

The Oldest Question
Job 1:1; 2:1-10
Second Sunday of Epiphany
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The story begins, as all good stories do, long ago and faraway. It begins in a mysterious land called Uz. It begins with a man named Job. But in reality, the story could be anyone, in any time, in any place. Because we all know Job.

Job is the young woman in her twenties hit by a drunken driver as she crosses the street.

Job is the grieving mother, standing over the bedside of her incurably ill child.

Job is the new widower, grieving the loss of his beloved wife.

Job is the innocent bystander, gunned down in a drive-by shooting.

Job is the mother in Haiti, clawing at the ruins of her home to free her trapped children.

We all know Job. Job is our sister, or our parent, or our co-worker, or our church friend. Job is our next door neighbor, or our neighbor far away in a place like Haiti. And sometimes, Job is us.

We know the shock, the horror, the questions that Job asks that seem to have no answer: Why? Why has this terrible thing happened to them? Why has this terrible thing happened to me?

We just don't understand why.

We can understand retribution, and actions having consequences. The drunk driver gets in their car and drives into a tree and ends up paralyzed. The career criminal who lives a life of violence and dies in a rain of gunfire. The drug addict who dies of an

overdose. It's sad, because any death is sad, but there's a kind of rough justice that makes sense to us. We can't help shaking our heads and thinking, well, they pretty much got what was coming to them.

But why do the innocent suffer? This may be *the* fundamental question of faith. If God is good (and we say that in all things God is good and loving), how can a God who is good and loving allow—or even cause—such terrible and unjust afflictions? As we have watched the dreadful suffering in Haiti, the suffering of a people who have already suffered far more than any nation or people should, this question seems more important than ever.

The book of Job was written to answer this fundamental question of faith—why do the innocent suffer. And since the book of Job was written more than 2500 years ago, that lets us know that this question of “why” has been with us for a long, long time. Furthermore, the book of Job was written to call into question a prevailing view of his time (and of ours), which says that God rewards the good and punishes the evil. Pat Robertson echoed this ancient understanding of how the world works when he said that the earthquake in Haiti happened because the people deserved it, because their ancestors had made a pact with the devil. Bad things only happen to bad people.

But the writer of Job looked around at life, maybe even at his own life, and said, “It doesn't look to me like it always works that way. Sometimes really terrible things happen to good people.” So he wrote the book of Job to shake up this simple moral equation of reward and punishment. He starts with Job, who is a good man. Indeed, Job is more than just good, he is blameless and upright. In fact, Job lives such an irreproachable life that God brags to Satan about Job's goodness. Satan replies that the

reason Job is good is because it's easy for him to be good. He's rich, he's respected, he's got a whole flock of good looking sons and beautiful daughters. Anyone can be good when they've got the world on a string. Satan challenges God, "Would Job still be good, still be faithful, if he lost everything?" And this becomes the pivotal question at the heart of the book of Job.

At first, as we see from our scripture passage, Job seems to remain faithful. He sits in silence in a garbage dump, scraping away at his oozing sores with a piece of broken pottery. He is joined in the garbage dump by his friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Together they sit in silence for seven days and seven nights.

Then Job finally speaks. He curses the day of his birth, saying, "Let that day be darkness!" He insists that he is blameless and doesn't deserve the suffering that has come upon him. And while he doesn't quite curse God, as his wife had urged him to do, he comes pretty darn close.

Job's friends are shocked at his near blasphemy, and at his insistence that he is innocent of any wrong doing. Their moral universe is shaken to the core. Desperate to prove their tit-for-tat moral code makes sense, they begin to argue with Job, suggesting that he must have done *something* to deserve his suffering.

Sometimes I think, like Job's friends, we look at life like a vending machine. You put in a dollar's worth of good works and clean living, and you get back a dollar's worth of blessings and good times.

But Job lets us know that's not how life works. It's just not that simple. Sometimes you put in a thousand dollars worth of goodness, and you get back nothing, or worse than nothing.

