

What It Takes to Make a Heretic

From a sermon series on the Book of Job

Text: Job 6:25-26

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

*"Teach me, and I will be silent; show me where I am wrong.
Does honest speech offend you? Are you shocked by what I have said?"*
Job 6:25-26; Translation by Stephen Mitchell

I begin this morning a series of messages on the Book of Job. This is the first time I've ever tried to preach on Job in a serious fashion in order to handle the content of the writing itself because, to be honest, I haven't understood it. Oh, a text here and there—a text torn out of context to make a whale of a sermon on occasion. But an insight into the composition of the book sometime ago enabled me to crack open the enigma of the Book of Job. The Book of Job is a part of the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures—Job, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, some of the Psalms. The Wisdom literature is a particular genre of the Hebrew Scriptures which has its own characteristic themes. We don't do a lot with it in the Church, and I haven't done a lot with it in preaching. As I said, the Book of Job has been for me an enigma, and what I've found is that, in a new understanding of something of the composition of the book, it becomes a marvelous and powerful message which deals with the very concrete stuff which makes up our human experience. So I want to begin this morning in a kind of introductory fashion to deal with this book. I want to deal with the Book of Job because I think that it deals with the things that we wrestle with every day in our lives—the unvarnished stuff of human life. We'll see how far the series goes—four or five, six. Who can tell once a preacher gets started?

The enigma that has kept me from ever treating the Book of Job as a whole has a couple of aspects. In the first place Job has become in popular understanding the "patient Job." We come by that honestly because in James 5:11 we are told, "You know the patience of Job." So in conventional wisdom, Job became a model of patience. To be sure, in what I read, in the prologue to the book, he certainly is patient. But when you read the whole central section of the book, Job is not patient. He is one of the most impatient people in the Bible. He rails against heaven. He calls God to account. He damns the day he was born. Job is not

submissive, patient and enduring, but a "rebel with a cause." I could never put those two things together. If you read not only the prologue that I read a moment ago, but the epilogue, the last few verses of the last chapter you will find that, after his terrible suffering and total loss and the experience of God's voice in the whirlwind, Job gets everything back two-fold. So, it would appear that the message of Job is to suffer, be patient, so that finally you will be vindicated, rewarded. But that theme contradicts the whole powerful center of this poem.

Well, the insight that helped me to make some sense of this book is that probably the prologue and epilogue is an ancient legend—probably centuries and generations old, and that the author of the central poem, if you glance at the Book of Job you'll see the shift from prose to poetic form sandwiched between a prologue and epilogue which are reflective of another age and a totally other philosophy and understanding, a protest. Now you say, "Well, what's the sense of that?" Why would the poet want to sandwich that between the telling of an ancient legend? Well maybe, as some have said, because he wanted to set his own point of view in sharp contrast to the other.

The ancient legend says that God blesses those who are good and God punishes those who are evil. The ancient legend says if you suffer and endure patiently you will be rewarded. The poet says, "I don't believe it! It is contrary to everything that I experience and observe in human life, and I don't believe it." Maybe by setting that ancient legend at either side of his protest, he sets it off even more starkly. Or maybe he softened the edges of his protest by encasing it in this ancient legend just to get in touch. You know, it's dangerous to swim against the tide. It's dangerous to speak a word against conventional wisdom. It can cost you your life to hold an opinion contrary to that which everybody knows. Do you know how much we live by what everybody knows? The poet says, "I don't know that. I don't believe that." But, you had better be careful when you say "no," and everybody else is saying "yes." It would be an interesting doctoral dissertation to trace through history the significant written works that were published *after* an author's death, purposely, for fear that if they had been published in his or her life, the author would have lost his or her life, would have died sooner than he or she did. The poet gives Job the voice of a heretic—Job spoke a word against what everybody knows, and what nobody thinks about, but everybody believes.

Job was not orthodox. He was heretical. The word *orthodox* means straight opinion. The prefix *ortho* is from the Greek language. When I was a kid I used to be able to spit through my teeth. And then my mother sent me to an orthodontist. The orthodontist made my teeth straight because my father had me set apart for the ministry. Otherwise I don't think they would have straightened my teeth. (Laughter) If you break your leg and it is at right angles, you go to an *orthopedic* surgeon who makes bones straight. If you are *orthodox* in theology, you hold the right opinion. You hold the straight, accepted, perceived view of things. This poet was not orthodox. This poet was a heretic. Heretic also comes from the Greek language. It means "*to choose*."

William Safire, the *New York Times* columnist, has a relatively recent book on Job. He calls it *The First Dissident*. Job was the first *dissident*, which comes from the Latin, *descent*, to sit apart. A dissident is one who sits apart, stands apart, and acts apart. I don't use the word dissident because I'm not thinking as Safire is, largely of the political and economic realm, but I am thinking more theologically. So I will use the theological term *heretic*. The author of Job ran contrary to the commonly accepted view of things in his day. He stood up and dared to say "no." He stood up and dared to be alone and have the passion and conviction that enabled him with courage to say, "I don't believe it." He was a heretic.

