

Hillcrest Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett  
October 4, 2009  
Flesh  
Job 1:1; 2:1, 3-10, Mark 10:2-16

I confess that I got stuck the image of poor Job, sitting in the ashes, using a potsherd to scratch the open sores inflicted upon him from head to toe. Isn't that awful? The worst part is he didn't even do anything to deserve it! Job's story is really unfair!

At the start, everything is great: Job has his health, a good wife, nice home, lots of children, servants, land and animals. He worships God and sacrifices offerings every day, just in case one of his children has sinned. Even God says he is a blameless and upright man. Then God and Satan get into a contest and Job is the loser. Thieves come, lightning strikes, enemy armies attack, and a tornado hits. All of Job's possessions are taken or destroyed, and his servants and children are all killed. Yet Job remains faithful.

Satan tells God, "Of course Job has remained faithful. Any one would give up all they had to save their lives. But afflict his flesh and Job will lose his integrity!" So today, even Job's flesh betrays him. Finally, as we can imagine, Job's wife's loses her patience in the face of all this tragedy. She comes and tells Job to "curse God and die."

It seems that Job would be at his lowest point- but not yet. Job holds on... and things get worse. Along come three of his friends to "comfort" Job; they almost do not recognize him, and turn away to cry. Then they come and sit with him in silence for 7 days and nights- they are so shocked there is nothing they can say.

But they begin to ask questions and give him advice. They tell him to be patient and accept his lot. They tell him he needs to pray more. They challenge his faithfulness to God, and tell him that some how, some way, he must have done or forgotten to do

something, he must deserve all the horrible things that have happened to him. They tell him he must repent. Some comfort.

Then along comes a young man with wisdom for Job. He chastises Job's three friends because even though they are older they lack wisdom. Elihu tells Job that God uses suffering to teach us, and he points to Job's self-righteousness as the problem.

Finally, God answers Job's cries for vindication. But God does not reassure Job of his blameworthiness. Instead, God details God's omnipotence and then challenges Job. "Who are you to question God?" At this point, Job gives in: He has borne the suffering, has handled the defection of his wife, has stood up to the "comfort" of his friends, and being called self-righteous.

But when God challenges him, Job finally relents, repents and is reconciled with God. God gives him back everything- his health, and an even better family, home and possessions than he had before. And God chastises Job's friends that were so unhelpful. Job lives to be a 140 and saw four generations of family. Ah, a happily ever after ending. Anyone feel happy?

No. The story of Job is an unsettling, unsatisfying story. Here are just a few of the dangling questions left over: Why would God make a deal with and give Satan all that power? Where did Satan come from- is Satan the devil? Why would God allow these terrible tests? Why did they pick on Job? What happened to Job's first wife? What happened to Elihu? Where was the justice for Job's first children, servants and animals? Who could retain their inner goodness, integrity and faith being tested like that? Is this a real story or a metaphor? If it is a wisdom text, what is the wisdom?

In spite of all that happened, in spite of the losses, the pain, his struggles with his wife, his friends, and Elihu, Job believed that God was still with him. Before his trial, Job had everything a person could want in life. He was faithful and had a relationship with God. Then life fell apart. But Job did not let go of the relationship.

Job kept praying; asking God, pleading with God, challenging God, seeking God. He let go of all he had. Then he let go of his grief, and finally even his health. He dealt with the despair of his wife, his friends challenged him with the teachings of his tradition, and Elihu forced him to look at himself. In the end all that he had, and all that he might have used to prop himself up with was gone. All he had left was God. At the end, Job said to God, "I had heard of you...But now my eye sees you." It all came down to his relationship with God.

There is not one of us who has not and will not face difficulties in this life. Unfortunately we are all given opportunity to ask the questions: "Why me God? What am I supposed to learn from this? How can I bear this?" In deepening our relationship with God we have to come to grips with theodicy- how God can allow evil to exist.

We are not the only ones. These are the words of an ancient Gnostic Holy Eucharist prayer:

"I have been apart and I have lost my way . . . And in my hours of darkness when I am not even sure there is a Thou hearing my call, I still call to Thee with all my heart. Hear the cry of my voice, clamoring from this desert, for my soul is parched and my heart can barely stand this longing."<sup>1</sup>

But as we struggle there is support in sharing our experiences. Rabbi Harold Kushner's struggle with the challenge of his son's illness gave us his book *When Bad*

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Crocker Cook  
[http://www.utoronto.ca/wjudaism/contemporary/articles/a\\_cook.html](http://www.utoronto.ca/wjudaism/contemporary/articles/a_cook.html)

*Things Happen to Good People.* The book club is reading Viktor Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning: From Concentration Camp to Existentialism.* From sharing his personal experience of the Holocaust, he finds the last (and perhaps the only) human freedom is the ability to "choose one's attitude in a given set of circumstances... and discover an adequate guiding truth."<sup>2</sup>

It is the dilemma of faith, reconciling suffering and God. Today we remember our brothers and sisters in the Philippines, the Samoan, Tongan and Indonesian islands. I know that we are called respond to their suffering and to be what their eye sees when they see God. Yet, none of us can answer this ultimate question for the other. Each of us must make our own journey, and must seek and see God for our selves.

Jesus calls us to this journey. The Pharisees thought they knew the rules of the journey and were in control. They tried to use the narrow traditions to trap and discredit Jesus. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered, "What did Moses command you?" Yet again he answers their question with a question that he uses to turn the trap back on them.

He turns the question back, as he always does to relationships. Again and again, Jesus showed that a priority in interpreting scripture is a concern for human well being: In Jesus' time marriage was about economic stability and social privileges- ownership of people and authority over reproductive and inheritance rights. Allowing divorce created abusive situations for women. Abandoned by their husbands, these women could not return to their birth families and were seldom able to remarry. This left them without any means of support or safety. Jesus spoke often about protecting the least in the society.

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<sup>2</sup> Frankl, Viktor, *Man's Search for Meaning: From Concentration Camp to Existentialism*, Rev. Ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962) pg xi, xii

But more significant is how Jesus masterfully turns the debate from legalistic aspects of the human law, to consideration of God's perfection. He bests the Pharisees by returning to the spirit of God's law not the legalistic interpretation of it. Jesus says- that is what Moses' law says, but what does God want? He points to God's kingdom as the ideal that we are to strive for. God's kingdom requires wholeness in our selves, and our relationships with each other in marriage and otherwise, and God.

Yet Jesus knew we were not perfect. It is the children he told us we must emulate. Not the powerful or the wealthy or the wise but those who are new, who are non-duplicitous, who are available to wonder, who are seeking and open to relationship with God. Receiving the kingdom of God as a little child requires that we be vulnerable. It requires that we shed the things of the world that stand in the way as Job was forced to do, and become open to encountering God.

We know that the kingdom of God, and God, is here, all around us. In our family, our marriages, every place and time. God is there when we wrestle with scripture like Job, when we wrestle with the suffering of people around the world, and when we wrestle the stories of our lives. Paraphrasing Job, shall we acknowledge that God is with us in the good times and not in the bad?

We are people of both flesh and spirit. Yet, in the words of the psalmist, God has made us a little lower than God, and crowned us with glory and honor. The story of Job, and the teachings and life of Jesus call us to a genuine and life-giving relationship with God. They also challenge us to become whole people within our selves, and to live this out in our relationship with others. Let us strive for the ideal.