

FAITH IN THE FUTURE  
BETRAYAL AND BLESSING

Texts on Sunday, March 11, 2012

*Job 7: 1-21; Luke 4: 1-13*

The book of *Job*, as many of you know, contains not only Job's speeches but also responses from his three friends, if friends they be: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. We are not going to hear much from them in this sermon series, for our time is short. But take note of this. As these friends lay up many words to shield the roots of their religion from the blows of Job's sorrow-sharpened tongue, they say the same old thing over and again. As for Job, they never hear him. They learn nothing. Nothing ever changes. Here is Eliphaz responding to the anguish of Job's first cry:

Happy is the one whom God reproaches; therefore do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he binds up; he strikes, but his hands heal. He will deliver you from six troubles; in seven no harm shall touch you . . . You shall know that your tent is safe . . . and that your offspring will be like the grass of the earth. You shall come to your grave in ripe old age. (Job 5: 17-26)

This speech sounds familiar. It has a cousin: "God never gives you more than you can handle." Never? Really? Can you have uttered that blasphemy to any of the 8,000 citizens of Syria in the hours before their president blew their last breaths and brains to dust? The honest version of the maxim must ever be: "God never gives you more than you can handle—unless you die."

What are the friends up to with these conventional reproaches and soothing sayings? Why is it that political speeches and so many happy hymns and Hallmark cards and the words of Job's friends all sound so hollow and so alike? Let us try this answer: Such talk is motivated by fear. Job's friends are terrified by what has happened to him. They know their own lives are muddy creeks compared with the broad river of his good will. If this could happen to him . . . They cannot absorb the meaning! His hideous face threatens their power, their religion, their sanity. So they pour platitudes of divine providence all over Job, to stop their ears from hearing him and shut their eyes from seeing him. Conventional comforts are for control, whether made personally or politically. They instruct the sufferer to keep the bitterness of her complaint within the bounds of the acceptable explanatory regime. Conventional comforts and reproaches are a gag order. They work the same when the name of a woman testifying before Congress is dragged in dirt across the air waves. When candidates for the presidency utter disgusting reproaches of gay and lesbian citizens. When people are accused of "class warfare" for revealing how our politicians have handed the government of this nation to the rich. Or when Job's friends appeared on Fox News the last few days. Did you hear them?

Our true friend, the late Professor Derrick Bell, has just been smeared as a radical; "the Jeremiah Wright of academia" Sean Hannity's program proclaimed. This sudden interest in trashing Dr. Bell comes from the discovery of a "secret"

tape in which a young Barack Obama is caught embracing the professor—physically!—during Bell’s 1991 protest against Harvard Law School for failing to offer tenure to any professor of color except himself.

Now, to my heart, Bell’s writing on the permanence of racism in America has the feel of Job’s cry. Is it “radical”? Be that as it may, now Fox is in the henhouse to silence even the dead. Citing the president’s association with Bell, Sarah Palin said Mr. Obama is “trying to divide” the country, “bringing us back . . . to days before the Civil War when racial discrimination was prevalent . . . based along lines of gender, of religion, of income, even of race.” But not any more, right, Mrs. Eliphaz? Writing in *The Atlantic*, David Graham says: “In her view, the very act of talking about the role of race in U.S. history makes one a racist.” This is how power controls speech. This is how power uses prayer and religion, too: to instruct sufferers to keep their words within the bounds of the acceptable explanatory regime. It is a gag order. It is why we must hear Job renew his cry in every generation.

When in Chapter 7 Job lifts up his voice for the second time, a strange sound comes. For the first time in the poem, he speaks directly to God—and his words break all bounds. Psalm 39 had set the conventional bounds:

I said, ‘I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue; I will keep a muzzle on my mouth.’ . . . I was silent and still; I held my peace to no avail; my distress grew worse . . . Then I spoke with my tongue: ‘Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days . . . Deliver me from all my transgressions. Make me not the scorn of the fool.’

But Job says: “I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul. Am I the Sea, or the Dragon, that you set a guard over me?”

Or hear Psalm 8, which set the acceptable tone for divine praise:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

Job howls back, “What are human beings, that you make so much of them, that you set your mind on them, visit them every morning, test them every moment? Will you not look away from me for a while, let me alone until I swallow my spit?”

In all the Bible, there is no precedent, no parallel for such a speaking to God in bitter parody of the beloved psalms. We can fairly see the poet of *Job* scrutinizing a scroll of the Psalms in the candle light as he in deep anguish searched for a voice to mock the rigid rules of religion oppressing his beloved community in conformable speech, keeping them from knowing themselves in the power of God. Job’s speech is like Jimi Hendrix’ rendering of the Star-Spangled Banner at Woodstock in 1969. Do you remember the foaming anger of the defenders of war back then, when a sound like that could not be stopped? Imagine the emotional torque in this sanctuary, if a sufferer took a song we love and with skill and gravity distorted its sound and overturned its meaning in order to cry out for the unloved, that we might become lovers in the

beloved community! Why, some of you need not imagine it, for that happened right here in this chancel just months before Hendrix played Woodstock. Here on a Sunday morning in May of 1969, James Foreman and other members of the Black Economic Development Conference interrupted the worship service, took the microphones, and read a “Black Manifesto,” demanding that the nation’s churches and synagogues—Riverside in particular—pay hundreds of millions of dollars in reparations for centuries of economic abuse of African-Americans. Was it worship? Does all of Job belong in the Bible?