What makes a heretic? Concrete human experience that can't be crammed into conventional wisdom as an explanation. Burning, passionate, concrete experience that you just can't shove into a ready-made pigeonhole. A heretic is one whose experience brings him to a point where he dares to stand up and to say, "No, I don't believe it. This is what I believe." Job is a heretic, because everyone knew that suffering was a sign of sin, that the one who was suffering was carrying some guilt whether known or unknown. In his day the poet ran into the conventional wisdom, the things that everybody knew, and that is that God blesses those who are righteous, and God punishes those who are wicked. Everybody knew that when you run into trouble, when calamity comes, when tragedy strikes there is either some open or secret sin in your life. So when you come into trouble, the question you ask is "What have I done wrong? Why me? What have I done? Am I wrong? Where have I gone wrong?" It was a cruel philosophy or theology, but it was deeply inbred into the human heart then, and it continues to be to a large extent even today. I think that's why it is so important to deal with it. The poet of these poems said, "I don't believe that." He said, "I look about me and I see a mystery of human suffering that cannot be explained. I see the innocent suffer. I see the good coming into calamity, and I see sometimes the careless getting off scot-free." Human experience—what I observe and what I myself experience—simply cannot be put into a neat formula: God blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked. Job said, "I see innocent children die. I see cancer strike willy-nilly. I see fires rage and floods rise, and I see natural calamities which the insurance companies call 'acts of God', and I see human calamities when there are broken relationships and betrayals and denials. I see parents who find their daughters raped and mutilated or throats slit. I find young people blown away in war. I see good people, decent people struck down by any number of things that bring them into intense suffering and pain and loss." The poet said it is simply too simplistic—"I don't believe it. The innocent suffer. That is a mystery. I can't explain it. Sometimes there is darkness, and there is no word to say."

Job's friends had words. And today, we have pious platitudes, which work for many people: "God makes no mistakes." "God has a purpose in it." Of course, when you are back in the age of legends, then God did it, or God's agent whom God controls did it. You can't have it both ways. You can't say God has a purpose and apply it only to minor inconveniences. How can you tell someone whose life has just been ripped apart with tragedy, that God did it. I don't really think we

mean it when we say, "God has a purpose in it," or "God makes no mistakes." Job stood up and said, "No! I don't believe it for a moment." He said, "I can't explain the mystery of human suffering. I don't know the whys of human tragedy, but I am innocent and I am suffering, and I see no good purpose in it."

We have something else we resort to, as I mentioned a moment ago. We take upon ourselves feelings of guilt for our failures and for the things that go wrong. Last year I ripped this woodcut of William Blake out of the *New York Times*. It was woodcut of Job and underneath it says, "Many Americans in the flooded Midwest will sit like Job amid the ruins of their lives and ask why God has turned against them." Nearly one in five Americans told the Gallup Poll that the floods are God's judgment on the people of the United States for their sinful ways. The poet-Job says "I won't hear a word of it."

Job was a heretic. He stood up against the received opinion, the common person on the street idea of things that everybody knows. He stood up alone because it was contrary to everything he felt in his gut. He knew it was wrong and he dared to say so, and thereby set himself apart. He paid the price, of course. His three friends who came to comfort him came and with delicate sensitivity, when they saw his disaster, they sat with him seven days and seven nights without opening their mouths. That's a good comforter. Don't say a word. But when Job's voice was raised against heaven, calling God to account, railing against this injustice, this mystery, this suffering—then they ran to the defense of God or rather to the defense of their belief system about God and they denounced Job. He was rejected by his friends and he felt abandoned by heaven, but he stood up anyway, and he didn't yield. Thank God for that. Thank God that this poem made it into the canon of the scripture, because Job gives me the permission to think, to experience, and then to seek to connect my experience with my faith. When faith explanation doesn't fit with the facts of my life, I keep probing and struggling until I bring them again into some kind of meaningful relationship. Thank God for this heretic-poet. Because, as it is, we are told that one out of five Americans say the floods are the result of God's punishing the sins of the people. But think what it would have been if we had never had this protest that said, "No! I don't believe it." Thank God for Job who called God into account and said to his friends, "I'm innocent and I'm suffering, and I don't know why." Thank God for Job, for in his darkness, which was not penetrated by any ray of light, he wrestled with God. He wrestled with God and became the forerunner of another who in his darkness cried out, "My God, my God, why?," which is not a question seeking an intellectual answer, but a primal scream from a devastated human being, longing to know that there is someone there. Thank God for our confidence that, while there is suffering that has no meaning and tragedy that has no explanation when finally we must be silent, nonetheless we cling to the God of all mercy, who we believe will never let us go.

If God plays with us like puppets on a string, you have every right to fear such a God, but you can never love such a God. But if we can trust in the darkness,

believing somehow or other in an infrastructure of mercy, that's a God you can love. That's a God you can love when everything goes wrong and nothing makes sense.