

“Skin for Skin, Said the Adversary”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 18, 2019

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Holy Scriptures: Job 2:1-10 (NRSV)

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. ²The Lord said to Satan, “Where have you come from?” Satan answered the Lord, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” ³The Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.”

⁴Then Satan answered the Lord, “Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. ⁵But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.” ⁶The Lord said to Satan, “Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.”

⁷So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. ⁸Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself and sat among the ashes.

⁹Then his wife said to him, “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die.” ¹⁰But he said to her, “You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Get Used to Being Beloved

Sunday School can be a good time for learning about the Bible
and our connections with the Holy and each other.

Like the child who came home from Sunday School
after learning all about Adam and Eve.

He looked a little green. His mom asked what’s the matter.

The child said, *“My side hurts. I think I am going to have a wife.”*

In February, Bethany Apelquist, our Seminary Intern at the time,
taught a Sunday School course on the Book of Job through the lens of art.

She used art to help us examine the story of Job,

of Job’s wife and his friends, Job’s relationship with God,

and the competition between God and the Adversary,

also known as the Accuser, and in some translations Satan.

One Sunday morning we read poetry about Job;

another Sunday we made collages;
another we listened to music videos both classic and modern;
another we pondered historic paintings and sculptures.
Each Sunday we explored how the Holy Bible depicted
the challenge of good and evil, God and devil, hope and hurt,
suffering and piety, all in the human context.
We got into the subject at hand.
When I think about piety,
I am reminded of the farmer in overalls and a straw hat
who went into the big city and sat down to lunch in a diner.
When her meal arrived, she bowed her head in prayer.
Some rowdies at a nearby table teased her,
asking if all her farm animals prayed before they ate.
“No, not all,” she said. “The pigs don’t.”

Get Used to Being Beloved

You know, when it comes to the Book of Job,
folks tend to have strong reactions, responses, rejoinders to the story.
Artists, writers, theologians, firefighters, baristas,
cashiers, nurses, teachers, and folks from all walks of life can relate.
Everybody suffers.
Everybody wonders why bad things happen to good people,
to all people, the world over.
Everybody wonders at some point where is God in the midst of pain and hurt and loss?
A friend became ill for an extended period.
Several of her friends said, “Oh, you are like Job!”
Not exactly what she wanted to hear.
Who wants to hear Job’s name being directed at you as a noun,
to be perceived as synonymous
with the long-suffering lead actor in the Bible.
Made her never again want to hear the name.

Get Used to Being Beloved

Imagine.
Job 1:1 begins, “There was once a man in the land of Uz...”
This is storytelling at its finest,
and the first hearers of this tale would have smiled,
knowing there was no “land of Uz.”
The term “There was a day...” (Job 1:6 and 2:1)
is like our modern equivalent of “Once upon a time.”
Yes, Job is a story, a myth, a made-up tale created around 2,500 years ago.
Like all classic mythology, the story of Job is intended for everyone, everywhere.

Job was told, retold, and recorded
during an era when followers of God wrote Wisdom Literature,
including Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs.
The predominate belief system at the time
was of a God of Reward and Punishment:
remain pious, blameless, and righteous,
and you will be blessed by God with a good life.
Strong remnants of this theology are found today in the Prosperity Gospel.
Give generously to the Church and you will be rewarded by God,
who rewards the faithful and punishes those who are not.

In Dade County, Florida, a Christian sued his church for \$800.
The court filing states: *"On September 7, I delivered \$800 to the ...Church
in response to the pastor's promise that blessings, benefits and rewards
would come to the person who did tithe ten percent of his wealth.
I did not and have not received those benefits."*

True story.

