

Fairy Tales and Reality: The End of Job

Texts: **Job 42:1-17; Psalm 126:1-6**; “*Our Response to Atrocities*”, Judith Lewis Herman

“In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job.” Do you remember that line from the beginning of our series on Job? It’s the first line of the book, and in that first sermon I said that it was the Biblical equivalent of “Once upon a time....” It indicates that the book is not a true story of an actual person, but a type of fairy tale to talk about the meaning of suffering. It tells a story about an innocent man who lost everything. In this case, raiders stole all his livestock, and a house collapsed on his children, killing them all. Then he had sores on his body, which caused him to sit in dust and ashes, partly to show mourning for his dead children, and partly because the ashes made it itch less. Then his wife said to him, “Just curse God, and die.” Seems like that relationship is broken after the death of the children, too. So it really couldn’t have gotten worse for Job.

Except it did. His friends show up to comfort him, but instead end up arguing with him and accusing him of some hidden sin. Hey, thanks for coming, guys, very comforting! It just goes from bad to worse. Then we get 40 chapters of Job complaining about how unjust it is that he’s suffering since he’s innocent, and his friends telling him that he must have sinned somehow, or this wouldn’t be happening to him. Job then complains that he can’t find God anywhere to plead his case.

From the prologue, it seems that the point of the book is that there is no necessary connection between suffering and sin, and prosperity and righteousness. The innocent can suffer, the wicked can prosper. That seems fair enough, and an important point to make. Jesus himself makes that point in his ministry about a man born blind. Near the end, as we heard last week, God appears in the whirlwind and explains it all to Job – okay, just kidding, that’s not what happens. God says, “You can’t even figure out how the tides work, so how could you possibly understand why suffering happens. There is a pattern and a wonder to creation that you just can’t see, though I can see it.”

But even that’s not the full story, since we know from the prologue that Job’s suffering comes about because of a challenge from the Satan, a kind of Devil’s Advocate who is in God’s council. Just a reminder that the Satan is a title for an officeholder, not a personal name in Job. The Satan said that Job was only faithful to God because God had blessed him. God claims that Job would have been faithful anyway. So the Satan gets to ruin Job’s life to prove it. Job complains, protests, yells at God, but ultimately remains faithful, so God’s point is made.

This is a crazy and complicated book of the Bible. What on earth are we to make of all this? Hopefully the ending we heard today will help us out. Let’s look!

Well, the book of Job ends as all fairytales end: with a “happily ever after.” Today we heard, “After Job had prayed for his friends, the Lord restored his fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before.... The Lord blessed the latter part of Job’s life more than the former part. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. Job also had seven sons and three daughters. His daughters were named Jemimah, Keziah, and Keren-Happuch.” I don’t know about you, but I’m totally unsatisfied with that ending. I mean, it’s definitely a fairy tale ending.

First off, the whole book has been about God not hearing Job’s prayers for help in understanding his suffering. Then God appears, tells Job’s friends that they were wrong about Job, and tells Job to pray for his friends. And then God answers Job’s prayers. The friends get a blessing. So the prayer of a

righteous man isn't answered when praying for understanding his own suffering, but it is answered when he prays for his friends, who have had it all wrong all along?

I suppose that can happen, when your prayers for someone else are answered, but not for yourself. And it does teach that God will bless even those who get it all wrong, and that's consistent with the rest of the book, and the rest of the Bible, too. But it sure is strange that suddenly God is hearing Job's prayers after not answering for so long. And then, Job gets back twice as much as he had before because he remained faithful to God. But wasn't the whole point of the book up until here that sin and suffering, prosperity and righteousness aren't necessarily related? Doesn't that undercut the whole teaching of the book? Job remained faithful, so he got a big blessing, because faithfulness leads to a blessing. But the whole book has contradicted that teaching right up to this point!

More than that even, when telling us what is restored to Job, the book mentions all his livestock first—his sheep, his camels, his oxen, his donkeys—before mentioning that he had further children, as if to make up for the ones he lost. Now, a donkey might just be a donkey, replaceable by another donkey, I don't know, you'd have to ask someone who's had a donkey, but I do know that you can't just replace a person's children by giving them more children and then everything is all right. Are we really supposed to believe that Job got over the loss of his children by having more children? No one who has ever had a child would believe that for a second. New children would be a joy, but you would never get over the loss of your other children.

