

Job 42:1-9

¹⁻⁶ Job answered GOD:

“I’m convinced: You can do anything and everything.
Nothing and no one can upset your plans.
You asked, ‘Who is this muddying the water,
ignorantly confusing the issue, second-guessing my purposes?’
I admit it. I was the one. I babbled on about things far beyond me,
made small talk about wonders way over my head.
You told me, ‘Listen, and let me do the talking.
Let me ask the questions. *You* give the answers.’
I admit I once lived by rumors of you;
now I have it all firsthand—from my own eyes and ears!
I’m sorry—forgive me. I’ll never do that again, I promise!
I’ll never again live on crusts of hearsay, crumbs of rumor.”

⁷⁻⁸ After GOD had finished addressing Job, he turned to Eliphaz the Temanite and said,
“I’ve had it with you and your two friends. I’m fed up! You haven’t been honest either
with me or about me—not the way my friend Job has. So here’s what you must do.
Take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my friend Job. Sacrifice a burnt offering on
your own behalf. My friend Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer. He will ask
me not to treat you as you deserve for talking nonsense about me, and for not being
honest with me, as he has.”

⁹ They did it. Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite did
what GOD commanded. And GOD accepted Job’s prayer.

INFORMED

Our Bible Study group has been more of a book study group of late, and the latest book
we’re studying is a book on Methodism. Admittedly I have a lot of issues with the
Methodist Church – but to be fair I would probably have a lot of issues with whatever
denomination I served. But one issue that I DON’T have with the Methodist Church has
to do with their stand on the Bible. The Methodists assert that the Bible contains
everything necessary for our salvation. Agreed? I like that, because it speaks of what
the Bible does, not what the Bible is.

There are other denominations who will say that the Bible is the inerrant, infallible word
of God. I have two problems with that statement: First, it’s idolatrous. It makes the Bible
into God, which in fact diminishes God. It does exactly what Job and his friends and you
and I tend to do, and that is to reduce God into something or someone that we can get
our heads around. You know that many Jews don’t even write the word “God” because
they consider that even representing God in letters is diminishing God. To claim the

Bible to be infallible does the same thing; it diminishes God into something less than who God truly is.

The second reason I object to the claim that the Bible is the infallible, inerrant word of God has to do with human psychology. As I just said, people have a tendency to want to explain God, and therefore they reduce God into something comprehensible. And it's because we really want to have everything explained for us that we are attracted to communities that claim to have those simple answers for us. It fulfills a psychological need that we have to understand things. The belief that the Bible is the inerrant, infallible word of God relieves our anxiety about the uncertainties of this world; just look in the Bible and you'll find the answer. That didn't work for me; I'd look in the Bible and end up with more questions than answers.

But here's the good news; when we can stop looking at the Bible as the answer to all our questions, maybe we'll start looking more to God directly to answer our questions, and maybe we will learn more from the Bible when we bring it down to earth and study it as great writing that is nonetheless written by people, not God – yes, those writings may be inspired by God, but they are the product of human hands recording human experience and exhibiting human frailty. All this was necessary to tell you before I delve into today's reading, because I have a lot of unanswered questions about the ending of the book of Job, and I know that you are a pretty clever group of people, so you are likely to have those questions, too.

The ending of the book of Job, which I did not include in today's reading, says that God "restored" Job's fortunes – gave him his health back, gave him more cattle than before, and gave him ten more children and a very long life. That's the ending that I have trouble with for two reasons; first, anyone who has ever lost a child knows that you can't simply replace that child with a new one and imagine that everything is just fine. You still grieve for the child you lost, and Job lost TEN children. NOTHING can restore that loss or take away the pain that Job will feel for the rest of his life. Second, the whole book of Job seems to indicate that our righteousness in this world has nothing to do with our wealth and our health or our family life. Good things happen to bad people just as bad things happen to good people, so an ending that has Job "restored" to his previous blessed condition seems to indicate the opposite, that righteousness IS materially rewarded by God. A lot of students of this book have argued that the ending was tacked on by a writer or writers who didn't like the lesson that this book was teaching, and so it "unteaches" that lesson for the sake of the reader who would rather continue to believe that there IS some connection between our righteousness and material blessing. It doesn't jibe, and we know it.

And so today I would rather focus on what most people would consider to be the original ending of this book, where Job responds and God VINDICATES Job without making some artificial and feeble attempt at restoring something that cannot be restored. Job has suffered terribly and there is no way to make up for that, so let's not pretend that God has acted in a way that we truly WANT him to act, and let's just get used to the fact that our lives very often involve suffering that feels "undeserved."

But let's not forget the point I made two weeks ago, that the blessings of health and affluence and a life free of tragedy are NOT the results of our righteous deeds. There are plenty of healthy, affluent people who are far from righteous, and plenty of people who suffer tremendously who are nonetheless good people, obedient to God. At the end of today's reading God addresses Job's friends and says, "Shame on you for implying that Job's misfortune has anything to do with his behavior. It doesn't." And this is a lesson that we must absolutely take to heart and remember every time we see human suffering. God help us from ever thinking that a person DESERVES pain or grief based on their poverty.

And let's not forget the point I made last week, that there is no greater treasure than an authentic relationship with God. For all Job's righteousness Job still lacked a true relationship with God; he says as much in today's reading:

I admit I once lived by rumors of you;
now I have it all firsthand—from my own eyes and ears!

Too often wealth and health and affluence become false gods to us, as they did for Job and for his friends. Wealth and affluence become convenient excuses for us NOT to pursue an authentic relationship with God. Job's friends insist on keeping this false image of God, but Job is really struggling to know God throughout his ordeal. He's not willing to capitulate and assume that his misfortune is brought on by sin, which means that he is not willing to compromise his passion for a true relationship with God.

Today I want you to see Job as a bit of foreshadowing, as a sign pointing to Jesus, one who was never as wealthy as Job – in fact when he died all his worldly possessions were the clothes on his back – and one who suffered terribly not on account of his own sin but on account of humanity's sin. Jesus was scorned by those in power who considered him an uneducated nobody. He was condemned as a criminal – an insurgent who threatened Roman rule – and as a blasphemer – one who claimed to have a very authentic relationship with the true God but who the religious authorities condemned because they stubbornly insisted that THEY were the ones who truly knew God. I should point out that Jesus too questioned God as he lamented from the cross, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" I'm certainly glad that he did, because I believe we all feel that need from time to time, a need to cry out to God and ask, "Why?" And like Jesus, we may not get an answer in this life. We may have to wait until we are raised up as Jesus is.

In conclusion, there are things that we will never understand about God, but our faith looks to the God of Resurrection, to the God who does not let death have the last word, to the God who accompanies us through our trials and tribulations and comforts us with the assurance of his eternal presence. May our faith be in the true God who suffers with us but guides us through the storms and brings us safely into his kingdom.