Such is the selfish piety that God will reward good deeds,
as is promoted by such teachings.
(Elizabeth Achtemeier, Preaching Hard Texts of the Old Testament, Page 98)
*"The prosperity gospel makes everyone feel special.
It makes everyone feel uniquely chosen.
Every detail of your life is God's ultimate concern,"*
says Professor Kate Bowler at Duke Divinity
and author of Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel
and Everything Happens for a Reason (and other lies I've loved)

"I've seen that do wonders for people..."
*"Some Christians believe God rewards the faithful.
So why did I get Stage 4 cancer?"* asks Kate Bowler.
*"Getting over not being special has been hard.
I have to get used to being as beloved by God as everybody else."*

Get Used to Being as Beloved as Everybody Else

The author of Job had a revelation
that we should get used to "being as beloved by God as everybody else."
The storyteller envisioned that God loves everybody,
doesn't play favorites, and when it comes to reward and punishment,
well, what matters most is relationship.
Our storyteller got a revelation that God is more.

More generous.

More present.

More merciful.

Like every good storyteller,

he or she addressed the question of how to communicate an idea
in a way that your intended audience
will grasp, understand, incorporate it.

What emerged was a tale.

Imagine the Lord holding a council with all the angels,

including the one who is kind of like a superhuman Attorney General,
sent by God to call sinners to account.

God and the Adversary joust with words:

Job is blameless and upright, says God.

Does Job only love you because you reward his piety?

Does Job fear God for naught? (Job 1:9)

When everything is taken away, skin for skin,
Job will curse you, says the Adversary.

No way, says the Lord. Job is pious and adores me.

I trust that my servant will remain faithful.

Do your worst. Just don't kill him, and watch, you will see.

So begins the competition at Job's expense,

and soon he is lying down in ashes, scratching his painful sores with a potshard.

Get Used to Being as Beloved as Everybody Else

This is a tough text, having been interpreted and seen from countless points of view.

Like Job, we have had friends and relatives who have approached us
in our experiences of pain or anguish or suffering, saying,

"What did you do to deserve this? You must have done something wrong."

Or, "If God blesses the pure of heart,

maybe you need to confess your sins so you can be blessed."

Or, "God is omnipotent, all powerful,

so surely this is God's fault, or God's plan, or God's will."

Or ""Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die."

Get Used to Being as Beloved as Everybody Else

Over the course of human history

people sought to get a handle, to define and articulate
the nature and nurture of God.

We have identified three core Omnis that serve to clarify the mystery that is God. Omnipotence, Omniscience, Omnipresence.

The Omnipotence of God – God is all-powerful, all creating, almighty.

The Omniscience of God – God is all-knowing, aware and cognizant of all creation.

The Omnipresence of God – God is always present, with you here, there, everywhere.

For many of us we start our faith journey by embracing the omnipotence of God.

No surprise here:

the understanding of God as omnipotent
permeates the arts and books of theology,
hymnals and favorite biblical stories.

We revel in the attributes of a powerful and almighty Creator
who can do all and be all and save all.

We find comfort and a sense of security
in trusting the One who conquers death and overcomes hate with love.

However, for many of us this becomes problematic

when evil raises its ugly head;
when the gift of free will is abused and some fly airplanes into buildings
or beat protestors in the streets of Hong Kong;
when our beloved are harmed due to the laws of gravity and physics,
all of which appear on the surface
to stymie the power of the Holy Spirit.

So, we lift our heads in anguish and cry aloud,

“If God is all powerful, why did God allow this harm come to my beloved?”

We feel betrayed, bereft, abandoned in our hour of need,
alone with a cruel and distant God.

In Martha’s despair over the sudden loss of her brother Lazarus,
she asked the approaching Jesus,

*“Where were you when my brother died?
If you had been here, he would still be alive.”*

We know how Martha felt.

We’ve projected our disappointments onto a God we trust as omnipotent,
which leaves us to feel let down by the divine,
as distress becomes despair
which leads to disappointment
which results in departure from the faith
and from the Church.

Alone again, with no trust, no divinity, no community.

It’s a hard place to be, and I dare say many if not all of us have dallied
in such a desert, in a wilderness,
thirsty for respite and hungry for hope.

What is the modern term?

Hangry.

No Snickers will satisfy such a deep-down need.
We need more.

