

FAITH IN THE FUTURE  
A LOVE SUPREME

Texts on Sunday, February 12, 2012

*Job 1; Philippians 4: 10-13*

What sort of God is this, walking about our Bible in the book of Job, talking about us? What sort of God is this, proud of a good and upright man, yet unwilling or unable to stand by his man when his own boast is tested by the satan? What sort of God is this who takes a bet in a game; whose only risk is his pride when challenged, “Does Job fear God for nothing?” and who does not ask his opponent to put up any stake at all; who by his own word spills all that a blameless man loves into the lap of loss in order to see if he—God!—can win the wager? If he knows—truly knows—he will win, why torment the man? If God does not know who will win, is God God?

Now we go ringside and hear the bell clang for the evilest round of fighting any eye could conjure, for it is sanctioned by the Lord God: gloves off, no referee, no rules, no weight class, no time limit, no way to rest or surrender, but only blood and blood and more, as God looks on, attending to every word from Job’s lips, lest he, God, lose this bet.

Yet In all this, Job did not sin or charge God with the least wrong.

But God did sin, though Job cannot know it, barred, like all mortals, from the heavenly council. God was double-minded: Proud of Job, yes, but proud too of his estimate of Job; that is, proud of himself when challenged, but doubting himself. Did you ever wonder what that little letter “b” is doing in *doubt*? It is an ancient reminder that *doubt* is *double*. Yes, God sinned. God set a lesser god before God, the god of pride and power. And then God smashed the tables of the commandments on the ground, saying to the satan “Very well!” when there stormed down on Job’s household theft, assault, and murder. Thou shalt not steal? Thou shalt not kill? What sort of God is this?

Now, it is easy to dismiss this God as not God. You can say it’s an old story and you just don’t believe it. You can say, *Ah! That Old Testament God is full of wrath and punishment, but our God is a God of love*. You can say you prefer Jesus because he is nicer and this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Yes, it’s easy to leave this theater in the middle of the movie. But the book of Job offers food for your worst hungers, food you need, food you cannot find if you shelve the story as mere ancient error about God. For the hard fact is, the poet who pulled this book together did a very simple thing here at the outset. He put two ideas in one cage to see if they could get along—two ideas which flow as freely from our tongues today as they did of old.

Idea 1: that God is all powerful, all seeing, all knowing; that nothing

happens except God wills it. Idea 2: that horrifying devastations fall upon men, women, and children out of any proportion to their frail powers for good or for ill. Is God responsible for all the devastations from humans and from nature? On these terms, you can decide that it is absurd to believe in God; millions have. You can walk out of this movie and not watch. Why, on your way out, you can yell *No, God is not responsible!* and call God good and bad bad and try your religion with mind turned off to real life. Millions do. You can cry Why! and just cry and cry in misery. Millions cry. But the poet who set this Job down was not caged in by any of these choices. He knew that the two incompatible ideas are already in the ring together inside our minds. That's where the fight is. Who is God? Who am I? What is our suffering? What is our death? Don't answer.

What moved the poet of Job to write this book? Now, we cannot climb into history to find his answer, but consider: We have no difficulty seeing what moved the apostle Paul to write to the early churches. He loved them. It is as simple as that. He hoped life for them in the midst of their sorrows and struggles. He encouraged them and corrected them. He gave them clear and useful instructions. More than once, he wrote, *Join in imitating me.* "I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing abundance and want." He was not gloating but guiding his beloved communities toward that inner wholeness, that integrity, which makes all things possible in love. "I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me." Paul wrote in order to build up the beloved community through the transformation of their minds from misery to life.

This is exactly why the poet of Job wrote. He harbored edgeless hope for the future of his beloved community, struggling through a severe test of affliction. Superficial acquaintance with the name of Job cannot give this insight. Certainly "Job" stands for terrible trials, and people practiced in long-suffering are often said to have "the patience of Job." But these worn words tell us nothing of the poet, when he wrote or where, for whom, or why.

Now, you know that all the Bible was written by humans and that humans don't labor at hard work for sport. What moves preachers to their sermons—or what should move them—is the same spirit by which all the Bible was composed: a longing to communicate transforming love for communities whom the authors love. All these words were love letters when they were written. If we say they were "sent from God" rather than just from the humans who wrote, we can mean that the words proved so helpful, so transforming in hard situations, that people could not account for the healing in ordinary ways. They said, *Teacher, read that to us again. It is like the gift of God.* And then they asked for it again. That's how the Bible came to be. People gave it birth; nursed its stories into fullness out of their need for

wholeness in times of trouble. And the Bible in turn gave new birth to the people, for in telling their stories, a people become a beloved community, able to step from the burdens of their past into the faith of the future, full of charity. What story do you tell, O Riverside? Is it of a beloved community? Or do your lips talk of mischief?

