

“Faith Amid Ambiguity”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Job 1:1; 2:1-10
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-9

The Book of Job has to be one of the most fascinating, and yet at the same time one of the most confusing books in the Bible. It is fascinating because it depicts a solitary man, Job, who is the pawn in an apparent game of life between God and Satan. It is a literary and poetic tale which has been the subject of many novels, and continues to challenge the human mind about God and life and who is in control of this world. It is confusing because it does not paint a clear picture of why bad things happen. As Christians, we are challenged by God’s yielding to Satan so that Satan can test this loyal and upright man of God. And we relate to the ups and downs of Job’s struggle, but we wonder if we can remain steadfast in our faith as he did, even when the most terrible events occur in our lives.

We all know the basic story of Job, even if we haven’t read the entire book in the Bible. There is a man named Job who is one of God’s favorite human creatures. One day, the heavenly beings gather and Satan comes, as well. God asks Satan if he had noticed his servant Job, one of his most faithful human beings. But Satan disagrees, telling God that Job would be nothing without all his possessions and health. God agrees for Satan to test Job, as long as he doesn’t kill him, and the game is on. All that Job has is taken away: livestock, home, family, even his health. Despite all these tragedies, Job does not sin against God. But he does have some direct and pointed questions for God, which, to Job’s dismay, are not directly answered. In the end, Job remains faithful, and God remains steadfast in his love for Job, replenishing his possessions and blessing the remainder of his life.

This is the familiar account of Job, one which most of us know. But there are specifics of this narrative which also point to deeper meanings for our life in the 21st century. Those include how our view of morality and the world may be changed by the actions of God; how strong our faith really is in God when life seems to be falling apart; and how we appropriately share our faith with others who themselves are in the midst of despair.

To begin, notice how Job is described from the very beginning of the book: “There once was 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” (1:1). What does that tell us? It lets the reader know that his neighbors and friends saw nothing wrong with him in their eyes. It lets us know that he was a man full of integrity and morality, standing tall in his community. It tells you that he was humble in his faith to the Lord of hosts, for he knew the power and might which God possessed. Finally, it identifies him as someone who is not easily tempted or turned in the wrong direction. In all honesty, if there ever was a “perfect” believer, it was Job in God’s eyes!

Who are the “perfect” ones in our world today? They could be teachers who sacrifice much prestige in order to educate and care for our children. They could be veterans who have served in battles far from home, having never complained but always willing to fulfill an obligation of service which many of us can never fully appreciate. They could be men and women in the church who are the true models of Christian discipleship. There are many around us who are “blameless and upright,” and who “fear God” and “turn away from evil.”

But what happens to them, or to us, when bad things start to happen? How do the “upright and blameless” fare when trial after trial come their way? That was the question Satan had for God when God told him about Job. In Hebrew, Satan is literally called “the Adversary” or “the Accuser,” and as such presents an adversarial opinion to God’s pristine view of Job. The Adversary has already taken away Job’s possessions and family. Now he seeks to hit at the core of life itself. “Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face” (2:4-5). When the Adversary says “skin for skin,” he foretells what is to come for Job: his suffering will determine Job’s response to God, but it also reflects the leprosy which will afflict him during his torment.

How many times have we said to ourselves, “I would give up any of these things which I own if it would give me better health, or more time on this earth?” The few who do have the most to give often throw all their resources into preserving their life, whether it be for the best doctors, around-the-clock care, or experimental treatments for disease. And yet, when those possessions are taken away, and our health is still poor, who usually gets the blame? God. “Why have you done this to me? What have I done to deserve this? Where is the healing spirit you promised if only I believed?” We wish we could barter with God, to tell God to trade our suffering for anything we own. But instead we are left with the reality that suffering is not something which can be traded away, and we must search the depths of our souls for God’s presence amid such despair.

What suffering brings is ambiguity. On the whole, we hate ambiguity. Ambiguity means there are no clear, definite rules. There is no marker which states right from wrong. There is nothing but gray, muddled life, which frustrates us and causes us to yearn for order and simplicity. “When our once placid lives are disrupted by the late-night phone call, the letter that was unexpected, those terrible words, ‘I have some bad news for you . . .’ – in those moments everything seems to come unglued and we cry out. We ask, ‘Why?’” (Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 28, No. 4, p.9).

When ambiguity strikes, we are left to wonder whether we have done something in our past which has caused our suffering. William Willimon calls it “a kind of moral arithmetic in the world. If you do right, right will be done to you. If you do wrong, wrong will be done to you. Think now, what did you do wrong?” That is the question Job’s friends posed to him after the passage we have read today. Despite his uprightness and faithfulness, surely he has committed a sin in his past which now has caught up with him. Instead of comfort, his friends offer reason and logic and arithmetic.

Too many times we offer words for comfort in the midst of people's distress. We try to reason why this suffering has happened. We attempt to throw Scripture and lessons of the past at them hoping that will bring God's peace in the midst of turmoil. Words often can be the shield which protects us from our own insecurities. Why is it that we are so uncomfortable to be with others who have experienced some terrible calamity? Perhaps because it threatens our own simple explanations for what is happening in this world around us (Willimon, 9).

At the end of the book, Job finally has many direct and pointed questions for God, such as why is this happening to him and how could God allow this to take place. Instead of direct answers, God responds with more questions. "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? I will question you and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding" (38:1-4). Instead of answers, Job gets a vision of the world, a vision which can only come from the Creator – his creator. It is further ambiguity and grayscale, while Job yearned for black and white. Once again, Job's faith is tested as to how he will accept this response from the Lord.

"Then Job answered the Lord: 'I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes'" (42:1-6). Job accepts the ambiguity. He does not question it further. He chooses to live in it and realizes that that is the world which God has created for him to live in. "Job is invited out toward a new world, a world not based on simple, distributive, retributive justice . . . What we know is that Job is given a glimpse of the wide world, of the deep mysteries. He isn't given the answers. He is given God. God speaks to Job. It may not be the words Job expected. But maybe what Job gets is even better than words. Job gets God" (Willimon, 10).

We aren't meant to know all the answers to life's difficult situations. We aren't meant to tell others the answers to why suffering happens to them or to others. We aren't meant to reason out the bad things of the past which cause suffering in the future. All we are meant to do is to know God. God will get us through the ambiguity and ground us in an understanding which only God can give. For in times of deep distress, that is all we really want, even more than words or answers.

Have faith amid the ambiguity of life, and know that God will always be with you. Thanks be to God. Amen.