

A MESS IN THE MIDDLE

Those of you who got up on this somewhat gloomy morning, headed into church or consumed enough coffee to tune in, all just so you could encounter the story of Job should probably get an extra star in your crown, but as we may learn from Job, that's not quite how things work. This morning we heard the first of four sections from the book Job that are assigned in the lectionary for this time in the liturgical year. And, heads up, I'm going to use that as an opportunity for us to explore this puzzling, enigmatic book together. I know, someone of you may now be thinking, "See you again in November," but I hope you'll stick around for this journey into the mystery of God nonetheless.

Despite its inclusion in the biblical canon, Job is one of those books that many of us has heard about but few may have read all the way through. That's not surprising. Although it starts out with a bit of a fairy tale: "Once upon a time, in the land of Uz, there was a man named Job..." the prose narrative of the first two chapters gives way to 39 chapters of poetry before returning to the prose narrative. If you're not a fan of poetry that can be quite a slog. Sitting down to read the book of Job can feel a bit like sitting down to read the book of Genesis: it's all well and good until you get to the "begats" and then things get a bit tedious.

It doesn't help that there are a lot of things we don't know about Job: We're not sure when it was written; We're not sure who wrote it: We don't know where Uz is (probably just a made up location); We don't know the audience for which it was intended; It's seems pretty clear the book has undergone some form editorial evolution but we're not clear on how or why that happened. There are words and phrases that continue to perplex even the most learned scholars who are well versed in multiple ancient languages. The good news, is that by and large, there is a structure to Job and that can help at least give us some reins to hang onto for the ride.

More recent scholarship has provided English translations that help make Job more accessible, notably Stephen Mitchell's translation, *The Book of Job*, and Edward L. Greenstein's 2019 *Job: A New Translation*. Greenstein was this year's speaker for Oberlin College's Haskell Lecture and I am thankful for that lecture having brought his translation to my attention. Mitchell frames the book this way:

- Prologue: The Legend (part of which we heard this morning)
- The Curse (this is Job's first extended speech in chapter 3)
- The First Round (the first exchange between Job and his three "friends": Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar (you can decide if these are the sorts of friends you'd like to have)
- The Second Round (the second exchange between Job and his friends)
- The Third Round
- The Summation (this is Job's final defense)
- The Voice from the Whirlwind (God responds – but not in the way Job, or the reader expects)
- Epilogue: The Legend

Noticeably absent from Mitchell's framework is the arrival of Elihu, a fourth "friend" who hasn't been previously mentioned and who disappears from the picture after he makes his remarks. Mitchell also doesn't include the so-called "Wisdom hymn" that appears in chapter 28. Many scholars consider these later additions; others argue for a more "canonical" approach that encourages us to engage the text we have received, that we now have in our hands, for better or for worse, and to view the entire text as worthy of inclusion.

Whatever we may make of Mitchell's decisions regarding Elihu and the Wisdom hymn, his structure can help give us some sign posts along the way to keep us on track with the overall structure of the book. That is why I am encouraging you, in the next week, to sit down and read Job – all the way through – preferably in one sitting. It's only 42 chapters – and that's "bible" chapters, so they're short. Don't get hung up on the small stuff, just try to get the gist of the argument. After you finish a chapter, pause for a moment and ask yourself this question, "What is one thing that this chapter is trying to say?" Just one thing. And then move onto the next chapter.

OK, now that we all have a reading assignment, — I mean, it's the start of a new academic semester after all! — Where to begin? How do we approach this book in order to make some sense of it? Today, we begin at the beginning. "Once upon a time..." which leads us to expect a happy ending at some point. Like most fairy tales, the setup is pretty straight forward. We heard a piece of it this morning but the lectionary omits almost the entire first chapter. It begins by telling us a bit about Job – he's a guy who has just about everything: seven sons and three daughters, seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, and very many servants. He is described as "blameless and upright" and so careful that he even says extra prayers for his children just in case they did something unseemly.

One day God is in conversation with the heavenly beings, including Satan, or rather, more properly, "The Satan." This is not a guy in a red suit with a pitchfork. He's more like an "accuser" or as one scholar has suggested, a district attorney, who goes around checking on folks and reporting back to God. God gets the story rolling by inviting The Satan, to "consider my servant Job" for "There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil." The Satan, replies, "That's all well and good, but that's really only because you've protected him and given him everything. Take everything away from him and he'll sing a different tune." God says, "Wanna bet?" and the game is on. So The Satan arranges for calamity to strike and in an instant Job loses it all: sheep, camels, oxen, servants, sons, and daughters. And yet, Job does not curse God. So The Satan returns to God and says, "Many people can lose a lot and remain faithful, but how about we see how he does if he loses his health?" And God says, "OK." And next thing you know poor Job is covered head to toe in boils and sores and sitting out on an ash heap scraping himself with a piece of pottery. He still doesn't curse God. Just past the end of our passage, Job's three so-called friends show up. They all sit together in silence for seven days and seven nights. And then the poetry begins.

I think we are initially drawn into this story because we like fairy tales. We suspect we'll get to go along on an interesting, if not fraught trip to a happy ending. But like most fairy tales, the middle is messy, and in Job it's VERY messy. It's messy because we may have been told that it's about the question of theodicy: How can God be good if bad things continue to happen to

people? But that's not really the question. It's messy because at its core Job is questioning a very fundamental understanding: that there is some sort of cosmic reward and punishment system in place with our relationship with God. If that's the case, how do we explain and blameless and upright person like Job, encountering such horrible tragedy. It's the prosperity Gospel turned on its head. It challenges the hidden underlying assumptions we all make at times about our relationship with God: that it is somehow transactional, and that our faith, our allegiance, should get us something. Does God buy our loyalty by granting us a blessed life? Perhaps not a bank account of riches but at least life free of major tragedy. When tragedy strikes, as it will, is our faith larger than what we think we've "invested" in God?

One scholar, Karla Suomala, has humorously suggested that an American version of Job would require some action on Job's part:

He wouldn't just sit on the ash heap complaining, cursing the day he was born, and demanding a reason from God for what has happened. No, Job might start out in protest, but, being such a remarkable person he would "get over it" and "move on." He might get a good lawyer to help him recoup some of his losses but he would focus on reinventing himself. He would get into a new line of work — one with more potential than land and cattle. He would find a new wife — someone more supportive and who understands him better and perhaps a therapist to help him deal with grief. He would get better friends since the old ones were of no help at all. He would work day and night. He would keep at it until he was on top again; in fact, he would emerge in a situation even better than before. His experience would have had a purpose — it would have taught him something. It would have been worth it in the end.

But that's not what unfolds with biblical Job, as we shall see over the next few weeks. There is no "piety of protection" as one commentator has put it. Because we more readily connect with Job as a fellow human, our tendency is to make this story all about Job. In other words, all about us. But it's really not about Job. It's about God. Virginia Woolf spoke for many readers of Job when she wrote to a friend: "I read the book of Job last night. I don't think God comes out of it well." 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? This morning, we conclude our portion of Job, sitting with Job on the ash heap, possession-less, family destroyed, inflicted. We sit with him in silence as we ponder the God in whom we believe.

AMEN.