Today, and for many Sundays to come, we are going to tune our hearts to hear through the book of Job a word of promise and power for the church of God, for this church, and for any people bereft of what belongs to them; any people kept from sharing in what is good by powers that bind them. When we are done, you will never forget God's word to you through *Job*. May you grow faith in the future in this beloved community.

Let us clear the table a bit. Job is not history; Job is a story. This man named Job never lived—but the poet drew him up and wrote what he wrote for your good; therefore, let us not trouble after “what really happened” as one does with real people and with history. There is nothing “behind” the story except the intention of the author to help the beloved community.

Who were *they*? People of Judah in Jerusalem—the first people called Jews practicing Judaism. When did the poet write? In the generations after they returned from exile in Babylon. They came home full of a hope like that of Isaiah 40, hope that the world would see that their captor had been crushed by Yahweh and they themselves sent home; hope that the world would trust in their God who had sealed the victory and would now prepare them as a light to the nations. Again their king would rule like David over great lands; again they would build a temple for the Lord; at last the earth would fill with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

But time did not turn that way. One empire, then another and another, ruled over the little tribe of Judah. In every way known to the tragedies of history, the overruling empires used the little land to enrich themselves. Rulers were harsh and humiliating. The people stayed poor. They were not permitted to rule themselves. Undoubtedly many doubted: Is the Lord real? Has he no power to save? Isaiah's dream faded to a picture on the walls of a political prison. It was in such times, after the fires of a people's hope had burned down to coals under ashes, that the poet of Job wrote his story *Job* is not about Job. Job is about the people laid low through generations of oppression, and how some, somehow, stayed whole while everything around them was pulled apart. You know this song.

James Baldwin sang it fifty years ago with these words:

It is entirely unacceptable that I should have no voice in the political affairs of my own country. I am not a ward of America; I am one of the first Americans to arrive on these shores. This past—the Negro's past of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it; sorrow for his

women, for his kinfolk, for his children, who needed his protection, and whom he could not protect; rage, hatred, and murder, hatred for white men so deep that it often turned against him and his own, and made all love, all trust, all joy impossible— this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm human identity— human authority—yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful.

I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering— enough is certainly as good as a feast— but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it, knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth—and, indeed, no church—can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable. This is because, in order to save his life, he is forced to look beneath appearances, to take nothing for granted, to hear the meaning behind the words. If one is continually surviving the worst that life can bring, one eventually ceases to be controlled by a fear of what life can bring; whatever it brings must be borne. And at this level of experience, one's bitterness begins to be palatable, and hatred becomes too heavy a sack to carry.

The apprehension of life here so briefly and inadequately sketched has been the experience of generations of Negroes, and it helps to explain how they have endured and how they have been able to produce children of kindergarten age who can walk through mobs to get to school. (*The Fire Next Time*, Dell Publishing, pp. 132-133)

You know the song. Has half a century made it an oldie? Absolutely not. Not least, because respect and changed power relationships for many remain deprived of so many more. The humiliation and destruction of millions of black Americans proceeds fast. The song is not old also because our eyes are opened. We see ruins wrought by the powerful upon Palestinians, where Israel, custodian of this book, has forgotten that they were once like Job. We look on as Syria destroys its people and China, Tibet's. Countless more are not even seen: People with disabilities. The undocumented workers we called up north to tend our gardens and babies and parents. May no spirit of competition for "most grievous wrong" attend our prayer this morning. Let us rather affirm that only through tears for what humans bear can the lens of our eye focus on the sorrows of strangers; and only a broken heart can ponder well how to live so that neither misery nor complacency buy us out.

Religion has not done very well in this project. The book of Job will affirm that sad fact. And though I think Baldwin is right, that "no church can teach [a person how to] achieve his own authority," a church can teach an edgeless hope for the future of faith in the beloved community, and guard its people while they learn the way through suffering and compassion. Oh, how a mind must either open wide or close in willful sleep, if we will tell a tale of woe and wait for God, behind the God we thought we knew, to speak.

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*The Riverside Church  
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