

Retribution is Not God's Idea

From a sermon series on the Book of Job

Text: Job 20:4-5; Job 21:7; Job 42:7, translated by Stephen Mitchell

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Zophar: *"Haven't you realized yet (How can you be so blind!) that the sinner's joy is brief and costs no more than a moment?" Job 20:4-5*

Job: *"Why do the wicked prosper and live to a ripe old age?" Job 21:7*

God: *"I am very angry at you [Eliphaz] and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has." Job 42:7*

I was thinking about the serenity and beauty of Psalm 23 as it was sung a moment ago. I was thinking of the melodious song, beautiful words, comforting and reassuring as they were floating over you. You seemed to be at peace and it reminded me of a conversation I had last evening with a good friend of mine who is a pastor. He has just gone through radiation for the cancer that has invaded his body. I asked him how he was and he said, "Doing pretty good." He added, "I'm speaking to God again." He said, "In the midst of it we kind of got separated for a while." Well, you know, all the wonderful religious comfort in the world in which we really believe, by which we live, by which we are undergirded and overshadowed, enabled and empowered, all of that which is so terribly important and so wonderful, sometimes comes into collision with our real life situation. All of a sudden it can evaporate, it can raise doubts and questions, and we wonder, "Where is God in this moment and in this darkness?"

I think that that's what happened to Job. The poet who wrote this dramatic poem may have come into a crisis in his faith, or maybe, as poets generally are, he was a spokesperson for a lot of people who had come into a crisis of faith. What they had learned in Sunday School just wasn't working any more. They couldn't connect what they were experiencing with what they had always held to be true about God. So the poet raised a serious protest against the generally perceived wisdom of the day about the relationship of God to our lives. What the poet protested was in the question of last week—the one-to-one relationship between sin and punishment, virtue and reward. What he said was, you can't tell whether a person is virtuous or wicked by looking at their life—their happiness, their prosperity or their lack thereof. It just doesn't work that way in my human

experience and what I see about me, even though that's what I once believed and that's what you friends are trying to convince me of anew, I don't believe it.

I am not going to make a lot of progress today because when I get into a series like this I get to thinking about it eight days a week, and I find often that I move too rapidly. So I am stalling this morning. If you were here last week, you can leave now. (Laughter) No, what I want to say this morning is just a little different spin on what I said last week. This morning I simply want to say, "Retribution is not God's Idea."

Tribute is payment; retribution is re-payment. It reflects an idea of human experience and of the way the world is that gives tit-for-tat. You do "a", you get "b." You do "c", you get "d". The one who is turning the dials and pushing the keys is God, the moral cop striding in heaven observing creatures on earth, giving just "desserts," whether for weal or woe, depending on whether one is good or bad. That was a very early conception of things and, as I said last week, in saying that is not the case, we have got to make some qualifications. We have got to recognize that there is a whole lot of the Bible that says that's the case, at least as superficially understood. It would seem to say in many places in the Scripture that it is a matter of being good and being blessed—being evil and being punished. The implication of that was that if you are punished, therefore, you have been evil. No one suffers if one is innocent. There is a lot of Bible that would seem to indicate a very close relationship between being good and being blessed—being evil and being punished.

We all know that there are certain patterns of behavior that engaged in will result in happiness and prosperity and wellbeing. And there are certain patterns of behavior if engaged in will result in disaster and self-destruction. So there is a certain truth in the fact that our human action and human behavior has its consequences. Don't hear me denying that. That is obvious.

Maybe I should add another qualification and that is that to live in human community or human society we do need a system of justice. We live in a nation, under a constitution. That constitution is interpreted and reinterpreted, and its laws are applied. Apart from that, it wouldn't be possible to live in community or to have human society. I wouldn't want to live in a society where good and evil were just indiscriminately affirmed or where it didn't matter. It does matter. You can't live together unless there is some law, some structure, some order. Human beings being as they are, it is necessary that there be some enforcement of order. The great theologian of the last generation, Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote a book about society. I can remember being struck by his book many, many years ago where he said, "The ideal for human community is not love, but justice." I said, "Oh, come on. Love is higher than justice." But his point was that in society you cannot legislate nor can you enforce love. Love is not for legislating and love is not for enforcing, but justice you can legislate and justice you can enforce. I think that was at the time of the Civil Rights Movement in the 60s, and at that time

there were those who were saying you can't legislate this decency in community, and all of that. Reinhold Nieboer said, "Oh, yes you can. There is a standard of justice that can be legislated and it should be enforced because, even though we cannot effect through any human means a loving community, we can effect a just community." So, that is important.

