

I'VE NEVER BEEN JOB

sermon preached at St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Medina, WA
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One evening in the summer of 2005, Christy and I were attending a pre-birth class at Swedish Hospital. We were one of fifteen couples in nervous but eager anticipation of the birth of our first child, and we were being addressed by a nurturing teacher who had been through this several times before.

The teacher said, "OK, dads-to-be. Imagine that your wife is right in the middle of the most painful hour of labor. She screams that she's changed her mind, and she doesn't want to have the baby after all! What do you say to her?"

O silly, foolish me. I raised my hand, and she called on me. "I would say, 'Oh, we're so close. I know it hurts now, but just think—in a couple hours, we'll have our beautiful baby and the pain will be over!'"

Our nurturing teacher shouted: "WRONG!"

I have another, more sobering story about being wrong. I was 20 years old, and my girlfriend's younger sister had just been diagnosed with cancer. When we arrived at the family's house, their mother was crying inconsolably on a friend's shoulder. She wailed, "How could God do this to me?"

O silly, foolish me: I opened my mouth then, too! Groping for words of comfort, I quoted something I'd heard before, something that comforted me very much: "God has promised never to give us more than we can handle."

The mother shot back: "WELL, GOD LIED!" Good Christian woman that she was, she was immediately embarrassed and began apologizing through her tears, probably more to God than to me. That's forgivable; my words of comfort had really been for me, not for her. Woe to the silly, foolish person who offers a platitude to someone who is suffering. It's simply not good enough. It wasn't good enough for Job, either.

The ancient Book of Job is an in-depth study of the frustrating problem of pain. In preparing for today, I re-read the entire book from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase in *The Message*. And what I learned is this: I have never been Job. I may feel like saying a lot of things to Job, and in the book, four of his friends do just that. But I will do my best to refrain, because I've never been Job. Now, while I won't say anything to those of you who have been Job, I do want to make a few observations about what I found in his book.

Many scholars believe that the story of Job goes back long before the writing of the book in the Bible—perhaps centuries earlier. In all likelihood, Job began as a pious folktale made up of just the first two chapters and most of the final chapter. Here’s my paraphrase of that original story.

Once upon a time, there was a man named Job. Now, Job was a very good man. He did everything right, following all of God’s rules. He had ten children. He was also very wealthy.

One day, God said to Satan, “That Job of mine . . . he sure is good, isn’t he?”

“Ha!” said Satan. “He’s not so great. He only acts good because you pamper him so much. If you took everything away from him, he’d curse you to your face.”

“OK,” said God. “I dare you to make Job curse me to my face.”

That day, raiding marauders destroyed all of Job’s cattle and killed all his farmhands. Lightning struck and killed all his sheep and shepherds. And a tornado swept through and killed all ten of Job’s children.

Job fell to the ground and wept. But all he said was, “God gives, and God takes away. Praise God.”

The next day, Job became covered with painful sores that wouldn’t go away. His wife said, “Just curse God’s name. Then maybe God will kill you and your suffering will end.”

But Job had too much integrity for that. He replied, “Don’t be a fool. We accept good things from God; why shouldn’t we accept the bad things as well?”

And because through all his suffering Job never broke the rules, God gave Job double the fortune he’d had before. Job and his wife had ten more children, and Job lived to the age of 210 in happiness and comfort. The end.

Well, that story has a happy ending. It has a moral: be faithful to God and everything will work out OK. And that’s a good moral, isn’t it? It’s a Disney ending! Yes, the original story of Job has everything we might ask for in a good story, doesn’t it? So why is the story so unsatisfying?

Eventually, some ancient Hebrew author must have felt the same way. He took the story of Job and expanded on it. At the point at which Job has just lost everything, but he refuses to curse God’s name, three friends come to sit with him. They sit with him for an entire week in total silence. Now, if they had just performed this noble act of friendship and stopped there, maybe things would have turned out better. I can’t imagine sitting in

silence with a suffering friend for 45 minutes without saying something, let alone an entire week! So I have to admire Job's friends for their fortitude. But in the end, they turn out to be just like me.

First, Eliphaz opens his big mouth. He reminds Job that God rewards good people and punishes bad people. If Job has been good, then all this pain must be only temporary. There's sure to be a light at the end of the tunnel. Next, Bildad takes the approach of reason. He suggests that maybe this disaster wasn't Job's fault. Maybe Job's children did something to deserve death. Job answers each of them with impatience and irritability, insisting that neither he nor his children did anything to deserve this.

Zophar, the most tediously pious friend of all, warns Job not to complain too loudly. To call God's motives into question is blasphemy. Then Zophar lays out his argument, which is the equivalent of a modern-day Christian who says, "Everything that comes from God is an undeserved gift. Accept the gifts, but don't insist that you have a right to them."

