

THE BOOK OF JOB

4. The Lord Responds to Job

Job 31:25-27; 38:1-11

PENTECOST 8
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With this message, I come to the midpoint in this sermon series on The Book of Job.

To be fair and honest, a six-week sermon series does not begin to do justice to this 42 chapter Book that, along with the Psalms and Ecclesiastes, forms the major wisdom writings of the Hebrew Scripture, or the Old Testament.

These six sermons can barely scratch the surface.

They touch briefly upon some of the major questions raised by the voices that appear in this ancient, but timeless book about a man whose name has become associated with suffering for almost 3,000 years.

Just this past Thursday, I began a six-week Bible study on this Book. I introduced the study by suggesting how it is not uncommon for people to turn to the Book of Job when they experience suffering — their own and others.

I still remember picking up my Bible and looking at Job during the summer before my junior year in college.

I was searching for answers to the questions my father's sudden death raised, only to painfully discover my own inadequacies in terms of reading and understanding it.

Like I once did, people seem to have the impression that Job is going to provide a model or framework for how one should respond and feel in times of great suffering and loss.

From it, we expect to learn why God acts the way God does — why God allows people to suffer and then does nothing for them

It is no wonder, then, that most people find the Book inadequate, and their expectations still unmet or unsatisfied.

Upon entering the Lutheran ministry and becoming more wise and experienced as both a person and a pastor, I realized my earlier expectations were misguided, and I began to make adjustments to my understanding of this Book.

First of all, Job has trials, but Job is not ON trial.

Second, The Book of Job is not primarily about Job, but it is primarily about God.

Third, this Book has more reasons for righteousness than reasons for suffering.

Finally, the topic of wisdom plays a central role in this Book.

Indeed, Job's suffering leads to a heated debate as to who has the wisdom that will help the characters diagnose and proscribe a remedy for Job's dilemma.

Toward the end of this Book, you will see that, though all the human characters claim that they are wise, it is only God who is wise, as alluded to in today's passages.

Since many are here for Makayla's baptism, and some others might just be visiting, let me catch you up to today's passage.

The curtain, so to speak, opens up to ***“a man from the land of Uz whose name was Job.”***

Like the opening credits to the first **Star Wars** movie informs its viewers, Job is a story that happened *“long ago and far away.”* Job, we are told by the narrator, is ***“the richest man in the east”*** and he fears God and avoids evil.

We are also told that Job has seven sons and three daughters, 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, as well as 500 oxen and female donkeys. Like an Ebenezer Scrooge in a silk hat and finely-tailored wool coat walking down a snow-covered mid-Victorian London street, it's only a matter of time before the snowballs begin to fly.

Suddenly the scene shifts, and the narrator speaks of a heavenly court. God, Himself, is present, and so are all of the heavenly beings. Also on this occasion, someone called Satan, also known as the Adversary, is present.

The Adversary comes across as an operative, reporting that he has been spending time ***“going to and fro on the earth.”***

God inquires whether Satan has noticed His 'servant,' Job.

The mention of the world's richest man get Satan thinking like some Wall Street protester, questioning Job's wealth and possessions. Satan challenges God to take away Job's possessions and ***“he will curse you to your face.”***

My mother used to say that bad things and celebrity deaths happened in threes.

For Job, it occurs in fours, as four successive messages appear with increasingly dire news bulletins, informing Job that:

the Sabeans have attacked . . .
lightning has struck . . .
the Chaldeans have raided . . .
a tornado has touched down . . .
and everything — livestock, possessions, sons and daughters —
has been lost.

The perfectly wonderful world of Job has become perfectly miserable.
However, when Job's perplexed wife encourages Job to curse God,
he remains patient and steadfast, telling her:

“Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and not receive bad?”

As Chapter Two turns into Chapter Three, almost like the movies
The Wizard of Oz or **Pleasantville** turn from black and white into
color, The Book of Job is transformed from prose into poetry, from
narration into dialogues.

The questions that are being asked and answered no longer attempt to
address why Job has suffered so, but what kind of God permits
such tragedies to occur.

How can Job go on believing in such a God, when his world has been
turned upside down?

In this part of The Book of Job we are confronted by a now anguished,
deeply perplexed, and even outraged Job, who becomes engaged in
conversations with three friends, a youthful bystander, and God.

Unlike the reader who knows about Job, his situation, and God's
involvement, Job's companions present three rounds of speeches,
each generally followed by Job's reply.

Each friend offers his brand of self-serving analysis and theology.

We have all met these kinds of believers.

The first, Eliphaz, comes across as trying to be loving and caring,
spilling out his unctuous murmurs of concern, while shoving a
tract in our hands spelling out the four spiritual laws.

The second, Bildad, is a religious authoritarian.

If he had a car, its bumper sticker would read:

“God said it, I believe it, that settles it!”

Bildad is convinced that people like Job's children had sinned and got
what they deserved.

Job just needs to pray more to God for mercy.

Zophar, the third friend, must have gone to seminary.

He shares Bildad's retribution theology, but he has learned to
intellectualize it.

Zophar sucks on his pipe and tells Job, who is scratching his sores with
a pottery shard, that Job's whole situation is very, very complex.

He has decided that Job's major problem is a lack of understanding.

The speeches of Job in response to his friends are, at times, moving, occasionally entertaining, and always passionate and wildly beautiful.

He fluctuates between bitterly opposing his friends, and agreeing with them, even if sarcastically.

“Yes,” he says to them, **“you are the voice of the people, and when you die, wisdom will die with you.”**

Job also acknowledges that he used to believe and say everything they are claiming, but his experience no longer permits this.

For him, not only have the rules changed, but so has the game!

To put it in the vernacular of our casino culture:

Job admits that he was once a constant winner in the game of “Proverbs,” but undeserved suffering turned out to be the Joker in the orthodox deck.

Now that Job has drawn this card, he can no longer play his hand.

Even as Job addresses his friends, he is also addressing God.

“I want to speak before God,” he tells them, **“to present my case in God’s court.”**

He quotes from Psalm 8, shaking his fist in the air.

Job knows he cannot return to the safe harbor that was his former life, so he now turns to face the storm.

“I am ready to risk my life,” he cries, his own howling voice shouting into the wind.

“So what if God kills me?

I’m going to state my case directly to God.

It may even be that my boldness may save me.”

As we witness this drama, it gradually dawns upon the reader that what separates Job from his friends is that Job loves God.

His friends love the religious system.

Job loves God.

Unlike his friends, Job is willing, if he must, to give up his theology, but he will not give up his God.

As Job’s words become more directed toward God, the friends exit the stage, so to speak.

Another person and voice appears, that of young Elihu, who comes across like one of today’s Millennials, with his face stuck in a smart phone, sipping a cup of latte.

He tells Job, **“I am young and you are old, so I was afraid to tell you what I think.**

But now that these three older sages have dropped the ball, someone from my generation is just going to have to speak up and sort out this mess.”

It takes Elihu six windy chapters to speak his version of the truth.
When all is said and done, he has mostly repeated the same theological
mello yello we have heard from Job's three friends.
He comes across as a person who has stumbled across a well-worn
truism, and believes that he is its first discoverer.
As one commentator put it,
"Though there may be 'no fool like an old fool,' Elihu, as a young
fool, comes close."

Well it seems that I have run out of both time and paper, and I haven't
even addressed the title of today's message.
That, my beloved people of God, will have to wait until next week.
For now we have God's word given to us in Makayla's baptism, our
liturgy and readings, and our anthem and sharing of the bread and
wine.
If you need more, I invite you to come back next Sunday and hear what
God has to say to put Job and us in our places.

AMEN