

Pastor's Message – 10/10/2021

Job 1:1; 2:1-10

Everybody wants “the good life.” But can we define “the good life?” Is it health, mental and physical, health for ourselves? Maybe it’s health for children and spouse and loved ones? Maybe having enough money to live on, now and into retirement? Maybe it’s the time and money and opportunity to travel, both for leisure and to visit family and friends? Maybe it’s a good house or car or the boat or the possessions you’ve always wanted or maybe just the ability to buy what you want when you want? Everybody wants “the good life.”

Today, we meet a man in our Bible reading, Job, who had made it. He had “the good life.” Job was a deeply religious man who had the best of everything life had to offer. He owned more land, which produced more crops than any of his neighbors; he had more livestock also. Job was blessed with a wonderful family: seven sons and three daughters. As the Bible says, Job “was the greatest of all the people of the east.” Job was the type of person that you would envy, at least in your private thoughts. He had everything, a large family, wealth, and fame. His luxurious home might even have been featured on “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” had there been television. Can you even imagine having “the good life” like Job?

Change the picture now and imagine God and the heavenly beings in their weekly staff meeting. One of them is called “the accuser” – rendered “Satan” in English Bibles, but usually with a footnote that Satan is not a proper name. Some scholars refer to him as “Ha-Satan,” which translates to mean “The Accuser.” The description ‘The Accuser’ with the word Satan appears in Hebrew and in some other translation, indicating that it is an office, similar to that of a CIA agent. The accuser is therefore part the Lord’s government. As they move through the agenda, “The Accuser” responds to God’s question, or maybe God’s boast, that Job must be tested to prove his faithfulness to God. It is an interesting twist in the plot.

Why would God welcome Satan or his comments within the heavenly courts? The idea that the ha-satan is a member of God’s team adds a level of complexity to the story and gives us more to chew on in the story. Many people believe that God is in control or, at least, ultimately in control, of the life of God’s world and those who dwell thereon, and we see here that the ha-satan takes commands from God and only acts with God’s permission.

So “the accuser” enters the picture, proposing a challenge. (I’m going to use “the accuser,” *ha-satan* and Satan interchangeably, trusting that you’ve got the nuance behind all the names.) Satan thought that the reason Job was so faithful was because he had so much: children, land, cattle, oxen, camels, What might happen, Satan pondered, if Job lost everything he had? Would Job still place his trust in God? Would this godly individual lose his religion along with everything he had? Or would he remain faithful and steadfast in his relationship with God? There was only one way to find out.

God allows Satan to persecute Job, even though Job has been faithful and true. It is only with the approval of God that Satan begins to destroy and take away everything within Job’s possession. (Job 2:4-6). Job loses his children, cattle, possessions, and even his health. Job is left covered in sores from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet (Job 2:7).

He experiences unimaginable pain and no relief. Job could not stand up or lie down; there was no way to escape the discomfort. Job's only attempt of relief came when he began to scrape the sores from his body using broken pieces of pottery. Can you imagine his sense of confusion? His feelings of isolation and frustration? What words could possibly be used to describe Job's current state of mind?

Job is unique as a book within the Bible. Job gives us no time stamp when the events happened. Unlike many Old Testament books that begin by announcing, for example, who is king in Judah or Israel, Job begins, "There once was a man in the land of Uz..." (Job 1:1). Job's location is not even in Israel. Literarily, Job is a book of prose and poetry, as well as irony and lamentation.

Although the book is unique, the questions raised in the Book of Job are enduring. Why does suffering come to the righteous? If God is all-powerful, why can't God keep the righteous from suffering? If God is all loving, why do evil, pain, and suffering exist? Why do bad things happen to good people?

Instead of providing neat and tidy answers, the Book of Job invites us to struggle and question along with Job and his friends. Along with Job, we can wonder if having hard luck or difficult circumstances are the result of God's anger.

We've already heard during our journey through the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament, including the Book of Proverbs, how the righteous will endure and be rewarded, while the foolish will suffer consequences. There was a widespread belief that, if you were a good person and did what was right, God would prosper you and keep anything bad from happening to you. And who can deny that there is some truth in that belief? But we also know that sometimes things don't work out that way. Job, however, seems to question whether this "wisdom" is accurate. The book of Job is here in the Bible to answer that question. But the answer is not simple -- or easy to understand -- or easy to live with.

While Job leaves us with more questions than answers, it will be in the seeking for those answers that we find God's presence.

The very first verse of the Book tells us that Job was a righteous man: a man of integrity, complete, whole, well-rounded. There was no shadow of turning in Job. The Lord was so confident in Job's virtue, even boasting about him, that the Lord accepted Satan's challenge to Job's faith. The Lord initially permitted Satan to assail Job's property and possession. So, in the rest of the first chapter of Job, parts that are skipped by today's Bible reading, a series of calamities wipes out Job's livestock, possessions, and family. In minutes, a procession of bearers of bad news comes to Job, and he hears that he has lost everything – he's wiped out. Job says unbelievably, "the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." (1:21b, NRSV) In spite of it all, Job remains faithful.

