

# **The Real Question of Job**

Text: Job 1:1; 2:1-10

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on June 13, 2021*

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. The Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason." Then Satan answered the Lord, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life."

So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

## **SERMON**

In this story Job is not, shall we say, winning. In chapter one he loses all his material wealth. His servants are killed by invaders; his livestock are killed by fire, and a tornado knocks down the home of his eldest son, killing all of his children. That's one terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

But bad days like that never seem to come by themselves, and Job's not-winning streak is not over. Here in chapter two, he wakes up with every inch of his body covered in painful sores, and we find him—understandably—just sitting in ashes, scraping his skin with a piece of pottery. His wife swings by to tell him to quit with all the integrity already and just curse God and die; then his friends show up to tell him it must be his own fault.

You would think this tale of catastrophe and suffering would resonate with people more. If we live long enough, many of us experience some version of this where, through no fault of our own, we suffer enormous, painful loss—and, like Job, it comes in waves. The economy tanks and we lose our job, our home, our business, or maybe all three. Our loved ones are taken by disaster, violence, or disease. And those stresses take their toll on both our emotional and physical health until we end up depressed and sitting in the ashes, wondering if God either sees or cares.

But despite all those points of connection, a lot of people avoid the book of Job. Some forget this is a story that begins with the Hebrew equivalent of "once upon a time." Those readers take the literary device at the beginning literally and think God actually is awful enough to bargain with Satan and do all those horrible things to Job for the sake of some grand lesson. "Not my God" they think, and move on.

Others have entered the story and are right there with Job, wondering what God is going to say to a blameless man who has been absolutely pummeled with disaster for no good reason. “Okay, God,” say those readers, “Why **do** the innocent suffer?” They wait with Job for dozens of chapters, and then are furious when God finally appears and responds to Job’s pain with pages and pages of, “I’m God and you’re not.” Those readers frequently cite this as one more example of why they believe the God of the Old Testament doesn’t measure up to the God portrayed in the New Testament.

It’s true that the question weighing most heavily on Job and his friends is the question almost all of us have: Why does a supposedly benevolent God let wonderful, good people hit the skids? Why doesn’t God step in and protect the righteous from harm? If God doesn’t do that, then what’s the point? It seems to us that life ought to work that way: Do good, receive God’s protection; do evil, reap God’s wrath. And it seems that way to a lot of people in the Bible, including Job, Job’s friends, and King David who calls to God in Psalm 26: “Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.”

But if there’s one thing that’s plain in this life, it’s that, for whatever reason, life **doesn’t** work that way. It’s not a quid pro quo system. Signing up for the faith journey is not an insurance policy; it’s something else entirely. And that something else is sitting right before our eyes in Satan’s opening salvo in the story of Job. This is from chapter 1, verses 8-11:

The Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.” Then Satan answered the Lord, “Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.”

The reason the book of Job never answers the question about why good people suffer is because the point of the book is to move us away from that question and toward a more fruitful one. The fundamental question behind the book of Job isn’t “Why do bad things happen to good people?” but rather, “Why are good people good in the first place?”

Satan is claiming that goodness and integrity in human beings are commodities that can be bought and sold. He doesn’t believe there is any inherent goodness in the human spirit. People are simply trading a set of behaviors in return for their own well-being. It’s all pay to play. The whole test of the book of Job is Satan trying to prove that integrity and faith in God will vanish, even from a totally blameless and faithful man, once you take away the reward of a happy and healthy life. Whether or not Satan is right is the fundamental question of the book.

Job’s wife seems to agree with Satan’s assessment of the human condition. “Do you still persist in your integrity?” she asks, as Job sits in the ashes. “Curse God, and die.” After all, she may not be covered in sores, but she’s also endured the loss of all her material wealth and the loss of all her children. That was enough suffering for her, and now she’s ready to be done with religion and integrity. It was a system that, ultimately, failed her and she wants out.

