

## The Gospel According to Job

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Job 19:23-27a; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15; Luke 20:27-40

“For I know that my Redeemer lives. . . .”-- Job 19:25

If you're up on your Greek and Middle English this morning – as I'm sure most of you are – you'll recognize right away that the title of this morning's sermon is trickier than most. The word “gospel” means “good news” or “good tale” or even “good story” in its Middle English roots, and it comes from the Greek word *euaggelion* which means pretty much the same thing.

We all understand that the story of Jesus is good news. But what about the story of Job? Where's the good news in that?

Most of us know the basic outline of the story of poor old Job, commonly thought of as one of the sorriest characters in the entire Bible. He starts out a wealthy, healthy, pious, respectable burgher with a nice family and a nice home and before you can say “Reversal of fortunes,” everything has gone right to hell – literally, because Satan has taken control of Job's life.

Satan – or “the satan” as he's called in the book of Job – makes life a living hell for Job. He destroys Job's property first, then kills his children in a tornado. Then he causes Job to break out in some sort of horrid skin condition that's both painful and disfiguring. Before we've made it through two chapters of Job's story, Job is a sorry mess.

And then, if all that weren't enough, along come his three friends – Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar – to comfort him. And what form does that comfort take? They tell Job he deserved his suffering! They tell Job that he must have done something to deserve the awful things that are happening to him because, as Eliphaz says, “Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off?” (4:2). “As I have seen,” he goes on, “those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same.”

That's the tidy moral universe in which Job's three friends operate: the good receive good and the bad receive bad. Or as we'd put it, echoing Eliphaz, you reap what you sow.

The problem is, as we all know, it just ain't so. That's not the way the world works. Bad things do happen to good people and wicked people often get away with their wickedness. Think of all the atrocities committed by the Nazis, by Stalin, by Pol Pot, by the Turks in Armenia, by Hutus in the Rwandan genocide, and by Bosnian Serbs in Srebrenica – how many have been brought to justice? A handful of military commanders, at most, but the vast majority of the guilty died full of years or remain at large and, we know, will never be prosecuted for their crimes. It is not true that justice works unflinchingly in this world or even most of the time; justice, in the sense of people getting their just deserts, works some of the time at best.

And it certainly is not working in Job's case. If anyone deserved the calamities that befell him, it was most emphatically not Job. And he says that, again and again and

again, to the platitudinous moralisms served up by his friends. Whatever wrong I've done, Job says, I don't deserve this. And he's absolutely right.

But the central question in the book of Job isn't about why the righteous suffer or the wicked don't. It's about something deeper. It's about faith – one's relationship to God – and whether one's faith can withstand a clear-eyed look at life. That's what "the Satan" means when he asks God, right at the beginning of the story, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" That's at 1:19, and what Satan is asking is, Will Job, an obviously religious man, remain a believer if things start going very, very badly for him? Or to put the question another way, Are people only religious when life is going their way? What happens to their religion when suffering strikes?

So when people ask, when something terrible happens to them, "Why is this happening to me?" that's in many ways the wrong question. It's the inevitable question, but its inevitability doesn't make it right, because there is no answer to it. There is no answer to the moral question of why this terrible thing has happened to me or to someone I love. That's the central teaching of the book of Job, and if you want to learn more about Job's story, take my class on Old Testament this winter that I'll be teaching for the Lay School, because the book of Job is one of the writings we'll be studying.

And the whole story of Job says there is no moral answer to the question of suffering except – and this is a huge EXCEPT – that the relationship with God of the truly spiritual and religious person is not broken by suffering. That's the story of Job.

Suffering is not supreme. Suffering does not triumph. Suffering does not win. Suffering does not have the last word. The last word is God's word and that word is love. That's the message of the book of Job, and that message, as I've said to you many times before, that is the heart and soul of the Christian gospel: the last word is God's word and that word is love. That's the gospel, and that's the message that I find in the book of Job.

Job's fortunes, as we all know, are more than restored at the end of the book, and some people have found this an unsatisfactory ending – too Hollywood, too convenient, too pat. Serious people don't like pat answers, and the church has been guilty of giving pat answers to tough questions for too long. Serious people need serious religion, and that's very much what the book of Job is about, because life doesn't get much more serious than it got for Job.

But the end of Job's story isn't the point of Job's story, at least not for people of a serious disposition. The point of Job's story is that Job does indeed fear God for nothing – that is, Job is religious, spiritual, pious, God-fearing – whatever word you want to use – just because God is God and Job is Job, and not for any of the externals that we commonly consider as God's blessings or Satan's curses or life's vicissitudes.

