

Church of All Nations

Sermon on Book of Job October 20, 2024

Our lectionary spends 4 weeks in the book of Job, with edited highlights on offer each Sunday. Today we are up to week 3 so unless you have been following the story, which we here at CAN have not been doing it is all going to be a bit disjointed. Mostly for that reason today I have fallen for the trap of preaching on a whole book in one sermon.

The book is best read as an extended reflection on the problem of suffering. It has elements of cartoonish irony and humour. Cartoonish not in the sense of childish but in the sense that in the cartoon world one kid who was bullied can go pump some iron and then take on and give a solid thrashing to the gang of ten bullies who tormented him. An anvil can be dropped by the Road Runner from a cliff onto the head of the Wily Coyote and he will get up a bit dazed but soon ready for the next round of the endless competition. And Job's family can be whisked away and then replaced with interest at the end of the book. It is not history OK? Not to say it does not contain profound truth as it struggles with the greatest challenge to belief in God - suffering, and specifically so called innocent suffering.

First year Theology or Philosophy 101 courses have a subject sometimes called "Theodicy" and usually starts the course by pointing out that you can have any two of these three statements but not all of them. 1/ God is all powerful. 2/ God is all loving 3/ There is unwarranted suffering.

Which one are you going to drop?

One of the images seared into my memory comes from my first couple of years in ministry and is of a distressed father carrying the tiny white coffin of his 6 day old son under his arm as he and his partner walked from the hearse to the graveside for me to conduct the baby's funeral. I can still see it... that coffin... so tiny, so white as it swayed against the movement and the darkness of the father's jacket. And do you know one of the things I feared most at that time? ... that I thought I might be asked by those parents why their 6 day old son died. Why did God not answer their anguished prayers? And now all these years later another thing scares me... that if they had of asked me back then I just might have attempted an answer. And anything I said that tried to "explain" or "make sense" of that tragic loss would be a violation of... well just about everything I have come to appreciate about God, life, death and grace.

Mostly readers focus on the introduction to the figure of Job and the set up of the plot in the first couple of chapters and skim through the extended (and to be honest long winded), speeches in the body of the book, and pick it up again in the final few chapters when at long last God makes an appearances and more long speeches.

Many of us will know the plot line. Job is a wealthy devout man but Satan suggests to God that the only reason he is devout is because of his good fortune. Remove all

the trappings and you will soon discover that Job is not so faithful or willing to honour God. Satan declares to God, "Job does not love you, on the contrary he loves himself and the stuff (blessings) he gets from you, God. Who would not say Oh God I love you when you say to him, Oh thank, here have a house, Oh God you are so majestic, Thank you Job, here have a herd of cattle". Job's faith is not "disinterested"; it is in his interest to have faith. Put him in the furnace however and we will see what emerges. Satan is given permission to destroy the accoutrements in the life of Job, meaning his family, livestock and livelihood but not Job himself. And so the onslaught commences. Job is reduced to sitting on a pile of ashes scraping at the sores on his body with a piece of broken pottery. Job becomes "every person" a representative of every person who has ever felt violated and raged from the dung heap at the unfairness of life

Job has some friends who buy into the doctrine that suffering is always the result of sin and so they urge Job to examine himself honestly so as to be able to confess the sin that must lie, perhaps even thus far unexamined, in his soul. They urge Job to "fess up" and cop his just punishment.

These friends hold to the prevailing mechanistic view of life. Which Job up to this point has also subscribed to. Do the right thing and you will do all right. Wander off the straight and narrow and bad things will happen to you. It assumes there is a moral basis to life that is deeply embedded and it is inviolable. It is the basis of Wisdom literature in the Bible - Proverbs is probably the best example. At its best it gives us a clear world view to enact in our lives but at its worst it can be unimaginative and judgemental when things go awry in our lives and we are left floundering for explanations and comfort. For instance I heard a story (likely highly embellished for the use of preachers) that after the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps a high ranking German official was taken to the camps to be confronted with the horrors of how the Nazis had treated the prisoners. Rather than accept the reality of the evil of innocent suffering the person commented, "These must have been very wicked people to have this done to them".

It goes without saying that this mechanistic mentality works best when things are going well for you. Human nature being what it is we will invariably believe that our good fortune is a result of our hard work, innate intelligence, faithful spirit, and generous nature.

I was in my office late last week when the bell rang and a guy is there as I open the door he says energetically Can I see you Pastor. I vaguely recall seeing him before. Come in I say, having a pretty good idea where this conversation is heading.

We go into my office, Pastor can you help me? I need to spend a night in a backpackers. I am living in my car and haven't had a shower for ages. Can you give me \$40 for a back packers?

No, I say we can't give out money. But you can have a shower here.

He wasn't especially interested in that. Just \$40 Pastor. No we don't give out cash. Well can you put petrol in my car then. Its empty. I need petrol.

He was most insistent and I was vulnerable as during the week I had been preparing a sermon on the Rich Young Ruler and the admonition to sell all you have and give to the poor and come and follow me. Hmmm

Ok you win, I will put petrol in your car, which turned out to be a Mercedes Benz van which when I enquired he said his Dad had bought him.

