



“The Trickiest Question of All”

Text: Job 1:1-22

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I went back and checked the record and it seems that I have never - in thirty-one years of ministry - or even before - I have never preached a sermon on any portion of the Book of Job. For some reason that appears questionable and borderline ridiculous, I decided to preach on this incredibly difficult book of the Old Testament. I must not have had enough coffee that morning.

A couple of things about the Book of Job, by way of introduction.

We know very little about why, where, when, or by whom this story was written. It is a story - it is not history. The person Job never existed and none of what we read ever happened in the way we read it.

The story has more twists and turns than a roller-coaster. The question of why suffering exists is at the heart of the story. There is a cast of more than interesting characters. There is destruction, death, and so much more. The latter chapters of the book contain a host of questions, presented in such poetic beauty that they cannot help but move us.

But the story has some significant problems. Virginia Woolf spoke for many readers of Job when she wrote to a friend: “I read the book of Job last night. I don’t think God comes out of it well.” God allows the suffering of Job and seems unmoved by Job’s sufferings. That’s a problem.

Then there’s the problem of Satan. Now, we need to clean up this translation problem. Satan, in Hebrew, means “accuser” or even “the adversary.” In the story of Job, *satan* carries with it the prefix *ha*, which is the definite article, “the.” If we were reading it literally, we would read “the satan” or “the accuser.” Try to get the Miltonian idea of a devil out of your mind when you read Job. The Satan appears to be one of the heavenly beings whose job it is to accuse mortal beings of sin and corruption.

We could spend weeks on this story - and maybe sometime in the future we will - but for today, we are only considering the opening of the story - the first chapter. And in that consideration, we will ask "the trickiest question of all."

So, you have to buy into the premise of the story. The story begins with the introduction of the protagonist - Job. Job is described as "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil." He had seven sons and three daughters, and (in a word) was loaded. He had everything he would ever need and more. There were trust funds for the kids, people to wait on him hand and foot - Job wanted for nothing.

But Job was also a deeply faithful man. His children were known to enjoy good parties - parties that would last for days. When the parties came to their end, Job would rise early in the morning and offer sacrifices, just in case his children - in their revelries - had sinned and offended God. That is Job.

Scene change.

Now we are in the heavenly court. The heavenly beings come before God and among them is The Accuser. God strikes up a conversation. "Where have you been?" "Well, I've been traveling the earth," says The Accuser, with the intention that it was an information gathering mission. "Did you run into my servant Job?" God asks. "Job is one of the very best."

"Of course he's one of the best," says The Accuser. "You've given him everything. You've coddled him and sheltered him. You've nearly packaged him in bubble-wrap. But, if you took away all that stuff, he'd drop you like a hot rock."

"Really?" says God. "Would you like to make a wager?"

"Done," says The Accuser.

"Here's the condition," God says. "Everything Job calls his own is now under your control. You can do as you please with all of it. But you cannot touch or harm Job."

"Agreed," says The Accuser.

End of the scene.

Now we are in Job's house. A messenger arrives.

The messenger tells Job that a band of nomads called the Sabeans (not from Alabama) conducted a raid that killed all of the oxen and donkeys and the field hands who were using them to plow. At that moment, another messenger runs into the house with news that fire from heaven fell and burned up all the sheep and the shepherds. Another messenger runs in to announce that the Chaldeans have conducted a raid, stealing all of Job's camels and killing all the camel-keepers. And then, another messenger rushes in to say that a desert wind has knocked down the tent where Job's children were feasting, killing all of Job's children.

You will never have as bad a day as Job had. Give thanks!

Job stands to his feet, tore his robe in a sign of mourning - a custom still observed among some Jews - shaved his head (which was a sign of mourning and loss) - fell face down on the ground and worshiped God. Job says, "Naked I came from Mother Earth and naked I shall return to her. The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

And the scene concludes with the narrator telling us: "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong-doing." Job never blamed God. Job never questioned God. Job never cried out to God in anger or rage.

And the opening to the story of Job is concluded.

The very opening of the story prompts a slew of questions.

"What kind of God allows a faithful follower to suffer such devastation?" "Why do disasters happen? Are they some kind of test?" "Why does Job believe so completely in God and why doesn't Job abandon God when disaster comes?" "Do human beings believe in and serve God because of what they receive from God?" Questions pour from the story and we've only heard the introduction.

But, perhaps there is another question that needs to be asked. It's a tricky question. So often, whenever we hear about the story of Job, the question is asked, "Does Job have faith in God?" You can absolutely approach the story in that manner. The story begins with The Accuser asking that essential question.

Still, in the conversation between God and The Accuser, another question stands in the background. As God and The Accuser speak and discuss Job, the question seems to be "Does God have faith in Job?" Does God know Job well enough to know that Job will not abandon God, reject God, and turn away from God?

God is basically making a bet with The Accuser. The Accuser puts God in a no-win situation with his question: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" "Does Job believe in God because of all the stuff? If you take it all away, will Job still love you?" If God *refuses* The Accuser's wager, it looks as if God accepts the idea that Job loves God because of all his stuff. If God *accepts* The Accuser's wager, it will look as if God is heartless and merciless.

So, God considers - mulls over - contemplates the faith of Job. Will Job abandon faith in the face of calamity? Or will Job remain faithful to God and offer God worship and praise?

The question is, "Does God have faith in Job?"

Ok, this is where it gets a little uncomfortable. If we ask that question of Job, then it is a question we need to ask ourselves. This is where it gets a little uncomfortable. If God were betting against The Accuser, would God place the bet on you? On me?

Does God trust in us? Are we living examples of who God is and what God is all about? Do we pursue justice, which is love in action? Do we practice compassion, which is love made visible? Do we live humbly with God and our neighbors? Does God have faith in us?

Are we willing to take risks for those who are treated unfairly and unjustly? Are we less interested in our own comforts and more interested in seeing that all people have what they need? Are we willing to practice a generosity that is God-inspired, and live a little more simply and help others simply live? Does God believe we are that kind of a people?

Are we willing to speak the truth and demand that the truth be spoken? Do we live up to the promises we make, or are we lured away by the siren voices that tempt and seduce us? Are we faithful to our family and friends, as God is faithful to us? Do we accept and welcome those we meet, or do we harbor prejudice and hatred toward some? Does God have faith in us?

That is the trickiest question of all. If asked if we have faith in God - if we trust God in all the circumstances of life - we would probably answer "yes," even if there are times that faith and trust is a little shaky. We know we're not always as trusting and confident when it comes to God as we could be. We know there are times when faith lags and our confidence in God droops. We know that and we trust that God forgives those lapses.

But, when you turn the question around and ask, "Does God have faith in me? In us?" - well, it gets a little more real. Would God bet the future of the planet on us? Would God wager all that God is, was, and ever will be, on our faithfulness and trust? Does God have faith in us?

In spite of every reason to believe otherwise, I think the answer is "yes." I think God knows that we are capable of being the people God calls us to be, to live as God calls us to live, and to love as God loves. I truly believe that. I think God believes in us, even when we fail to meet the mark that God has set. God believes in us and when we don't live up to that trust, God forgives and calls us to get back to it.

If you're a little concerned about how much you are deserving of God's trust, make some changes. If you already know where those changes need to happen, get on with it. If you will need some help and encouragement, that's why we're here.

But the good news for today is this: God has faith in us! For now and evermore. Amen.