But having said that it still doesn't get at the nub of Job's protest. Job's protest was, "I am suffering. I am innocent." Therefore, there is not a one-to-one relationship between human behavior and consequence. Job was so convinced of his own experience that he was willing even to accuse heaven. But, really, he was buying in with his friends the idea that God was doing these things—pulling the strings and pushing the buttons, busying God's self with all of the stuff that makes up our life. He bought into that. But what he couldn't go along with out of his own experience was the fact that, therefore, if one is suffering, one is being punished for sin either known or unknown. So, he accused God of being unjust. That really got the ire of his friends and they went on the attack. Job had a lot to learn too, and we will get to that eventually (Out of the whirlwind Job had to say, "Whew, I didn't know what I was talking about. Sorry."). But the important point that Job made in the protest that was brought to expression in this dramatic poem was that there is suffering in human experience, there is tragedy in human experience, there are things that happen to us that are disastrous, and we ought not first of all to blame the victim. Or, if we are the victim, we should not blame ourselves. Job's point was that God never intended a retributive system to be put in place, enforced by God's all-seeing eye and authority. Job said, "I don't know what I am suffering. I don't understand suffering. But in the human situation, I am suffering. And I am innocent."

His friends said, "Can't be." Zophar says, "The sinner's joy is brief and lasts no more than a moment." For if Job would point to someone, they would say, "Ah, yes, but that ephemeral, that's going to pass away. Just wait." The Psalmist in Psalm 73 had a problem with the prosperity of the wicked as Job did, but then he said, "Then I contemplated their end. Oh, you have set them on a slippery slope." Zophar was saying the happiness and prosperity of the wicked is an illusion and finally God will get them. Job said, "Oh really. Oh really! Is His candle so quickly snuffed out?"

Not what I observe. I see reckless, careless, people with grandchildren frolicking on the lawn and jumping on their lap. I see the wicked prosper."

Now Job has got a lot to learn yet. Job is going to go through the whirlwind. Job at this point doesn't have it all right. But Job's friends have it all wrong, and that's the point. In the resolution of the book, which I read also, God says to the friends, "I am angry with you. You didn't speak truly about me as my servant Job did." "Retribution Is Not God's Idea." No tit-for-tat. No God striding around heaven observing your behavior to prosper you if you tithe and bomb you if you don't come to church. We preachers wish that were the case. (Laughter) We have a long

history of implying that that might be the case. On second thought, you can't be too safe! (Laughter) But that is an abuse of religion. That is a manipulation of people. That is speaking to people's vulnerabilities. I am always surprised at how seriously you take sermons. Don't believe me. Let me raise some questions we ought to think about, but don't expect me to give you a simple answer because I might be just as miserable as Job's friends, or I might be as off the track as Job before the whirlwind."

The Wisdom Books out of which we are preaching really say to people, "Don't listen to preachers, begin to think for yourself." The Wisdom Books are books that call God's people to maturity, to stop using God as a security blanket, as a safety shield, using prayer to pass the buck to God when it is our responsibility to work at human community and concerns of justice and righteousness and compassion and to stop doing what Jesus forbids us to do anyway, and that is to judge other people or ourselves. William Safire in his book *The First Dissident*, in the quote I had in the bulletin last week says, "Don't blame the victim." Then he uses the example of the person with AIDS. Haven't you heard it? If you haven't, you don't watch preachers on television or listen to the radio. But if you do, if you have that addiction, I'll bet sometime or other you have heard one suggest that there is a plague on America, and the HIV virus has come because of homosexuality, and those non-persons coming out of the closet and making a big uproar in society.

Job would say, "No. You can't do that. For one thing you don't just take a class of people and write them off. For another thing, you being people who are being called to maturity and to growth and reasonableness and decency, know from new information and data available to us today, that the matter of sexual orientation may really be a matter of orientation, not necessarily a matter of choice. The Bible has a lot to say about promiscuity in hetero or homosexual relationships, but it doesn't talk about orientation per se. So for people to then say, "There is a plague. God is judging." That is nonsense! It is cruel. And, it is not true. Safire says, "A woman is raped. Easy to say 'She got what she deserved.' Or people's houses are flooded because they live on the river bottom and say, 'Stupid people. God is judging them for their stupidity.'" No. Job says, "That's not what God is into. God is not into tit-for-tat. God is not walking a beat in heaven in order to get a bead on you and all of that." God says, "Here is light. Here is creation. Live it. Be responsible. Be mature. Stand up and be a human person."

The God that Job is going to meet in the whirlwind that lies yet before us is a God that is going to blow Job away. Job isn't going to get all his questions answered. He is not going to get a nice neat scheme of things. I want to say at this point that if you have a good satisfying relationship with God and your faith system is working for you, far be it from me to try to move you from that. But as your pastor I know that some of you one day will come into an experience where, if you haven't thought these things through, your faith is going to crash on the rocks of

reality. Then I would like to be able to say to you, "There is something bigger and better."

The reason to think these things through is that, if we should come into a Joban experience, I would hope it would lead us to the whirlwind of revelation in order that our God would not crumble before the assault of tragedy and human suffering, but rather that God might become grander and greater. For what Job finally had to learn—I think the outcome of the book would be this—is that God ought to be served because God is worthy to be served, that one should be in awe before God because God is awesome, that God is such that one can trust and cling even in the darkness, and that virtue carries its own reward.

In other words, one ought simply to be "good for nothing." If one is "good for nothing," then one is good for the only good reason there is to be good. If one catches a glimpse of the grandeur and the glory of God, then one will have another way and a better way to stand in any storm of life. Job didn't have it all right yet. But in the end God said, "That other stuff, it's wrong. Job has said it right."