Here are two remarkable facts about the Bible. One is that they let Job in. God knows, not all of the tradition agrees with him, yet when it was in their power to shut down this disturbing, voice by simply not copying that scroll but letting it mold in a corner, they did not do that. They let the conflict over the meaning of God’s word stand *inside* the holy word. We shall do so too. The second remarkable fact of the Bible and of all transformation—social, psychological, and spiritual—is that it comes in consequence of betrayal.

The whole book is riveted together with stories of betrayal: Adam is betrayed by Eve—or is it by the serpent? Or is it by God, who set them all up for a fall? Abraham’s trust in God’s promise of a good land is betrayed by famine not ten verses after he and Sarah sets their bags down. And Abraham is betrayed into binding his son Isaac for blood sacrifice. The children of Abraham were betrayed into slavery. Moses, though certainly betrayed by Pharaoh, surely experienced God’s denial of the promised land as a betrayal. “I may not get there with you,” he must have said in the solitude of Mt. Nebo, “but mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” Betrayed. For hundreds of years, the people of Jerusalem felt sure that God had secured their kingdom forever. Did they not feel betrayed by God into that awful exile? And Job? Betrayed in friendship, to be sure, but literally betrayed by God into the hands of the Satan. And Jesus—“full of the Holy Spirit, returning from baptism in the Jordan, was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.” Is this not betrayal, and not for the last time? Wherever we turn: betrayal.

We may wish to defend the Almighty from the accusation that God intends this hurt, but for now, let God look to Godself. Let us be as plain spoken as Job. From inside their experience, do not all the heroes of faith feel betrayed—the root of the word “betrayed” means “handed over”—handed over to fates they did not ask for and did not deserve by forces beyond their control? And do you not know this feeling deep in your own bones? Regardless what or who is behind the handing over, betrayal is the fulcrum by which all the heroes of the faith rise to real faith. It is not through bliss and blessing and conventional comforts or guiding reproaches, but by betrayal that they go up. Why on earth is all this betrayal necessary?

Throughout my ministry, for those who have ears to hear, I have worked to help people dismantle weak and unstable terms for faith. Faith does not mean—need not mean—believing that God breaks the laws of nature to rescue

the beloved. That branch can break; let it break. Faith need not mean believing that Bible stories record what a video camera might have seen. That branch can break; let it break. Faith need not mean you hope you will live forever in your own skin, so to speak, with your best-loved ones in bliss. That branch can break; let it break. Faith is not a magic shield. That word will break. Let it break.

Once begun, will it ever stop, this crashing downward through the breaking branches of broken words and betrayal, down, down from the tree house of childish safety and secret words? Is there an end to how much you can lose? One answer is: If one is too terrified that life will take too much away, he will press religion into service as a secret code with rigid rules for speech, with passwords like Eliphaz' giving access to imaginary healing at the hand of God. But if you let things fall where they may, if you accept the broken words that have betrayed your hopes, you will in James Hillman's words, "be led down or let down to [your] own level . . . betrayed to [yourself] where [you are] alone." Then you find what is your ground truly, when words and promises too weak are broken, and you are left alone where you cannot stand yourself. This is "a breakthrough to another level of consciousness." (Hillman) It comes, if it comes, through the experience of betrayal. It is the end of childish trust, and the beginning of humanity, of compassion. This does not mean, of course, that another's choice to betray you was right or good. But real faith sends you out walking on waters of paradox. There even your own evil can become the fulcrum of your being lifted up, if and as you are humbled by seeing it before God. Out there, on the waters of paradox, what comes after betrayal can so shift your shape that you are as if a new creature, freed from the burden of guilt and filled with charity. This Christians have longed to call salvation.

It does not happen automatically. The gift of God is not a mechanism and faith is not a transaction. But when you come to yourself after betrayal without revenge or denial or cynicism, then you are blessed. Then you know in your bones the meaning in our Lord's temptation and his death. And you are ready, in your time and in your way, to work like the poet of Job. You receive a kind of courage, no more a victim of "them," whoever *them* is, but one who chooses the meaning for what has happened to you.

Now, our brother Job is not there yet. You may not be, either. Think that Jesus was not either, while the forty days of wilderness unwound. So bless the Bible for its story of betrayal, for the Word meets you where you are. Come, then, with the ancient poet and his soul mate Job to find how you will probe the passion and the pain your heart has shown you on this earth, and sing it so others can hear it for hope, and hear all of them whom you love whom no one loves. Then you will see anew why we hold the awful tree always before our eyes. For blessing is hidden in betrayal.