

The Good and the Bad  
20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost - Year B  
Psalm Reading: (26)  
NT: Hebrews (1:1-4, 2:5-12), Job (1:1, 2:1-10)

Our reading from Job begins with the line, “In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job.” It sounds almost like the beginning of a folktale or a fantasy novel, but in actuality it is the beginning of a deep dive into one of the most profound questions we as Christians are confronted with. And the question is the nature of good and evil. And by this I mean evil in all its forms. I mean the evil that comes from one human perpetrating an atrocity upon another. I mean institutional evil that comes from governing bodies like those that seemed so prevalent in the mid-1900s in places like Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia or Maoist China, all three of which dealt death and suffering to untold millions. I mean natural evil that comes from hurricanes, volcanoes, and forest fires. I mean simple medical problems for which there seems no reason whatever.

Discussion of this question in theological circles produces something called a “Theodicy”.<sup>1</sup> Theodicy is a defense of God’s goodness in the face of evil, tragedy, and suffering. And truthfully, it is not only theologians who discuss this, but must cross the mind of anyone who has gone through tough times.

There really is little doubt about there being evil in the world. All we have to do is pick up a history book or skim over the news on our computer browser, or read about it in the newspaper.

On the other hand, the story of Job for us seems rather distant, almost other worldly. It starts in a strange place, far from home. In fact, this story would have been far from home for the Jews as well. Uz is thought to have possibly existed in Edom, south of Israel. It would have seemed slightly exotic, though the circumstances would probably not have seemed so foreign.<sup>2</sup> The economy was based on controlling land, owning animals and having an abundance of servants. This balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar would have allowed the Israelites, as it allows us, to consider the subject matter in its universal form, seeing how it is applicable to all people, not us alone.

The next sentence in the first verse builds a bit of tension, “This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.” (NIV, Job 1:1) Now, what story that begins like that ever had for its next sentence, “And he lived happily ever after.” That might be the last sentence in the story, but you have got to know that there are going to be quite a few sentences describing hard times and suffering in between. Of course, it is in the nature of any good story that there be conflict, but the story of Job is one that seems specifically designed to deal with this theodicy question.

The rest of the first chapter one is not part of our lectionary reading, but I think it is important for the sake of context that I summarize what happens there. God gives Satan permission to afflict Job with all manner of troubles. Job loses many of his servants and all of his cattle in a raid from the Sabeans. Then he loses all of his sheep and more of his servants in a lightning storm. Then the Chaldeans raid and steal all of his

camels. Finally, in the cruelest blow of all, a wind causes the house of his son to collapse and all of Job's children are killed. And we are left to think what worse could befall any person?

Well, Chapter Two begins with God having a discussion with Satan. And since we are talking about good and evil, I think we need to talk a bit about the way Satan is depicted here. Some have said, he is kind of like a prosecuting attorney, trying to dig up evidence in a trial. And the Hebrew for *ha-Satan* does mean something like "accuser" or "adversary".<sup>3</sup> But I don't think that is really what is happening. The book of Job reveals Satan as a tempter and destroyer. The role of Satan may, rather, be to create evil by convincing people to sin. He convinces the Sabeans to steal Job's cattle. He convinces the Chaldeans to make a raid on Job's camels. He causes the lightning and the wind storms.

So in the discussion God asks Satan if he has considered Job. (Job 2:3) Both God and Satan know that the response of Job is one that a righteous person would make. Yes, he mourns his losses, "He tore his robe and shaved his head..." but, ultimately, he prostrates himself and worships God. (Job 1:20) Satan then admits that Job has passed the test. He has not rebelled against God in spite of all the evil he has seen.

But Satan exclaims, "Skin for skin!" (Job 2:4) Scholars think "skin for skin" was a colloquial phrase meaning an equal bet or trade.<sup>4</sup> Satan is saying here that the test Job has undergone is not a fair one. There is more that Job can suffer. Satan suggests that should Job's health and life be at risk, then Job will surely "curse God to his face." (v. 5) God allows Satan to put Job to the test yet again. He afflicts Job "with painful sores from the

soles of his feet to the crown of his head.” Now Satan’s “skin for skin” comment seems to take on an even darker meaning.