Of course, this frustrates Job even more. He cries out, "When I talk about my pain, it hurts. When I stay silent, it hurts. It all hurts, and I can't make it stop! Then you come along and make it worse." Job announces that he wishes he could just die now and be done with it. Naturally, Job's friends are alarmed by these words, and this makes them talk more. They go on for chapter after chapter, suggesting one banality after another to explain away Job's suffering:

"Just believe God's promises in the Bible. That should be enough to ease your pain."

"Don't you believe in karma? What goes around comes around. We all get what we deserve in the end."

"You're not the first person who's ever suffered. All of us go through rough times every now and then. Just keep being good, and God will restore your blessings to you."

"You claim to be innocent, but remember the story of Adam and Eve. We're all tainted by sin and deserve death. Anything short of that comes from God's grace. Through all this misfortune, you're still ahead of the curve."

"Just pray, Job. Keep praying. That's the moral of all our ancient stories. Keep praying to God and God will eventually answer your prayers."

"Job, you were very wealthy. That means you were part of a corrupt system that exploits the poor. Just by remaining rich, you brought disaster on yourself—that explains why you deserve this."

“God’s plan is perfect—you just can’t see it yet! Even the imperfections are part of the picture, and we’ll all understand someday.”

I suppose that some of what Job’s friends say is kinda sorta true, and some of it is short-sighted and simplistic. But none of it is helpful, and that makes all of it nonsense! Job replies to each suggestion with anger and frustration, alternately rebuking his friends for failing to understand and ordering God to explain his divine intentions. Job announces that he’d like to put God on trial for crimes against humanity ... but where would he find an impartial judge?

Finally, a fourth friend appears from out of nowhere: Elihu. Now, some scholars think that Elihu was added into the story at an even later date, because there’s no explanation for why he pops up now, and after he speaks, he isn’t mentioned again. Elihu is the most insufferable friend yet. Among his six chapters of claptrap you’ll find the following:

“God always answers prayers. But sometimes the answer is to leave the prayer unanswered.”

“God is good by definition. Therefore, you have nothing to complain about.”

“Maybe you should just confess your sins, even if you’re not sure how you sinned. Then God will forgive you and restore your blessings to you.”

Eventually, Elihu revs up into an extended speech about how wonderful God is, as evidenced by all the marvels of the world. And just as he seems ready to collapse in a frenzy of ecstasy, the LORD GOD ALMIGHTY shows up!

A whirlwind descends on the scene. God orders Job to stand up and says, “Where were you when I created the earth? Do you know your way around the cosmos? Would you know how to run it? Would the creatures I have made obey your commands? Can you provide enough food for all the animals on earth? I could go on and on, and I do for four chapters ... but for now, let me just say: Will you try to make me a sinner so you can remain a saint? Silence!”

Job falls to the ground in humility. He says, “I’m speechless. I thought I understood you before. But I’d only heard about you—now that I’ve seen the real thing, well ... I talk too much. I’ll shut up now.”

And then we’re back to the original ending of the story. God gives Job double the fortune he’d had before. Job and his wife have ten more children, and Job lives to the age of 210 in happiness and comfort. The end.

Wait! That’s *still* the ending? I’m afraid it is.

The Book of Job—the book itself—is, I think, like someone who dies in the prime of life. Just when it starts getting good, just when you think you’re going to get some real answers straight from the source, it’s all over, and in a really stupid, pointless way. Maybe that’s the point.

See, you can’t read the Book of Job as a mere intellectual exercise. The story demands that you join the conversation. The ending alone is a double irony. When we hear God speak directly, he doesn’t really say anything new. Then we are given the ending we would all want! But when we get it, we don’t want it. We reject it because it’s so false, like the false comfort of Job’s friends. We could write a different ending, but we don’t, because it would just be hopeless, wouldn’t it? We keep the stupid ending so it can upset the next person who reads it.

Oh, I’ve been Job’s friends so many times, but I’ve never been Job. That’s why I wasn’t going to say anything to any of you out there who *have* been Job. But I can’t help myself. At the risk of sounding like one of Job’s friends, I do want to say one thing.

When Jesus came into the world, what did he do, really? He taught us wisdom, but did he give us all the answers? If he had, couldn’t we just slap on a bumper sticker that says, “Jesus is the answer” and be done with it? Some people do that, and I guess it’s true, but it’s still nonsense!

When Jesus was among us, he healed people, but did he end all the suffering? No. He drank the cup of suffering to the dregs with all the rest of us. He was brutally murdered. Everyone, including his own mother, watched him die a slow, agonizing death.

Then, somehow, in a baffling mystery, Jesus’ suffering and dying was transformed into the sneakiest of resurrections. It went unnoticed but by a few, like a tiny flame that his friends tried to protect from the wind until they could light some kindling. Amen.