So I go into the petrol station and as I am paying the attendant gives me a scratchy/peely. And I think to myself, you know if the world is a just place I am going to win something here. Karma, what goes around comes around.

And the scratchy says ... you are a winner. And I won a cup of coffee and a dodgy sermon illustration

Every religion or philosophy needs to deal with the Big question of human suffering. Especially undeserved suffering or “innocent suffering” which is the major sticking point in any discussion of the problem of the existence of God and evil. It is kind of hard to deny the existence of unwarranted suffering. There are any number of millions of examples.

And yet contrary to accepted wisdom of the day Job maintains his innocence. “... until I die I will not put away my integrity from me. I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days” (27:5-6)

Job will not bargain or do a plea deal. He wants total acquittal. Job wants to have his day in court. He wants to intercede on his behalf. He’s utterly convinced that if he can plead his case to God, God will hear him, that he will be vindicated. But far from Job being able to plead his case before God in the divine courtroom Job cannot even locate God. “Look! I walk forward, but no God! Backward, but I cannot see God. God hides on the left so I cannot grasp God; God turns right so I cannot perceive God” (Jb 23:8-9)! Parts of Job read like a reversal of Psalm 139, which affirms the psalmist’s belief that escaping the presence of God is impossible “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” 139:7. Job 23:8-9, in contrast, laments that Yahweh “is not there... I cannot perceive him... I cannot behold him... I cannot see him.” A true experience of the Dark Night of the Soul.

Thus Job is trapped in a Kafkaesque dystopian nightmare that he cannot awaken from, nor find any release nor even any point of reference that will enable him to find a single foothold upon which to stand. His world careers off course and nothing and no-one will stand with him. Not his friends, now not even the God that he had continued to pin his trust upon. He can’t argue his case before Yahweh because Yahweh is nowhere to be found.

By now Job is struggling with his commitment to a mechanistic worldview. Job holds two things that could not be held together. His own innocence and the justice of God. Job goes so far as to allow his cognitive dissonance to challenge the justice of God because God knows first hand of his own innocence. Because God is not following the dictates of a mechanistic worldview, God must be held accountable.

Job would ask God, if he could find him, why have YOU done this to me? After all, I played by the rules, I did the right things, I have been a good person. You, God, have not played fair. What's going on up there? I need to know!!

What an incredible model tucked deeply into our sacred text! Job shows us that saying hard and true things and asking real questions is part of being in relationship to God. They are not simply tolerated; they keep the lines of communication open when every other avenue is closed off.

In lament, the despairing person “says it aloud” to God, and thus holds on to God even in the depths of despair. And in that holding on, something like hope is made possible. Job dwells in the depths of despair, but in the midst of that despair he addresses God; he demands that God answer him; he holds on to God; and in that holding on, a fierce hope is indeed born:

“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another” (Job 19:25-27a).

Wendell Berry writes of the relationship between speech and hope: “The distinguishing characteristic of absolute despair is silence. There is a world of difference between the person who, believing that there is no use, says so to himself (themselves) or to no one, and the person who says it aloud to someone else. A person who marks his (their) trail into despair remembers hope — and thus has hope, even if only a little.”

Bad things don't happen to us because we've deserved them. As Jesus says, “the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike.” (Matthew 5:45) But, when horrific things happen to us, it also isn't the case that we've been wronged by God. Every time life collapses in front of us and we're left sitting in the dust, it isn't time to blame ourselves or blame God. Most of the time, there is no one to blame. No one is found at fault. That is, at its core, what the Book of Job is about.

Today, after chapters of Job demanding that God appear and give an explanation of just what is going on in God's world, God actually does make an appearance. God it must be said is a tad sarcastic and seems to take delight in proclaiming to Job, “You are not God and I am. ”

But to the dissatisfaction of generations of bible readers since, God doesn't really give an explanation of why there is suffering in the world. A rough summary of what God says would be that we have a very limited capacity to see or understand the big picture complexities of the world, so we are never likely to be able to make sense of the injustice of life.

So there is good news and bad news here. If you are suffering, the good news is that this does not mean that you are a bad person and that you deserve this. The bad news is that there is no guarantee that life won't continue to kick you when you are down as it did for both Job and Jesus. And if you are currently happy, healthy and prosperous, the bad news is that there is no guarantee that that will continue, no matter how good or careful you are. Life can be random and utterly unfair, and it could cut you down unfairly just as easily as the next person.

Naturally we will continue to feel confused and angry when that happens. But Jesus does promise that your suffering need not lead you to self-condemnation, as though you deserved it. And he does promise that he will be with you in the midst of it, even when you feel utterly forsaken, even to the end of the world. And he does promise, and demonstrate, that tragedy and suffering do not have the last word and cannot defeat the emerging culture of God's love and mercy. He shows us that the pathway of unjust suffering, the path through the valley of the shadow of death, the way of the cross, will emerge from even the darkest and most horrible places into the wide open spaces of the promised land of God's love and life. Jesus has walked that path before us, and walks it with us now, and he has shown us that it leads to resurrection.