It seems that Job has been caused to suffer, through no fault of his own, to the very limits of natural human endurance. Yet, Job refuses to forsake God. And his wife, who must be suffering as much as he, cries out to him, “Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!” (v.9) For most people this would be the final straw. His wife is on the edge of despair, and she would go over except the one thing keeping her from simply giving up is that last vestige of strength that she sees in her mate. And I think it may be the knowledge that she is depending upon him that causes Job to say, and I can see him speaking with tears in his eyes and love for her in his voice, “You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we [and he says “we”] accept good from God and not trouble?” (v.10)

And maybe it is the sharing of this burden, the sharing of this suffering that keeps him going, allows him to keep the faith, so that the author of Job can write, “In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.” So Job continues to be a righteous man. He continues to worship and honor God in spite of all his troubles, at least in part, because of this relationship.

You know, in many ways I think the whole story of Job hinges on this little conversation between wife and husband. It reveals rather starkly the relational aspect of human life. There is something unconditional about the relationship between Job and his wife. They are one in their suffering. And this is the same relationship that Job has with God. Job, in spite of everything continues to love and honor God, and ultimately, God’s love for us has the same unconditional aspect.

Let us turn this whole scenario around and think of it backward. We as human's are all sinners, we continually do things that are an affront to God. We do things that it pains God to see. And Jesus Christ had to suffer, suffer ultimate death and crucifixion because of our sinful behavior. In a sense, God has the "patience of Job" and we are afflicting God. It is God's unconditional love for us, God's integrity in God's relationship with us that is important. It is God's steadfast love that will bring us salvation, in spite of all that we do.

And maybe this helps us to understand just little bit about how evil operates in the world. It is certainly not caused by God, who is an active force bringing about all that is good. God created the world and God created us. We are made in the image of God and as such have some of the attributes of God. Among these is a will to choose either good or evil.

We know that the attributes of God include being all-knowing and all-powerful. Taking these two things together, one might suppose that God could correct all evil even at the moment it is unleashed. Yet this would destroy free will. It may also be asked, if God knows all before it happens doesn't that mean that a person confronted with a choice is predestined to make that choice? Well, not really. God simply knows a person so well, the choice that person will make is already known. It is kind of like asking a ten year old what they want for dessert while giving them the choice of broccoli or ice cream. Well, I think we all can say what that choice will be.

So evil in the world comes from human choice, humans giving credence to the seductive but evil suggestions of the adversary. And it comes from from pure happenstance as when

someone is struck by lightning. But the thing about lightning is that you are less likely to get struck by it if you don't try flying a kite in a lightning storm. This means that you can avoid some evils, though not all, no matter how careful or righteous you may be.

But what does Job have to tell us about this? The fact is, with all of this theological talk we are moving into abstraction, and it is clear from the first two chapters of Job that the whole thing is not about what is good and what is evil in the world, but is rather about relationships. It is about relationships of unconditional love that transcend the earthy categorization of events as good or bad. The fact is, good has to do with loving relationships (that is loving in the sense of *αγαπε*) like the relationship between Job and his wife and the relationship between Job and God. Choosing these relationships is making right choices. Evil is being separated from the love of God. This, my friends would be a wrong choice.

God can rely on Job to be faithful through every event, whether or not it is physically categorized as good or evil. And the same goes for Job. He can rely on God to come through in the end. In fact, he will, ultimately, toward the end of the book of Job, say this very thing. And this was written hundreds and perhaps a thousand years before the birth of Christ.

He says, "I know that my redeemer lives, and in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes – I and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" (Job 19:25-27)

So, Jesus, our redeemer, has come to earth and at the Cross has won victory over death so that the evil that we perpetrate upon the world may be forgiven. And Jesus Christ will return so that we will see him with our own eyes. It will be a time when all evil will be eradicated from the earth and we will walk in the light of Christ for ever and ever. O how our hearts yearn within us. O Lord, O Christ, O Holy Spirit, bring us into closer relationship with you.

Please bow your heads and pray with me...

We praise you O Lord, the promise we have heard through the mouth of Job is being kept. Lord, open our minds to understand your promises. Open our hearts that we may feel your presence, open our souls that we might do good in this world, your creation.

ἀμήν

<sup>1</sup> Daniel L. Migliori, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014) 468.

<sup>2</sup> NIB, Vol.4, 328, 344.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 347.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 354.