

B Lectionary 27 10.6.24

Job 1:1, 2:1-10

Focus Statement: God blesses us with honesty

The lectionary has gifted us four weeks in the book of Job. I have generally preferred to spend no time in the book of Job, certainly none as a preacher. And yet, the gift of being a lectionary preacher, a. And, b, foolishly committing two years ago to spend the summers and falls preaching through the semicontinuous lectionary readings means, here we are, four weeks in the book of Job. This may be the first and only time in my career I envy my colleagues trying to work through Jesus' teachings on divorce.

Part of my problem with Job comes from last week's reading from James. A line you probably didn't catch. I didn't until I was researching Job for this week's sermon and thought, wait, didn't we read that part of James last Sunday? Looked back at the bulletin and, not quite, we started a few verses after, but close. Here's the James stuff, to catch you up. James chapter five talks about having patience in suffering. Our reading started at verse thirteen, "are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them... The prayers of faith will save the sick." This, to be clear, is not bad advice. This section of James is about the marks of Christian community, which include praying for those who are sick and in need, celebrating with those in good health, restoring those who have strayed, confessing sins to one another, and offering forgiveness to each other. All good things. The problem comes when we start to take those words too literally, "the prayers of the faith will save the sick." Because then, when situations do not end in the way we had prayed for, with our understanding of what would

have constituted salvation, then either one of two things must have occurred. Either we were not faithful enough or whatever horrible thing that occurred was somehow God's doing. If the prayers of faith do not save the sick, then it must be a problem of our faith or we must just not understand God's will, because, as James pointed out in verse eleven, "You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord."

Now, I like the book of James just fine, don't get me wrong. It's scripture—scripture Martin Luther tried to advocate to leave out of the bible, but that's another story for another day—it's scripture and there's great wisdom and value to be found in it for sure. But I have to say, I disagree with James' reading of Job here. Job endured, sure. Job endured because what other choice did he really have? And the purpose of the Lord in the story of Job? That asks me to consider questions about God's purpose that I don't really want to sit with.

And that, dear people of God, is the good news, is the beauty of Job. Job invites us to wrestle with the hard realities of hard things. The book of Job digs deep into the problem of suffering. It asks the question, "why do bad things happen to good people," and leaves us with no easy answer. Which, I'm not going to bury the lead right here, I'm going to tell you straight out, I think is so important. We live in a time and a place that is so desperate for easy answers, for reasons, for someone to place blame on for why there is suffering, that someone must be a fault, and Job gives us none of that. What Job does give us is first of all the promise that we are not alone in these questions. Questions of suffering and God's place in it, who deserves what, and why, are questions that humans have been wrestling with for untold millennia. We are not unique in our uncertainty; we have thousands of

years of companions on this journey. The other thing, or, I should say, certainly not the only thing, but a-nother thing Job gives us is a God who is large enough to hold our wrestling, so much larger than our understanding. Job gives us the freedom to not understand, to not try to explain the inexplorable, and instead to sit in the uncomfortable unknowing. So, with that, let's read Job.

"There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job." The book of Job begins with some real "once upon a time in a galaxy far far away" vibes. Job is not a traditional Israelite name, Uz is not an identifiable place, and there are absolutely no historical markers to anchor this story in any particular time. The book of Job is not history, it was never meant to be. It is a thought experiment, a fable, an opportunity for considering the question of what do we do when the bottom drops out of our lives or the lives of those around us? Can we sit in uncertainty?

We don't know who Job was or where he was from. What we do know is this, Job was "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil." He was a model human, and he seemed to be living the life of one. Our lectionary skipped this section, but the first five verses outlined Job's wealth, ten children, ten thousand herd animals, one thousand work animals, he had everything going for him. Until one day when, "the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and the satan also came among them." A word about the satan here. Notice the word "the" and the lower case s. If you go home and check in your bible, it will likely not show up that way, I confess I did a bit of translation work here. The English translation often has capital S Satan, like it is a proper

noun. But this character isn't Satan, the evil one, fallen angel and chief enemy of God. The Hebrew is ha-satan, which is where we get the name Satan, but literally translates to "the adversary" or "the accuser." The satan in the book of Job is a member of God's own staff, if you will. If God is the divine judge, the satan is the prosecuting attorney, charged with arguing against humanity the defendant. God said to the satan, look at how great my servant Job is. To which the satan remarked, of course he's faithful, he's got everything he needs. It's easy to believe when everything's working out in your favor. So the Lord said to the satan, "very well, he is in your power," and things begin to unravel. Chapter one ends with messenger after messenger bringing tales of destruction to Job, thieves carrying off his work animals, fire destroying his flocks, a great wind crushing the homes of and killing his children, and "In all this Job did not sin." This brings us to chapter two, again the heavenly beings are assembled, again God and the satan are talking, again the Lord brags on the greatness of Job. Job may really have wished God bragged on him a little less. For again the satan is like, sure, he can stay faithful when you take his stuff. But take his health, and surely he'll turn on you. Again the Lord said to the satan, "very well," and Job was covered in sores "from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head." Yet, in all this suffering, "Job did not sin with his lips."

If the book of Job ended here, it would be what James claimed it to be, in terms of a testament to "the endurance of Job." Though I don't know what it would say to us about "the purpose of the Lord," especially, to keep reading James, "how the Lord is compassionate and merciful." The Lord as depicted in the first two chapters of Job seems

neither compassionate nor merciful, allowing the satan to inflict such suffering on someone who was “blameless” to see how much pain they could take.

The temptation when faced with great tragedy we cannot understand is to look for an explanation. God must have a greater plan or someone must have done something wrong, something to deserve this or there is some sort of redemptive purpose at work. The writers of Job do something much more beautiful and powerful here in that they do not give us that easy out. They give us no such reassurance or comfort. They instead let us sit in a world that is hard, without making sense of it, because that is so much more honest and real and true. And, honestly, beautiful. Because when things are bad and there are no easy answers and suffering is not “God’s divine plan” then we don’t have to be stuck in it.

We’re going to spend the next three weeks wrestling through this, but for now, I’m just going to leave us in this discomfort. But I’m going to leave us in this discomfort with a blessing. Because there is gift in the wrestling. This blessing was written by Sister Ruth Fox, a Benedictine nun. She called it, “A Non-Traditional Blessing.” And so,

May God bless you with discontent with easy answers, half-truths, superficial relationships, so that you will live from deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, abuse, and exploitation of people, so that you will work for justice, equality, and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you will reach out your hand to comfort them and to change their pain to joy.

May God bless you with the foolishness to think you can make a difference in this world, so that you will do the things which others tell you cannot be done.

If you have the courage to accept these blessings, then God will also bless you with:
happiness—because you will know that you have made life better for others
inner peace—because you will have worked to secure an outer peace for others
laughter—because your heart will be light
faithful friends—because they will recognize your worth as a person.

These blessings are yours—not for the asking, but for the giving—from One who wants to be your companion, our God, who lives and reigns, forever and ever. Amen.