Get Used to Being as Beloved as Everybody Else

Rabbi Harold Kushner believed, as many do, that God was all-good and all powerful.
He believed in an Omnipotent God
 who was in control of all things under and over the Sun,
 until the premature death of his son from progeria (rapid aging),
Rabbi Kushner's son's tragic death
 caused a reexamination of these traditional beliefs
 and resulted in a bestselling book, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People."

Using the Book of Job as a background,
Rabbi Kushner suggests there are three things folks want to believe:

1. *God is all-powerful and causes everything that happens.*
2. *God is just and fair, giving everyone what they deserve.*
3. *Job is a good person.*

As long as Job is healthy and happy one can believe in all three of these.
But in view of Job's righteous suffering,
 Rabbi Kushner concludes we cannot hold both to 1 and 2.
No good person should be subjected to such terrible misfortunes as was Job.
What then is the solution to Job's tragedy?
Why do good people suffer such bad things?

Frederick Buechner weighs in, saying, "*You can reconcile any two of these propositions with each other, but you can't reconcile all three. The problem of evil is perhaps the greatest single problem for religious faith.*"

Rabbi Kushner concurs.
"God wants the righteous to live peaceful, happy lives,
 but sometimes even [the Lord] can't bring that about" (p. 43).

As a matter of fact, says Kushner,
 "There are some things God does not control..." (p. 45).

For Kushner this news is not necessarily all bad.
There "is a sense of relief" in coming to the conclusion
 that God is not all-powerful or all-perfect.

For if this is so, then "our misfortunes are none of God's doing" (p. 44).
Harold Kushner insists:

 "I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it,
 more easily than I can worship a God
 who chooses to make children suffer and die,

for whatever exalted reason" (p. 134).

[Notes adapted from a critique by Dr. Norman Geisler of "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" by Rabbi Harold Kushner, 1981.]

Which serves to lead us from grounding our faith in the omnipotence of God
to starting with the omnipresence of God, Emmanuel, God-With-Us.

Get Used to Being as Beloved as Everybody Else

Marjorie Suchocki observes that Jesus used water as a metaphor
for the presence of God in our lives.

Imagine the presence of God like the water that rises up to fill a well
and then spilling over and watering the earth
and plants and flowers around the well,
a refreshing and sustaining water of life
that overflows and blesses all it touches.

*"Water rushes to fill all the nooks and crannies available to it.
Water swirls around every stone, sweeps into every crevice,
touches all things in its path -- and changes all things in its path.*

And as water moves it changes what it touches.

The changes are often subtle -- often slow

*and happen through a continuous interaction with the water
that affects both the water and that which the water touches.*

The water is changed by what it touches too.

*Particles of sand and sediment change the color of the water,
and the water's action changes the stone, and the land,
and the life that can be supported.*

The water doesn't exert its power

*by being "single-minded" over and above these things,
but by simply by being pervasively present to and with all things.*

*God works this way, not as a power over an inert matter,
whether that be a person or an earth.*

God does not have a single purpose...

*rather, God is a power WITH all matter,
present to it, pervading it with presence, with multiple purposes."*

"What if God is like that?

*Can we imagine a God pervasively present throughout all the universe,
filling all its vast and small spaces,
its greatest galaxies and its tiniest motes of stardust?"*

(Marjorie Suchocki, "In God's Presence," Chalice Press, 1996, pp 4-5)

Get Used to Being as Beloved as Everybody Else

This is what we encounter in our prayer life

–the presence of the grace of God.

This is what we experience at the Lord's Table

–the hospitality of a God who welcomes us into God's presence.

This is what we engage in the city

–meeting and greeting the presence of God in the souls of our neighbors.

This is where a true sense of security and faith reside,

not in that which perishes or dominates or destroys,

but rather in that which sustains, engages, and connects us
with the Living Water of the presence of God.

Consider building your foundation of faith on the omnipresence of God,

which in time may lead you to grow in appreciation

of the omniscience of God,

the all-knowing grace of God,

as well as to foster a sense of awe

at the creative, almighty power of an omnipotent God

who loves everybody,

including you and everybody else.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!