So Job, who up until tragedy struck him down, had believed just as his friends, is outraged. He's angry, and he wants some answers from God. He's held up his end of the bargain. He's been good, he's been faithful. He's been generous to the needy and gracious to the stranger. So why has all this happened to him? Like a plaintiff who has signed a contract that the other party hasn't honored, Job demands his day in court. God hasn't kept his end of the contract and he wants to call God to account.

What Job wants is to do is put God on the witness stand, to cross-examine God and get some answers. And who among us has not longed to do the same! When Job demands God explain why, he is surely speaking for many of us.

Finally, at the end of the book, God *does* speak, but it doesn't work out quite like Job intended. Instead of answering Job's questions, God becomes the questioner.

God never actually answers Job's questions of "why?" Instead God raises a series of God's own questions:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Have you commanded the morning...and caused the day to know its place?

Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?

Is the wild ox willing to serve you?

Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads its wings toward the south?

Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook?

The divine speeches at the end of Job are among the most gorgeous poetry in the Bible, evoking the beauty and majesty and wildness of creation. Every animal mentioned in the divine speeches is a wild, untamed animal, like the wild donkey and the ostrich and the

rhinoceros and the whale. Animals that, from a human viewpoint, are utterly useless. It is gorgeous poetry, but it hardly seems an answer to Job's question of "Why?"

For centuries, no doubt ever since the book of Job was written, scholars have pondered the meaning of God's strange and beautiful response to Job. What does it mean? And how is this description of the grandness and wildness and majesty of creation any kind of an answer to the question of "why do the innocent suffer"?

I think that what God is saying, at least in part, is something about the freedom and wildness of all creation. God created a world which is radically free. And, in fact, that creation is not yet complete. I have a friend who likes to say that when the Bible went to press, God kept on talking. In that same way, when the seven days of creation were up, God kept on creating. Genesis 1 describes the creative process as God bringing order out of chaos. I believe that creative ordering of chaos continues. There is ongoing chaos and wildness and messiness in the world because God's work of creation is ongoing. God speaks to Job of the radical reality of a world that is both wildly free and still unfinished. The divine speeches suggest that bad things happen not because God is punishing us, or because God doesn't care about us, but because God created, and continues to create, a radically free world. A world of enormous beauty and grandeur, but a world where there is still chaos, and there are no tidy moral equations.

God's speech to Job opens Job's eyes and his heart to a new way of seeing and understanding. This is what Job says at the end of the book: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you." (42:5) Job had lived in a narrow world where the good get good stuff and the bad get punished. But now he has come face to face with the moral messiness and troubling ambiguities and tormenting contradictions of

life. God's speech invites Job—and us—to live faithfully in a world that isn't a morally neat and tidy place.

In the end Job isn't given the answers he sought. He is given something much better. As preacher William Willimon says, "God speaks to Job. It may not be the words Job expected. But maybe what Job gets is even better than words. Job gets God."

William Sloan Coffin was for many years the chaplain of Yale University. While he was at Yale, his son, just in his twenties, died in a freak accident, after running his car off the road and into a river. The car sank into the river before Coffin's son escaped. When Coffin returned to Yale, and to the first chapel service after his son's death, the congregation sat expectant and anxious. How would Coffin explain what had happened? Why hadn't God saved his son? Why had this happened? Was this part of some divine plan?

This is what Coffin said, "When my son's car went into the river and the waters closed about him, God's heart was the first to break."

When the diagnosis comes, It's terminal...

When the phone rings in the middle of the night, and the voice says,
I'm sorry to tell you...

When the earth opens, and tens of thousands die...

God's heart is the first to break.

In our times of deepest distress and greatest loss, this is what we have, this promise, this presence—God standing with us. More than answers, more than words, more than anything else. We get what we most need—we get God. We get the God who stands with us, and whose heart is the first to break. Amen.