ

This is the same God who spoke to Moses in the burning bush, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians” (Exodus 3:7-8a). God doesn’t cause our sufferings, but God comes to share them with us. God offers us solidarity in the midst of our pain. This is the goodness of God which Job can reclaim. This is the transformation Job experiences from a compassionate God. God suffers with God’s people and in that solidarity there is healing and love.

God also desires that we experience such compassion from our human companions in the journey of life. In passages we did not read from this last chapter, God commissions Job to pray for those friends who had accused him of being a sinner. Job is to serve as an intermediary reconciling his friends with his rediscovered God. They failed miserably in communicating the compassionate nature of God to their friend in his hour of distress. In fact, they misrepresented the Divine. Job is to pray for them, that their understanding of God might be transformed, as was his.

Job has learned that God’s power of creation and recreation is stronger than the power of the chaotic. In spite of the reality of pain and loss, God’s ability to create and renew will not be thwarted. This is the good news that we need to hear from one another. We need not bear our pain alone, for there is a whole living creation to absorb it with us. As a philosopher writes, “When the human... surrenders his pride of place and learns to bear the shared pain, he can begin to understand the pain that cannot be avoided as a gift which teaches compassion and opens understanding....It opens him to receive, in empathy, the gift of the other, not in censure but in gratitude and love.”

One woman grew in her understanding of the need for compassionate companions in her season of suffering. Sherri Mandell is an American-born Jew raising her family in Israel. Her 13 year old son Koby was killed by Palestinians in a brutal, random, and vicious act of terrorism. Sherri wrote of the experience and the aftermath in a book called *The Blessing of a Broken Heart*.

“Less than a year after our son was killed, my husband and I marked our wedding anniversary by going out to dinner. I can’t say we celebrated because we were too sad. When we walked into the restaurant, the smiling waitress with her shiny black hair had a spirit of effervescence I could only admire. I thought to myself, ‘She has no idea of the pain I’m living with, the weight I carry.’

“As my husband and I ate our meal, we realized that this restaurant was a perfect place to commemorate what would be Koby’s upcoming 15th birthday. We

wanted to take 15 poor or disadvantaged people out to dinner to mark Koby's birthday.... We spoke to the manager about our plans. He said that he volunteered at a nearby center that helped teens from poor, broken families, and he thought that the teenagers would appreciate going out with us.

"We thanked the manager for his suggestion. Before he walked away, my husband said, 'Do you know the Goodman family? They live around here, and lost their 16-year-old son in an accident. We went to the shiva, and I wanted to know how they're doing.' The manager then startled us when he told us, 'You can ask them yourself. Your waitress is their daughter.'

"I looked at her, at her beauty and her spirit, and I thought, 'You never know what's going on inside a person.' When she came over to our table, we told her of our loss, and she shared her own. As we spoke, I realized how much of life is hidden. We don't see what's inside of people. As we shared our feelings, my husband and I felt less isolated. The pain lifted for a moment. Healing may occur when we reveal what is hidden inside of us. It brings us closer to others."ⁱⁱⁱ

Amidst the multiple mysteries within the book of Job, Job discerns that God does not operate on a system of merit and demerit, of reward and punishment. Life is not always just or fair, but that is not the work of God. God's compassion surpasses justice and injustice. God sees the suffering of God's people and responds with a caring presence. God calls us to bear one another's burdens, to offer empathy to one another and to receive it in our own time of need.

The author of our next hymn, "Now Thank We All Our God," Martin Rinkart, was a Lutheran pastor in Germany during the Thirty Years War. Throughout the war years several waves of deadly pestilence, death and destruction swept the city as various armies marched through town. Rinkart's home served as a refuge for the afflicted victims. He was the only remaining pastor at the time. Rinkart assisted refugees, cared for the sick and dying, and conducted thousands of funerals, including one for his wife. The hymn began as a family prayer before meals but became a national hymn of thanksgiving in the years following the war.

Given the context in which this hymn was written, we marvel at the depth of faith it proclaims. The first verse is an expression of gratitude for God's countless gifts of love. The second verse is a petition for God's compassionate presence, guiding us when perplexed and freeing us from all ills. The third verse is a doxology of praise to the one eternal God. This hymn is a testament to the belief that God's compassion supersedes justice. Let us join in solidarity with all who suffer, expressing our gratitude and invoking the compassionate presence of God.

ⁱ Carol A. Newsom, Commentary on The Book of Job, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 629.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Beyond Justice*, Chautauqua Institute, 1999, Quoted in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. XIV, No. 6, October 2003, p. 28.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted by Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt, *God, Prayer, and Spirituality: A Collection of Sermons* (Jay Street Publishers). Quoted by Martin E. Marty, *Context: Martin E. Marty on Religion and Culture*, November 2009, Part A, Vol. 41, No. 11.

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