

Intro to Job

Over the past several weeks, one of the lectionary reading threads
Has been through the book of Job.
Many of us are familiar with that story –
which some scholars believe is the oldest of the scriptures in our Bible –
The story of how a good man is severely afflicted.

In the Job story, it's even God who allows the good man to be afflicted:
God and Satan are having a conversation in which they're both noting how good Job is,
Then Satan taunts God by saying that Job only worships God
Because God has given him so many good things.
Satan reckons that Job would be cursing God
If he met up with hardship.
But God is so certain of Job's goodness that he agrees to Satan's plan:
Satan will bring calamity on Job
And together Satan and God will see whether Job blesses or curses God in return.

The story that unfolds is one of Job facing incredible hardship:
Many of his cattle and livestock are first stolen;
His servants killed.
The rest of his sheep and servants are burnt up in a fire.
His camels are stolen.
His children are killed when a huge wind comes up from the desert.
Then his own health is attacked: he developed horrible sores over his whole body.
He goes to an ash-heap where he tries to get some relief
By scraping at the sores with a broken potsherd.
With their children and livelihood all gone, his wife comes to taunt him:
"Why don't you just curse God and die? At least you'll be out of your misery."
Job does follow with some cursing:
He doesn't curse God, but he does curse the day he was born
And he repeatedly protests his innocence to God:
Reminding God he has always done what is right,
And challenging God to prove otherwise.
Indeed, the story that unfolds tackles one of the oldest questions of mankind:
Why do bad things happen to good people?

We also know that three of Job's friends come to counsel him –
And that they all seem to agree that all the evil that has come to him
Is because of his sin.
In various – and seemingly unrelenting – forms,
They tell Job to repent of his evil – which he continues to deny.
In their understanding, God only punishes those who do evil.
But Job, even in his agony, rejects that argument –
And he points out that the wicked often go unpunished.
He's pushing forward an argument that though doing evil can cause calamity and hardship,
Certainly, one can suffer for one's mistakes and misdeeds,
Hardship also comes to those who do good.
We can't use Goodness as an insurance policy against hard times.

As the story continues, Job's three friends continue their accusations –

'Speaking truth in love,' one might say – and urging Job to repent.
Job resists, but he does seem to adopt some of their argument –
In fact, he decides he wants to try his case in God's court of law –
Because he understands God as a God of justice,
So surely God will understand that Job's suffering is unjust.
His friends respond that Job's insistence on his own goodness
Is an affront to God – who does Job think he is, anyway?

When God finally agrees to hear Job's case,
God pours out a seemingly endless flood to proclaim his own goodness
And protest what God has allowed to happen to him.
It's just not fair, God!

In the story, God listens patiently,
And then responds by giving Job a glimpse of the immensity of who God is –
God asks Job to consider the might of the world God has created:
"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?"
God asks if Job created the sea or light or snow or rain or clouds,
Whether Job can make animals give birth
Or teach a hawk to soar or an eagle to make a nest.

God asks Job if he is the one who created
The mountains and earth that yield food,
The strength of the oxen and wild beasts,
The power of the rivers and the seas.

God describes in terrifying detail a sea monster, Leviathan,
What some have described as 'God's pet dragon',
Crashing and thrashing across the waters,
Flames bursting from its nostrils,
Its strength beyond the grasp of any human attack.

In short, God paints a vivid picture of creation that dwarfs the scope of one single person.
In effect, God says, 'And who are you tell me what to do,
Or to find fault with my creation?'

One imagines there is then silence.
Job still sitting in the ash-heap with his sores and his potsherd –
We're not sure if the friends are still sitting there with him....
But there is silence.

And then we hear these words:

Job 42:1-6

42 Then Job answered the Lord:

² 'I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

³ "Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?"

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

⁴ "Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you declare to me."

⁵ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;

⁶ therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.'

The next few verses that follow tell us that God then speaks to the Job's friends as well,
Telling them that they need to ask forgiveness for telling Job wrong things
About God and making false accusations against Job himself.
And that they should mark their repentance by offering sacrifices and burnt offerings to Job.
They do this, and Job then prays to God for his friends.
Let's hear the verses that follow:

Job 42:10-17

10 And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends;
and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.

¹¹Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before,
and they ate bread with him in his house;

they showed him sympathy and comforted him
for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him;
and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring.

¹²The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning;
and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels,
a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys.

¹³He also had seven sons and three daughters.

¹⁴*He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch.*

¹⁵In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters;
and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers.

¹⁶After this Job lived for one hundred and forty years, and saw his children,
and his children's children, four generations.

¹⁷*And Job died, old and full of days.*

What we have here is the ultimate Happy Ending!
Good did prevail in the end!
As the saying goes, 'If it's not good now, it's not the end!'

The goodness apparently comes not just after Job's 'day in court' with God –
But when he had recognised his own littleness
And when he prayed for his friends.

And suddenly everything is restored:

Family and friends who had shunned him come back to eat with him,
And they bring gifts to get him back on his feet again.

God blesses Job with unimaginable wealth in terms of flocks and livestock.
God also gives Job new sons and daughters –

Interesting that the daughters are all named –

Quite unusual for the time, because the sons are NOT named!

Some have speculated that this was so that everyone would know

What a good dowry would come to their prospective husbands!

But Job is also seen to be valuing his daughters as much as his sons –

Which did not always happen.

I love the last line: 'Job died, old and full of days'

Full of blessings of a life well-lived.

It would be convenient to leave it there: to be content that goodness has been rewarded
And blessings have come to those who wait.

