

Job 1:1-12

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt-offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, 'It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.' This is what Job always did.

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The 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.' The 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.' Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!' So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

Disoriented

We begin this new *Mystery* worship series with a real zinger, an unsolved mystery that can really test our faith. We can handle unsolved mysteries; the mystery of the Godhead three-in-one; the mystery of holy baptism and holy communion, the mystery of love. But what about the mystery of God's justice, or, for many people who read the book of Job, God's injustice? This first week of our series the title of the sermon is "Disoriented." Today I want to dispel a common misperception of God and my prayer is that you would leave here perhaps a little disoriented – and perhaps you came here a bit disoriented - **but today let's put to rest the notion that God is Just by our own standards, and thank God for that!** Because all we have to do is look at the headlines regarding the nominee for Supreme Court Justice and you'd have to agree; *our notion of Justice is not such a simple thing.* We are quite the *bipolar* nation. And I don't say that in a disparaging way to those who suffer from mental illnesses; I use the term bipolar to express the way the nation has seemingly split at the seams with people on opposite ends of the political spectrum who are angry with each other. **So why should we want God to adhere to our system of justice?**

Our idea of justice is based on reciprocity. We live the way we think we're supposed to live, and we want God to reward our efforts. We want to believe that *if you keep your nose to the grindstone, kid, YOU'RE GONNA GO FAR! Go to church – or synagogue or mosque or temple – regularly, study hard in school, atone for your sins, do the best at whatever you do, and you will be blessed with wealth that will afford you a good, healthy life as you continue to do your very best in your job, your business, your vocation, your dream,* and according to the art of positive thinking if you have a positive attitude your troubles will go away, or at least do nothing more than keep you awake a few nights each year. And we can look at statistics that say that a positive attitude keeps us healthy, and we all want to be healthy...we're Methodists; we are steeped in piety – good healthy living and well-balanced lifestyles. Live right and you'll be rewarded by God; that what we'd like to believe.

But we know the bitter truth. We know, either through personal experience or through the grapevine, that some people can do everything right and have everything turn out wrong. We could spend a day sharing all the times that we've had letdowns that we felt we didn't deserve. And if we are people of faith we agonize with God over these things:

Lord, I've been a good person and tried to do my best; why do I have cancer?
God, I have followed every command of sacred scripture, and my father blames me for something that I have or haven't done.

Lord, there was a car that just passed me doing about 80 and the policeman in the rearview mirror is pulling me over for doing 70. What's up with that?

But let's face it; none of our complaints can compare to Job's. Actually our scripture reading this morning leaves off where Job's troubles begin; and by the end of Chapter 2 Job has lost everything – wealth, property, family, and even his health. In the next 39 chapters Job's friends are trying to persuade him that he must have done something

wrong to deserve such suffering, and his wife tells him to just curse God and die. Job is indeed disoriented through this whole ordeal, insisting on his righteousness and wondering why God has brought these catastrophes upon him. Like I said, no different from us; we suffer in ways we don't feel we deserve and we wonder, "Why me?" Is God just gambling with Satan trying to win a bet that we'll be faithful regardless of how much suffering we endure? I hope not, because a God who gambles can't possibly be a God of the Methodists!

I don't think that it's completely accurate to talk about the reason we suffer. Though the book of Job explains that Job's suffering is part of this bet between God and Satan, I don't see God as one who willfully causes suffering. But the fact that we do suffer independent of our level of righteousness tells us that God does not comply to our ideal of reciprocal justice, where we are punished or rewarded based on how we perform on the righteousness scale. The book of Job casts that idea to the curb; *one can do everything right and still everything will go wrong.*

But there is a deeper insight that goes with this tough lesson; if people are neither punished nor rewarded based upon their level of righteousness then we cannot judge people based upon their health or wealth. Rich people don't *deserve* their wealth any more than the poor deserve to be poor. There may be some people you know who are very hard-working and who have made money the good old fashioned way who you believe "deserve" to be wealthy just as there are those who lack motivation and thus deserve to be without food or home or health, **but Job reminds us that there are exceptions.**

And because there are exceptions we as human beings must be careful how we judge others. *Wealth, health, and family do not mean that a person is good and more than poverty and sickness means that they're bad.* And if we were to deduce a purpose in Job's suffering it may have been for God to show Job exactly that – that we must not judge others based on the ways that we too often measure success and well-being. Job's words to God in the middle of this book indicate that he may have had such a misconception; he considers himself *God-forsaken* in this state of suffering and poverty, but **is God really absent from those who are poor or suffer?** Perhaps Job needed to learn the lesson that prosperity is not always a sign of God's presence just as poverty is not necessarily a sign of God's absence. Keep that in mind when you look upon the poor and the rich.

So be encouraged that, regardless of one's appearance, one's health or wealth, God never judges us on such trivial criteria, and he never forsakes us.