

Job 38
Pentecost 21-B-2021
"Avoiding Words Without Knowledge"
Randy Smith

In 1981, the year before I graduated Duke Divinity School, a book of **popular theology** was published by a Jewish rabbi by the name of Harold Kushner. The title of the book was *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, and it spent months on the NY Times best seller list in non-fiction. It was, and is, an excellent study of a **central theological problem** which surely goes back to the first time a human being had any thoughts about God at all. And it is a problem which to this day *continues* to confront Christians and non-Christians alike. Christians keep trying to figure out how it could be that a "good" God allows bad things to happen to good people, and non-Christians ask, "Why should I want to have anything to do with such a God?"

What Kushner's book did was to open up *public* conversation about a question almost everyone has good reason to ask themselves *privately* at one time or another. Kushner himself dedicated the book to the memory of his son, Aaron, who died in 1977 at the age of 14 from an incurable genetic disease called "progeria". You may have heard of this. It's when a person dies of uncontrollable rapid aging. So, it's easy to understand why Kushner wrote *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* in response to this great personal tragedy.

It's also easy to understand why much of his book focuses on the Book of Job, which has been called by Jews and Christians, and by people in general, one of the most important looks at Kushner's topic in all of literature.

The character of Job is introduced to us in the opening chapter as someone who seems to have been clearly "blessed" by God in every way: with *family*, with *wealth*, with the *respect* and *real* admiration of others, because in their eyes Job clearly, in terms of his moral virtue, "qualifies" for his blessings. And, alongside of this, he is genuinely devoted to God, scrupulous in attending to his religious duties. As theologian Norman Wirzba (of DDS) comments:

"We might say [Job] is living an ancient version of the American Dream: after working honestly and hard he now enjoys the just rewards that come from his labor. The assumption that runs through the early chapters of Job is that God has ordered the world so that if we do our part, then God will protect and guarantee a safe outcome for us.

It strikes me that, in the Gospel reading this morning, the sons of Zebedee, given what they come to Jesus asking for -- that he do for them "**whatever**" they ask -- are operating out of this mindset. It was only a handful of verses before this in Mk. 10 that Peter reminds Jesus that all of his first disciples "have left *everything* and followed you" (v. 28). It appears that two of them, James and

John, figure it's about time for them to get some *major* return on their investment: we have "left **everything**", so *you* should do "**whatever**" we ask!

This, of course, strikes us as pretty *crass* behavior on the part of these first disciples. But isn't this -- at least in less crass ways -- how almost all of us tend to operate, thinking that we are, after all, *pretty good* people, and that God really *should* do -- should *want* to do -- for us pretty much whatever we ask? And that "whatever" is, for most of us, most of the time -- in the face of the dangers in life lurking around every corner, every waking and sleeping moment of every day -- is that God be the **guarantor** of our *security*, of our *health*, of our *family's* security and health, and of our very lives.

God should want to *do* that, *right*?

That is *our* conventional theological wisdom, *and* that of the sons of Zebedee before us, *and* that of the era of Job. It turns out, however, that the Book of Job was written precisely for the purpose of *challenging* that wisdom, and do so in the **most severe terms** possible.

As the story unfolds, God allows a figure called "the Satan" -- not the figure troubling the world in the NT, but a kind of "District Attorney" within the heavenly court -- to "prosecute" a case against Job, to **test** whether Job's devotion to God is **dependent on**, or *independent of*, all the blessings Job has enjoyed in life. The test takes the form of Job **losing everything, and everyone**, he's ever held dear in life -- family, money, his health. Job's *suffering* is immense, and unceasing.

And then it's *made worse* by a group of his friends who -- by employing dozens of chapters of **amateur theology** -- try to convince Job that, although the cause or causes of his great suffering cannot be identified, there **must** be *some* reason for it, some reason God is aware of, and on the basis of which has allowed these incomprehensible losses to come to him. They are actually trying to **comfort** their friend by doing **two things**: *one*, by defending God's honor, and reputation (God can never be thought to act unjustly, let alone irrationally); and, *two*, by implying to Job that when, and to the degree, humans do think that, then the soundness of the whole structure of human life is in danger. They are apparently, all of them, those for whom life has worked out well, or even very well, and so the conventional theological formulas make sense. And, of course, **this** is the problem: for most of *us* at least, most of the time, life *does* work out pretty well, and so we fall into the trap of thinking this is because of what *we* have done -- or wisely avoided doing. Those for whom life has **not** worked out, or is not working out very well **must** have, then, done **something** wrong, such that *they*, and **not God**, are to blame for their situation.