Job’s friends also have bought into Satan’s model as they try to convince him that his suffering is a result of some kind of failed payment. He wasn’t really blameless, they claim. If he looks back in his integrity checkbook and really digs into the numbers, he’ll find a mistake. Somewhere he must have

paid only \$100 when it should have been \$1,000 or something like that because THAT'S HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS. Pay good deeds, receive blessings. If there are no blessings, it's because you didn't pay.

And even Job's question—and ours—of “Why do good people suffer?” is rooted in the same assumption about how the system should work. Good people should not suffer, we think. A loving God should reward the righteous and punish the wicked—not just ultimately in that way-too-long arc of justice but in the here and now, every minute, every year, every life. Because...why be good if you still land on the trash heap of life? We are baffled by the problem, and many abandon their faith because of it.

The book of Job offers a 42-chapter smackdown of the entire premise. Good behavior is not a commodity to be traded for protection. Righteousness is not fire insurance. The universe is not built on a pay to play foundation. God, through Job, wins the challenge. Satan is proven wrong in his assumption, and Job's friends were so far off base that God tells them Job will need to pray for them if they are to have any hope of redemption. We are left unsatisfied by the book of Job only if we persist in asking the wrong question.

Once we shift the question away from “Why do good people suffer?” to “Why are good people good?” the lessons of the book become clear. On the one hand, we learn that God's promise has never been that we get to avoid tragedy, pain, and suffering in our lives. No matter how righteous we are, we still have to walk THROUGH the valley of the shadow. Faith doesn't get us a ticket to a zipline high above the valley floor. And in case that wasn't abundantly clear from stories like Job, Christians are told to follow Jesus. Specifically, we're told to take up a **cross** and follow Jesus. We are invited to become disciples of the sinless, blameless man who was mocked, beaten, abandoned by his closest friends, and brutally executed in his prime. So, there's that.

Genesis 1 tells us that we are made in God's image. To live well is to reflect the image of our Creator back out into the world. Living with integrity, honor, and faith is simply being true to ourselves. We are good because God is good. Goodness isn't a commodity to sell or trade; it's our truest nature. When are observers most impressed and moved by our goodness? When do the cynics watching our lives really come to understand the loving nature of the God whose image we reflect? When we do it while sitting in the ashes, scraping our sores with a piece of pottery. If good people didn't suffer, Guideposts would be out of business.

While we're surrounded by blessings on every side, faith's detractors say exactly what Satan says at the beginning of the book of Job: “They have it easy. They're rich, healthy, live in peace, have a loving family—take that away and they'll curse you to your face.” It isn't until we're hanging from a cross, surrounded by thieves, and mocked for not being able to help even ourselves that anyone looks. And when they do, they fully expect to hear us curse God. When instead we say, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do,” the earth shakes, assumptions go dark, and the first questions die and are sealed away in a tomb.

When the ashes around Job blew away in the whirlwind of God's presence, the true substance of Job was revealed. He was—before, during, and after his trial—a blameless and upright man. The story wraps up with God giving Job twice as much as he had before, and it might look on the surface as if nothing has really changed. But, during the intervening pages, there were arguments before the

Divine Court to finally get a ruling on nothing less than the nature of humanity. Is there anything good and true and holy at the core of the human soul or is all of our behavior designed to ensure a good life for ourselves? Why ARE good people good?

In the final chapter, Job responds to God's presence by saying "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know...I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you." The question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" may still ring in our own ears, but it is no longer a relevant question to Job by the end. In fact, he doesn't even have Satan's question of "Why are good people good?" By the end of the book, Job has no more questions at all, and Satan is nowhere to be found. In the heat of his suffering, Job still reflected the goodness of his Creator, and Satan vanished like darkness when a candle is lit.

What the book of Job asks of Christians is what those outside our church walls ask of us every day: "What is your faith really made of? When you engage in acts of service to others, is that really about the needs of others or is it some kind of fire insurance for you? When you go to church and worship, is that an act of love for God or a payment toward future benefits? Is anything you do really about reflecting God's love to the world or is it really all about you?" On the day life's hammer falls on us, every one of those people is watching for our answer.

Amen.