

## BACK TO THE FUTURE

Well, we've finally made it to the last Sunday of Job! The story is concluded; a happy ending provided. Case closed. Before we put the Job file back in storage let's take a moment to quickly review where we've been. We started Job's saga back on Oct. 3, when we heard a portion of the opening prose narrative and the set-up – the bet – between God and the Satan over whether Job only revered God because God was good to Job. That didn't end well for Job, but he hung in there. As noted at the end of that sermon:

The book of Job invites hard questions and invites to consider them without flinching, without looking away. It calls us to consider what it means to be in authentic relationship with God. Is it possible to love God for who God is, and not hope for reward?

We concluded that first section of Job with Job sitting on an ash heap, possession-less, family destroyed, and afflicted.

The following Sunday, Oct. 10, we read a portion of Job's complaint with Job frustrated that God was nowhere to be found. We pondered our experiences of divine absence and I suggested that perhaps what we can learn from Job, is that having faith enough to believe the conversation continues, may be the most helpful thing. It may be the only thing. Even in the deep silence of the darkest times in our lives, God continues to be in relationship with us, even when we cannot perceive it.

Last week, we heard part of God's reply when God actually did show up. It was puzzling answer to Job's questions. In fact, it didn't seem to directly answer Job at all. But, as I noted:

God responds to Job by bursting his box – his world – wide open, revealing all the wonder, majesty, terror, and beauty of creation and by reassuring Job, and all of us, that while from our perspective the world in all its beauty and splendor may also appear to be chaotic, tragic, and unjust, there is more at work that meets our eyes and understanding.

This morning, once again encounter Job, seemingly brow-beaten and bullied into submission, meekly responding,

'I know that you can do all things,  
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.  
"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.  
"Hear, and I will speak;  
I will question you, and you declare to me."  
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,  
but now my eye sees you;

therefore I despise myself,  
and repent in dust and ashes.’

Our hero in humble surrender.

But then, things radically shift, and in the passage that falls between the two sections of the final chapter of Job provided by the lectionary God, addressing Job’s friends says, ‘My wrath is kindled against you ...; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.’ And then we get, of all things, a happy ending. Job has his family and fortunes restored, and they all lived happily ever after; the end.

Say what?! After the incredible journey we’ve been on, particularly for those who read took time to read the entire book, this ending comes across as extremely unsatisfactory. If we were looking for answers in this enigmatic book, the ending doesn’t appear to provide us with any. Which is incredibly frustrating because we tend to think if we just work hard enough at something – through study and prayer – we’ll arrive at some answers to life’s perplexing questions. Job, appears to upend that thinking. As William Safire notes in his, *The First Dissident: The Book of Job in Today’s Politics*:

In refusing to be the celestial cop, God cops out; the accused deity fails to answer Job’s indictment with reasons we can put to use in our own lives.

God the accused shouted down the prosecutor-plaintiff, who then panicked and gave up the case. In return, as the prosaic epilogue recounts, the awed and intimidated accuser was corruptly paid off with six thousand camels, a thousand oxen and as many she-asses, a fresh family, and only God knows what other material rewards.

For centuries, scholars have wrestled with the ending of Job, many relying heavily on the sense that the beginning and ending of Job pre-dated the middle the section of Job and were tacked on at a later date. If you don’t like the ending, you can just ignore it since it probably wasn’t initially there to begin with. Safire and others offers several other possibilities to explain the happy ending of Job:

- *The fix was put in by orthodox scribes*
- *Poet-Job, in order to publish without being punished for heresy, had to make compromises i.e., the author felt the need to say “There, there, I didn’t mean it.”*
- *The author was genius enough to come up with the question but not enough to work out a satisfactory answer. i.e., “This sometimes happens to those blessed with inspiration but afflicted with a lack of stamina... maybe poet-Job painted himself into a corner...”*
- *Job knew he would win the case, and let God cop a plea on Job’s accusations of him in return for acquittal of all charges against Job.*

Safire also provides this humorous imagined conversation ala Mel Brooks:

Two men, a writer and an editor, are hunched over a pile of scrolls.