But Job *absolutely* knows he is blameless of any moral wrongdoing, and so undeserving of any terrible consequences befalling him on account of such. So, he **rejects** all of his friends' multiple theological arguments, and comes to blame God,

openly and loudly, not *only* for *his* sufferings, but for being the Creator of an ultimately *meaningless* human existence.

Doesn't it feel to you that, by digging into this ancient story, this ancient book of the Bible, that we are digging into this morning's headlines? My dental hygienist feels this way. Maybe because she knows I'm a pastor, she and I always end up in a brief theological discussion. This past week, this young wife, mother of a now 4-year-old little guy, was suddenly talking about all the troubles she sees going on in the world, going on to say that she just doesn't watch the news anymore, the implication being that it only makes her more worried. "I guess," she finished by declaring, not very confidently, "that God's got some purpose in all the bad things happening in the world." God, i.e., has got to -- somehow -- be in control of it all. *Doesn't* he?

Job has moved on down the road, however, even from my hygienist's tentative faith, and is just a couple steps away from arriving at **irreversible despair**. If there *is* a God -- and understand that to this point in the story God has yet to say a word in response to Job's complaints -- then let that God speak, and offer up at least *some* sort of **accounting** for what has crushed Job's life, *some* sort of *defense*.

The reading from Job for this morning is when, after 35 chapters, God begins to speak. Note, however, that neither in these opening verses nor in the several chapters which follow, God **never addresses** Job's *situation* or Job's complaints *at all*. Not one word. Instead, God streams a long series of questions at Job about the fundamental *nature* of the world, and *life* in the world, questions which neither Job nor any human could ever answer. God's questions are meant to **awaken Job** -- *and awaken us* -- to just how little we really understand about how the world works.

Both Job *and* his friends, it turns out, are thinking about things, and thinking about God ("theology" = "logos" about "theos") within a **merely human** frame of reference. Not only does God not mention Job in what God says, God does not mention human beings. Creation, in all of its *vast*, and finally *mysterious* complexities, is simply far more than either Job or his friends can *comprehend*, or even *imagine*, *much less control*, in order to make it run according to their rules.

God's response to Job **works**, and Job is led to see himself as a **very small part** of a **very much larger vision** of both the creation and the Creator, that -- somehow -- all the **suffering and joy**, all the **losses and the gains** are all a part of it, all a part of the majesty of God. In the opening verses of c. 42, Job famously says to God:

"I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know...therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

Stephen Mitchell, author of a commentary on the Book of Job, suggests that a better translation of Job's words might be "Therefore I will be quiet, **comforted that I am dust.**" Coming to terms with **his mortality**, i.e., and so with the utter **contingency** of the *whole* of our lives in this world, makes mortality and contingency no longer a curse but a comfort. As Wirzba says, it means that

God created [Job] with the same care as the rest of creation...Job is illuminated by the greater light of creation [and] survives his plight as one prepared to **surrender his life** to the wisdom of God, and the larger drama of creation.

Which leads us back to Jesus' exchange with his first disciples, where, after teaching that his followers must **distinguish** themselves in the life of the world by becoming "**slaves** of all" (*viz.*, those whose *only flourishing* in life comes by promoting the *flourishing of others*), Jesus concludes by saying, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:45).

Following Jesus doesn't mean trying to control, or manage our lives, going to extraordinary lengths to protect ourselves against its dangers and contingencies – which is our inveterate human habit. But, even when it appears as though all of our strategies for doing this are working they're not. If you don't believe me, ask Job. No, following Jesus means **surrendering our lives**, as Jesus did, for the sake of the kingdom -- the restored rule of God over the life of the world -- the kingdom which he came proclaiming (Mk. 1:15) as his core message and primary mission.