But there's one other aspect I want to explore in this story,
And that comes out of the experiences of several of my family and friends in the US
Who have recently gone through the two devastating hurricanes, Helene and Milton.
While I was not in Florida or N Carolina in recent weeks,
I have survived other hurricanes and floods and droughts and natural disasters.
I know that sometimes our cry is: why me?
But I also know that there is much to learn from going through hard times.
The book of Job reminds us sometimes we can only hear God's voice most clearly
When all our comforts are taken away...

As many of you will know, I grew up in Florida, and I was in Central and North Florida
Earlier this year (for family visits after my father and my brother-in-law died).
So often when I have gone back to Florida, I have found myself saddened
By the seemingly wanton destruction of the natural world,
'Old Florida,' as I think of it –
Swampy forests and wild tangles of undergrowth beside rivers and streams
And lakesides overhung with ancient oaks and Spanish moss...
Now largely overtaken by cities of cement and tall buildings and imported palm trees.
The sometimes-unbearable heat and humidity overruled by omnipresent air conditioners.
The swamps drained to control the mosquitoes, and canals installed to service pleasure boats.
Eight-lane highways promising speedier travel from here to there...

In both of my recent visits, I was delighted to find a few remaining patches of Old Florida –
Where nature was still respected, even human habitation demands were obliged.
But I also left with a sadness that so many seemed to think their own 'comfort'
Was a right to be pursued at all cost
And that cost was being born by the earth: our collective demand for our comfort
Was costing the earth.

What I've heard from family and friends over the past few weeks has given me hope again.
From mountainous Western North Carolina,
where whole towns and homes and businesses –
and people and crops and livestock –
have been washed down the hillsides,
and roads and bridges destroyed
and power out for days and weeks
with the only running water coming from streams
which could be contaminated...

People are learning to care for each other again.
There was a story of an older woman living on her own far up the mountain,
Cut off from all communication and transportation...
Much of her property seemingly in ruins.
When she was finally reached by rescuers.
She welcomed them in and offered them what she had –
Some food from the pantry, some water from her well,
Not realising that they thought she was the one needing help!
A friend of mine speaks of the early days of people bringing out
all the food they had in the freezer
and finding ways to cook it and eat it all together.
She speaks of the irony of 'losing it all' that helped her and others recognise

How very much they actually have.

Another speaks of learning how to wash one's clothes with water from the stream
And flush one's toilets with whatever waste water remained...
(which reminded me of the seven years of drought we experienced in India years ago!).
And feeling immeasurably blessed when water trucks arrived to fill up containers!

My brother in Florida acknowledges their damage from Hurricane Milton was much less –
But how he learned more about his neighbours
as they each gathered up roofing tiles from their yards
and traded with each other to get the right one's from their own roof!
My sister-in-law tells of having to move her makeup mirror from her dresser
To the window sill as they had no power for the lights.
Sitting there in the semi-darkness, she noticed a flicker outside,
And realised there was a hummingbird in the tree just outside...
She never would have seen it, if she hadn't moved the mirror...

Another friend says that when the power was down and she couldn't watch the television,
She picked up a book from the stack that had been accumulating over several years...
And she'd read three books before the power came back on.
She describes it as a great treat!

During one of my video calls to my brother several days after the storm in Florida,
He was driving up and down the highway
Trying to find propane gas to replenish his generator...
Not finding any available, he got home just in time for the power to be restored!
What rejoicing there was!
And my sister-in-law has a new respect for her electric washing machine,
Able to deal with heaps of towels dirtied through cleaning up after the storm.
And she absolutely adores having a hot shower again!

Not everyone has come through so well –
Many have indeed lost homes and businesses and the lives of friends and family.
And they are learning painfully how to put their lives back together
Amidst mud and muck and great loss.
But overall there is a new respect for what God has given us.
There is a growing appreciation of what we take for granted –
What we have demanded as what we 'deserve'.
Perhaps we can only truly recognise what we have
When it is taken away.

Is that Satan testing us?
Is it karma –
The deprivation and destruction a just reward for our own negligence?
Is there something about the consequences of our demands
that the earth and all creation serve US and our desires for comfort?
The climate scientists have been warning us for decades
That the earth can only take so much from us
And then it will inflict its revenge.
As with Job, we do well to listen carefully to and consider all of God's creation:

Do we think that we are the ones who know everything there is to know?

The words of scripture return: "Be still and know that I am God."

God and God's creation is bigger than any of us

And yet it is made available to us –

To steward, to care for, to love and appreciate and respect.

When bad things happen to good people,

Sometimes it is of our own doing.

And sometimes it is a result of the evil of others.

And sometimes it is a time to stand back and reflect:

Where is God in all of this?

And what does God need for me to learn?

Perhaps the true joy of the book of Job

Is to recognise, with Job, the ultimate blessing that can come out of hardship.

We'll sing a hymn in a few moments that,

Interestingly enough, uses the same tune as the hymn we sang a few moments ago.

But this hymn, written a few years ago by Michaela Youngson,

former President of Conference,

Reminds us that God's Spirit is still available to us,

Even through the most difficult situations,

And God's Spirit with us is what can 'make God's colours sing.'

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Intro to confession –

Reflecting as we have on the situations of Job –

And of those who have recently faced natural disasters

Perhaps we all can begin to recognise where we, too, have gone astray –

Where we have let the desire for our own comfort

Come before our appreciation of all God has given us.

How our self-centred demands have 'cost the earth'

And brought disaster to others...

It is with those thoughts in mind that we enter into a time of confession.

We will be using a liturgy from the Iona community

In which we, as gathered community,

Confess before each other – and receive forgiveness within community.

Along with Job, perhaps we can remember as well

To pray for those who have caused us grief –

Recalling that they, too, are part of God's good creation.

Along with Job's friends, perhaps we will be led

To make restitution for our wrong-doings

Thereby restoring the blessing of relationships within our community.