“Life Among the Ashes”

The Book of Job 1:1-22; 2:1-10

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First Congregational Church, UCC, Saugus, Massachusetts

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*“Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?”*

*The Book of Job 2:10b*

Poor Job. He certainly had his ups and downs. One minute, he’s on top of the world with ten children, thousands of sheep and camels, hundreds of oxen and donkeys, and a large number of servants for his large, extended family.

Job was a pious man who worried a lot about offending God. In fact, he worried *so much* about this, he began to be concerned *his children* offending God. So, in case they *did* offend God and forget to ask for God’s forgiveness, Job prayed to God *for* them. (Was Job the first helicopter parent?)

One day, in the heavenly court, as God was admiring his servant Job’s righteousness, along came some angels trailing behind their boss, Satan. Now, in Hebrew Bible theology, the Satan we know was not the Satan that ancient Hebrews knew. Satan did not represent the evil figure (the opposite of God) that our culture came to know. In fact, the name “Satan” is a combination of two Hebrew words “ha” meaning “the” and “santan” meaning “adversary.” In this strange story, Ha-Satan represents a figure in God’s court that plays the “devil’s advocate” with God. (This is the opposite of “the Advocate,” the Holy Spirit, whom God would send us to help us in place of the risen Jesus.)

“What do you think of my perfect servant Job? God asks H-Stan. “He fears me and shuns evil.”

These were tempting words for Ha-Satan to hear. “Oh, really?” says Ha-Satan. “I wonder how he’d feel about you if everything in his life went wrong. He’s doing really, really well right now, and says he loves you, but if it was all taken away from him, what would he think about you then?”

One of the puzzling things about this story is that God doesn’t wait even a moment before answering The Adversary’s challenge. “OK, then,” God says. “Take it all away from him.”

Ha-Satan wastes no time in sending catastrophe upon catastrophe to Job’s family and possessions. Oxen, donkeys, sheep and camels? Stolen. Servants? Murdered. Children? Killed when a house collapsed on them.

Job’s response? He falls down on his knees and proclaims to God:

*“Naked I came from my mother’s womb,  
    and naked I will depart.  
The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;  
    may the name of the Lord be praised.”*

Ha-Satan can’t believe it. But God is pleased with Job and says, “See how Job still maintains his integrity, though *you* incited me against him to ruin him without any reason.” (So, the devil made God do it, I guess.)

“Skin for skin!” Ha-Satan replies. “A man will give all he has for his own life. But now stretch out your hand and strike his *flesh and bones*, and he will surely curse you to your face!” And, sadly, God gives Ha-Satan another chance at ruining Job, and afflicts Job with painful sores from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. Yet Job still will not curse God. Job’s wife says to him, “Are you still maintaining your integrity, you with all the sores? Curse God and die!” And Job answers her, “You’re talking foolishness. Shall we accept *good* from God, and not *trouble*?”

The Book of Job goes on for many, many chapters, with back-and-forths between Job and his friends, who’ve decided Job *must have sinned* in some way to be punished so harshly by God. Job and God go a few rounds as well. And finally, after Job gives up and surrenders all his pain and his complaints to God, God responds in a fiery speech that leaves no doubt that God is in charge and what is right in God’s sight should be right in human sight. And Ha-Satan does not make another appearance in this story ever again.

This is a hard book to read and understand, but its message still leaves us wondering: Does God cause both good and bad to happen to us? Can we blame God for our troubles one day and curse God for our pain the next day?

Like Frank Sinatra sings in *That’s Life*:

*That's life (that's life) that's what people say  
You're riding high in April  
Shot down in May  
But I know I'm gonna change that tune  
When I'm back on top, back on top in June  
  
I said, that's life (that's life) and as funny as it may seem  
Some people get their kicks  
Stompin' on a dream  
But I don't let it, let it get me down  
'Cause this fine old world it keeps spinnin' around*

That pretty much sums up how Job feels about life: God gives and God takes away. Is that a comforting thought for us? Are we OK with thinking God is in total control of our lives, like a puppet-master? Or do we think the God whom we call “Love” *chooses* *never* to rain down misery upon us; that it is our own choices, or cancer’s choice, or a drunken driver’s choice, or a running series of misfortunes that causes our suffering?

Even Jesus on the cross thought God had deserted him. He cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In our darkest times, we often wonder, “Where is God?”

After the second test Job endures, he’s sitting in a pile of ashes, in the ruins of the good life he once had. Even with the taunting of his wife to curse God and end his life, Job doesn’t give up. He insists on believing that, “God gives and God takes away.” Life is all God to Job. No matter what happens to him, Job believes, he should *still* thank God for *anything* that happens to him. Was he crazy or courageously confident in God?

It is in the ashes of life that many of us realize God speaks to us most clearly. It is in the devastation and isolation of the ashes that everything else melts away, and we are left, face-to-face, with only God to speak to. “Speaking” is putting it mildly because most of us want to scream at God, even curse God, for raining down calamities upon us. But God can take our cursing. God knows what we’re like. God knows eventually we will quiet down and listen to what God is saying to us through it all.

When we think about it, why do we obey what we believe are God’s laws, as set forth in the Hebrew Bible and by Jesus? Are we afraid God will retaliate against us for our disobedience? That we will suffer as Job suffered? That it benefits us and the money and possessions we think God is helping us accumulate, to be good in God’s sight?

Or do we follow God’s laws because *others* will benefit? Because the *whole world* will benefit? Do you think *we* the center of the universe or do we allow *others* into our worldview, too? Is Christianity about obeying the rules to increase *our* chances of getting something out of it, like wealth or a ticket to heaven? Or is Christianity about putting the needs of others *before* *ourselves*, others who are suffering and in need of our compassion? Is Christianity about *putting aside our own suffering* in order to reach out to a suffering other? It is in those moments, when we make brave choices, to turn our attention away from ourselves and toward others, that we truly grow as human beings in God’s sight. This is when we make progress toward becoming the people God desires us to be.

The Buddhists say life is suffering. We cannot hope to avoid suffering because of the simple fact that we are alive. All living things suffer: birds, bees, water, air. That’s life. We are fully alive when we feel pleasure *and* sorrow; without one, we cannot know the other. It is only by sitting in the ashes that we can finally hear the wake-up call to seek God before we seek anything for ourselves.

In the end, Job got it. Life is a series of ups and downs. When bad things happen to good people, Job is a good example of how to roll with it. God never causes harm to us; sometimes things just happen. It is in knowing what to do with our pain, when we’re sitting in the ashes, that brings us comfort and redemption. And God will be there for us, always and forever. That’s life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

References

Bartlett, David L., and Taylor, Barbara Brown, Eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Vol. 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 122-127.

“That’s Life,” by Dean Kay and Kelly Gordon, sung by Frank Sinatra <https://songmeanings.com/songs/view/3530822107858494578/>

*Zondervan NIV Study Bible,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).