Stuff happens – that's life. Get used to it. Grow up. Put on your Big Boy or Big Girl pants. Man up, as the kids say today. Suck it up. Stay calm and carry on as the British government urged Britons during the Blitz. Don't lose your nerve, don't lose your cool, and for God's sake – literally – don't lose your religion, because your religion will get you through more stuff that life will throw at you than anything else in this world. That's a conviction of mine, that's a promise I make to you, and that's the message I take from the book of Job.

"For I know that my Redeemer lives," Job says, in our text for this morning, "and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another."

Talk about faith! Talk about hope! Talk about love! How tough is the religion of this man who's had just about every awful thing life can throw at him thrown at him? How many of us would put up with such suffering, such abuse and neglect at the hands of

an indifferent universe, and still say, “I believe”?

Does any of us, who live amidst such security and comfort as are ours, have any idea how hard it is for most people to say those two simple words, “I believe”? When the ancient creeds, such as the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed open with those words “I believe,” they were making their most radical statement right out of the starting blocks. The hard part of any creed or statement of faith is not to string together a bunch of words about God or Jesus or the Holy Ghost; the hard part is believing them – trusting that they are true, not in the sense of historically factual but rather in the sense of existentially credible, reliable, and compelling.

These words about God and Jesus and the Spirit and the world and sin and pain and death and resurrection and eternal life – words such as those, those beautiful words of life we sometimes sing about – words such as those we recited every Sunday in my former congregation – those words were hammered out on the anvil of adversity, conflict, strife, and confusion. They may have been strung together by theologians, but they were accepted and trusted by ordinary Christians. They are the product of real living and real life by people facing real challenges. And across the ages, and in culture after culture, women and men have said those words – clung to those words – literally for dear life.

That’s what it means to say, “I believe.” Believing takes guts, because the evidence is not in our favor, any more than it was in Job’s favor. Believing takes courage; it is not for the faint of heart. Believing takes intelligence; it is not for the weak of mind. Those are the messages that come thundering out of the pages and pages of dialogue between Job and his so-called comforters. Job’s patience isn’t nearly as impressive as his resilience, his toughness, and his fight. Job has to struggle to hold onto whatever shreds of faith he can preserve, and he does; and that, my friends, is the message of the gospel as loud and clear as anything you’ll read in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.

It’s easy to be an atheist. You just hang out and say life is what it is. It’s easy to be a fundamentalist. You just hang out and robotically repeat words from your sacred text or your religious tradition, with neither comprehension nor true spirituality.

But being a true believer in the gospel of Jesus Christ – that takes effort. It takes work, it takes dedication, it takes perseverance, and above all else it takes trust – trust in the God we say we believe in when we say “We believe.” Don’t ever underestimate the power of those words, dear friends, to get you through life’s toughest moments. Skeptics and cynics think that because some people are gullible enough to believe nonsense, belief doesn’t matter.

But that’s not true; belief does matter. It matters a great deal. That’s the message of the story of Job. When he’d lost everything else, the one thing that even Satan could not strip from Job was his faith, and that – not his family, not his friends, not his wealth, not his health – his faith allowed him not simply to survive his ordeals but to have the strength neither to be defeated nor defined by them.

That’s the truth, friends. If you’re worried that I’m telling you that the truth is found in a story that may be folklore, then let me reassure you. The truth of the gospel according to Job – that love wins, that God’s word will be the last word, and that faith has the power to save you from being defeated and defined by suffering – that truth is the truth of Jesus Christ, of the apostle Paul, of Francis of Assisi, of Mahatma Gandhi, of Martin Luther King, of Teresa of Calcutta, of Nelson Mandela, of Desmond Tutu, of Mahala Yousafzai, and of countless others who have really lived and really died and will be really raised to eternal life by it and in it. And there’s nothing fictional about them.

When it comes to suffering, friends, don’t try to predict the future, don’t try to manipulate God with promises of good behavior if you just get through this, and don’t mouth religious platitudes simply for the sake of having something to fill the painful

silence. In other words, don't be like Job's friends; be like Job instead. Hold to the promise of God's abiding presence in your life, and God's unbreakable love for you and for all creation, especially when those times arise, and they certainly will, when all the evidence points in the opposite direction.

"Tough times," Robert Schuller liked to say, "never last, but tough people do." That's the gospel according to Job. And what made Job – and can make you – tougher than Teflon is grounding your life in the God who is love itself. People who are grounded in God are grounded in love, because we know that God is love, and as Rob Bell famously said a couple of years ago, love wins.

Get on the winning side, folks, and let the skeptics live with their skepticism, the cynics with their cynicism, and the materialistic atheists with their emptiness. Get on the team that will win, eventually, despite all the zigs and zags we'll have to take to get there. Join your teammates with names like Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Deborah, Job and Mary, and play the only game really worth playing. Play love in action, and play it to win.