As if to emphasize the fairy tale nature of the story, the sons remain unnamed in spite of the fact that in ancient society the boys are what mattered, and the girls are given names that, once translated from the Hebrew, as our translators should have done, mean Dove, Cinnamon, and Dark Eyes as Eugene Peterson helpfully translates in the Message version. Those are fairy tale names.

The whole book has gone crazy here at the end, as if the problem of God and suffering had driven the author insane. Unable to find a good explanation of suffering, the author just resorts to magic: God just makes everything right, even though some of it can't be made right, like Job's dead children. It's so bad that some scholars think these last verses might have just been stuck on at the end to try to give the book some closure by someone who didn't really understand the book.

But I'm not sure that's the case. I think there may be method in the madness. And I think the clue is in what Job says to God after God has appeared in the whirlwind: "I had heard of you with the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." So just exactly where had Job heard about God with the hearing of the ear? Who taught him about God? Who told him all these things?

Well, he learned about God from his parents, from his clan, from his friends, from his wife, from books containing the story of the people of Israel. In other words, he learned about God from other humans. And if there's one thing that's clear, what humans have to say about God is often contradictory, and sometimes it's insensitive in the extreme. Someone will say one thing that is brave and profound, and the next minute they will say something else that makes you doubt whether God is worth believing in. A pastor will arrive to sit with you when your child has died and then will say something horrific, like, "Well, you can always have more children." In your church you hear the good news that suffering isn't the fault of sin, and then on the news you hear that another pastor thinks that the pandemic is God's warning to humans about their loose morals.

Those contradictory and often insensitive messages are just what we find in the book of Job! It's as if Job is mirroring all the conflicting messages about God that we find all around us, and pointing us in

the direction of an answer, but not giving us the answer itself. Like Job, we do our best to sort out what we hear, the good from the bad, what makes sense of God's love for us given our world, and what makes nonsense of the whole idea of God loving us. We do our best to make sense of it all, but we are limited in our understanding, and limited in what we know about the world. We can't see the big picture, and there may be things that God knows about the world that we don't. But we can hope that it will all turn out all right in the end.

As we go through our struggles to find meaning and make sense of God and life, even in the midst of suffering, Job asks us to remember that the reality of God is far greater than anything humans could ever say about God. Seeing the living God will be different than just hearing about God from other people. Job asks us to hang on to our faith in God even when we know that our suffering is undeserved, even when our loved ones tell us just to curse God and die, even when the comfort our friends bring in the name of religion is more like torture than consolation. Job experienced all that and more, but in the end, an encounter with the living God makes him set aside the contradictory messages of his family and friends, and even of his own heart, and continue to trust in God's goodness and greatness.

Perhaps the most famous verse in all of Job is one the lectionary didn't put into our readings, but which points to a wait-and-see attitude for faith. The story's not over yet, and we don't yet know what God will do. We've just been hearing about God with the hearing of the ear; let's wait and see what God will do in person. Job expresses his hope in chapter 19, verses 25-27: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at last, he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and whom my eyes shall behold, and not another." I think Job's words here point forward to Christ, the Redeemer, standing upon the earth in human flesh, God on our side and against all that would harm us, the invisible God visible to human eyes at last.

In Christ we no longer know God by the hearing of the ear, but our eyes can behold God, our eyes can see God healing the suffering, and raising the dead. Our eyes can see God joining with suffering humanity by suffering along with us from the cross, on our side in life, still on our side in death, on our side for the life to come.

Perhaps that crazy restoration of Job's blessings at the end is the best that the writer could do before he knew anything about resurrection. Perhaps a fairy tale ending and new children in place of old was all he could think of to make things right before Jesus came and raised Jairus' daughter and the widow of Nain's son from the dead and restored the child to the parent. We had heard of God with the hearing of the ear, but in Christ we saw that God was more than we could ever have dreamed, and could do more than we could ever think or imagine.

Like Job, perhaps it is enough to let us hang on now in the midst of suffering, to remain faithful to the God who isn't finished writing the story yet, whose ending may not just be a restoration of fortunes, but a restoration of life itself. Perhaps when God is done, the fairy tale will have become reality, and we will find on waking in God's kingdom that our dreams of a world where pain and suffering and death are no more were not dreams after all, but a vision of the future God has prepared for us all in Jesus Christ, our living Redeemer. Perhaps the fairy tale points to a deeper reality in life beyond the fairy tale; that is, after all, what fairy tales have always done.

Amen