Imagine if that happened to you! How would you have reacted to Job's trials?

- Become an atheist?
- Pray without ceasing?
- Blame others?
- Rejoice in all circumstances?

- Count your blessings? Name them one-by-one?
- Curse God and ask for death?
- Something else?

Job's story continues to ask the age-old questions that we still wrestle with today.

- If God is all-powerful, why do people suffer?
- If God is all loving, why do evil, tragedy, and suffering exist?
- Why does God seem so absent and quiet in the face of so much pain?
- Why do the wicked seem to prosper and the righteous suffer?

Imagine a person standing in the rain without an umbrella. All alone, soaking wet, in the middle of the night, the person cries out to no one in particular, "Why, God?" It's hard to distinguish the difference between the tears and the rain running down the person's cheek.

Tragedy has struck as it usually does at a time when it is least expected. Everything seems fine, a regular day, and then comes that call in the middle of the night informing you that someone you love and care about has been involved in a serious accident. "Why has this happened?" we want to know. "Why has it happened in this way?" we ask almost in disbelief. It just doesn't seem fair. The person had everything to live for and has been cut down in the prime of life, for no apparent reason. We have to admit that we struggle with that same question, "Why?"

Is there anything that could happen to you that would cause you to turn from the Lord? It's a tough question. The answer we all hope we'd give is "Of course not." But that's easy to say, especially when our lives are basically good. If we believe that God is in control of our lives and everything comes from God, won't we be willing to accept evil and disaster as well as good and blessings?

Job's retort to his wife's admonition to curse God is strong, but also challenging. We like to envision God as a giant dispenser of all that is wonderful. Do you remember the Pez candy dispensers? Those were amazing! You could get all kinds of them, different people, animals, and all sorts of things. You'd pull the head back and out would come candy. It was a simple pleasure for a simple time. In many ways, that's the image some have of God. He just dispenses the treats, one after the other. Job's statement reminds us that God allows evil, at least for a time and under some parameters -- but nonetheless evil. If we are willing to trust him when all is good, will we trust him even when it isn't?

Today we continue our journey through the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament and marks the beginning of a new four-Sunday series. We are taking a deep dive in the mysterious and complicated story of Job, which is neatly condensed into four Sundays of Bible readings. If you're willing, I'd like to invite you to forgo simplistic answers, because, in this Book of Job, there is a challenging exploration of religious issues of fundamental importance: the motivation for piety, the meaning of suffering, the nature of God, the place of justice in the world, and the relationship of order and chaos in God's design of creation. I would invite you to take up the challenge to go beyond the surface of Job and wrestle with a mysterious book of the Bible.

I agree with some older folks who I have conversation with, that when things go wrong – and we know that they do – when the golden years aren't so golden and “the good life” seems to be for others, and you gotta be tough to get old and getting old isn't for sissies, how do you keep your equilibrium and how to you keep on keepin' on? What or who or where is the foundation on which you stand? Where do you turn when the winds blow and the waves crash over your boat:

- Friends?
- Family?
- God?
- Habits – good or bad?
- Something else?

The story of Job gives us at least some answers. When we are experiencing hardships, we often feel lonely, but we are never alone. Job remains faithful to God, understanding that God is present in both good and troubling times. Job shows a level of faith and maturity that proves sanctifying grace in action. He is more concerned with being faithful to God than caring for his own needs. Job shows us sanctifying grace, the kind of grace that helps us move toward perfection in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Grace is the mystery of God's love evident in us, through us, and all around us. God is present in the good and the bad. Grace undergirds us during times of difficulty and disorientation, so that we, like Job, can remain faithful to God. The grace of God is the only way theologically we can explain the unexplainable, or biblically understand the mystery of God's Spirit in our reading from Job today. We are on a journey as people of faith, moving toward the goal of Christian perfection. Sanctifying grace helps us to love God and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves in light of the challenges we may face in life.

By God's grace and the Holy Spirit, we are given the strength to overcome life's most difficult moments. If we are seeking God, we will discover internal strength that bears witness to God's love in the world, even in the midst of external hardships.

Job trusted God in light of present hardships, and his faith did not grow weary. If we trust God, we can overcome what appears to be insurmountable. God is always with us and has equipped us with grace to withstand challenges.

In the darkest moment of his life, Job made a great discovery -- life is a combination of good and evil, blessing and pain, moments of ecstasy and agony, bad days and good days. Job had just experienced some very bad days that brought indescribable horror and pain. Remarkably, he did not lose sight of goodness. He talked about "the good days from God." He was still able to talk about those moments of goodness amid his loss and pain. He saw this goodness as something that came to his life from God. Because of this goodness he did not do what his wife admonished him to do. He did not curse God. Life was a combination of goodness and evil, blessing and pain, but because of the goodness from God, Job felt that life was infinitely worthwhile.

May our prayer be to remain faithful and see and trust that God is present in the good and in the bad and that “the good life” is the life in God's presence.