“You really want to say, “Damn the day that I was born?” You know who made the day - that comes as close as you can to cursing Shaddai.”

“Jeremiah got away with it - leave it in.”

“How about this supposedly happy ending, then, where you have Job dying wealthy but childless - what’s the use of dying with money, if you have nobody to leave it to? That will depress everybody.”

“If you want, we can change it to have God give him a new set of children, but none of my serious readers will believe it.”

“Look, - Job has to get everything back double, or it’s not going into the canon. Instead, because you did a lot of work on it, we’ll dump it into the Apocrypha in the back.”

“Okay, Job gets back everything as his reward - my readers, who are inclined to irony, will take it as my way of poking fun at retributive justice.”

Increasing, however, scholars are insisting, and I would agree, that we wrestle with the book of Job as we now have it, including the fairy tale beginning and ending. So, what are we to do with this ending that seems to subvert the entire middle portion of the book? After all, the entire book up to this point seems to have been an argument against the doctrine of retributive justice; that is, the idea that God always rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. Now, at the end of the book, that belief seems to be confirmed: Job is rewarded for his piety (or at least reimbursed for his losses). The friends appear to have been right all along. But is that really what is going on here? As Presbyterian pastor Patrick Willson notes:

Maybe the poetry of 40 chapters has so arrested our imagination that we won’t recall chapter 1 and everything lost there.

But we do remember—how a great wind struck where Job’s “sons and daughter were eating and drinking,” how they died in the collapse of that house. We understand when houses collapse and we build new ones. We rebuild, marry again, have children, and go on with life, but there is no evading the terrible loss. ... Life goes on and new things happen, good things, but there is no replacing what is lost. New daughters and sons do not take the place of the lost ones.

No they don’t.

Last week, God spoke to Job out of the whirlwind and reminded Job that this beautiful world that God has created, is full of freedom and chaos. The question is, “What are we to do when we are caught up in that chaos?” I was fortunate in seminary to have a course on Wisdom literature with Professor Ellen Davis. In seeking to make sense of Job, Davis writes:

The great question that God’s speech out of the whirlwind poses for Job and every other person of integrity is this: Can you love what you do not control?”<sup>5</sup> It is a question worth pondering. Can you love what you do not control: this wild and beautiful creation, its wild and beautiful Creator, your own children?

Speaking to the question of whether ten new children can replace those lost, Davis argues that

The real question is how much it costs Job to become a father again.”<sup>6</sup> Like a Holocaust survivor whose greatest act of courage is to bear children after the cataclysm, Job chooses against all odds to live again. Job (and his wife) choose to bear children into a world full of heart-rending beauty and heart-breaking pain. Job chooses to love again, even when he knows the cost of such love.

Perhaps, that is one place where we can end up with this challenging text.

In a scene that is reminiscent of *Back to the Future*, Job completes his journey back at the beginning, back with his wife, and family, and possessions, but things are not the same. How could they be? How often does the journey we take so refashion us that even when we return home, it is not the same – we are not the same. I’m still enjoying the after effects of the sabbatical this congregation granted me a couple years ago. It wasn’t until I arrived in Berkeley, CA, that I fully realized how tired and burned out I had become. It took weeks for me to learn how to stop and be still and more weeks to re-attune my senses, my perception. When I returned to Oberlin and First Church, I wasn’t the same; you weren’t the same; our relationship to each other wasn’t the same. And for all the changes ever since, it’s been wonderful in many ways.

“You can’t go home again” but you can discover a new home with re-envisioned familiar elements. A home, where God is indeed present, in life, in debate, in silence, in whirlwind, in every aspect of our lives, inviting us again and again, to perceive God’s unfolding creation and rebirth, even in our lives.

AMEN.