

Job 42:1-6, 10-17

There's a popular Christian gospel chorus that goes: God is good ALL THE TIME, all the time GOD IS GOOD. But is that really true? Job, the tragic character of our last 4 weeks of Old Testament readings, might disagree.

Once upon a time, in the land of Uz, there was a man named Job. Job was a wealthy man in both possessions and people: he owned more animals than all his neighbors combined, his home was filled with children and servants and food and music. On top of that, Job was a good and righteous man: he obeyed God's laws, prayed daily and treated all those around him with love and kindness. By all standards of fairness and nicety, Job should have lived happily ever after, seen his children's children to the fourth generation, and died, old and full of days.

But, unfortunately, the Heavenly Beings have it in for Job. Satan – “the accuser” – shows up for the weekly meeting of God and all God's angels. Satan has been bumbling around the earth, peering nosily into people's lives, and his attention is captured by Job, a particularly annoying goody-goody made all the more irritating by the favor he has found with God. So Satan and God make a bet: if God takes away all the blessings of Job's life, will Job keep his faith, or will he end up cursing God?

With his children dead, his livestock and riches destroyed, and his body afflicted with oozing boils, Job sits down in the ashes of his once prosperous life, to curse the day he was born.

Job's despair is reasonable. He has believed his whole life that good comes to those who do good, and that those who have faith and pray will be blessed by God. His three friends think similarly: “Come on, Job,” they say, just admit what you've done wrong and God will have mercy on you.” Surely there must have been something you did to deserve this tragedy – repent and be restored.

But you and I know that suffering doesn't work that way. The innocent suffer along with the guilty, children suffer along with adults, the poor suffer along with the wealthy, Christians suffer along with people of no faith. There is such a thing as self-inflicted pain, but the vast majority of pain in our world is either senseless, inflicted by others, or just what we would call “a part of life.” And, as we read the newspapers, or receive news of tragedy among our own families and friends, perhaps we begin to question along with Job. Do the Heavenly Beings have it in for us? Are we pawns for God and his angels to play with, to bet on? Is God actually good,

ALL THE TIME, as we've always been taught? Or is justice dealt out nonsensically, arbitrarily, with complete apathy toward the good or evil intentions of our souls? Is there even a God in Heaven from whom we can demand justice?

Job makes his wish clear: "I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God."

Oh no, Job, reply his friend, not that!! Drag God into a courtroom, and you can be sure that you'll be on the losing side.

But Job answers them, "I know that my Vindicator lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth, and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God." Job does not keep his faith that God is good, or that God is fair, or that God loves him. But he is convinced that he will use every shred of dignity he has left in his exhausted body and depleted soul to call God down from Heaven and ask WHY. And *that* is something that not many people have the courage to do.

The Lord responds to Job – not with an answer to the problem of evil, nor with a defense as to why God allows suffering to happen. Rather, God appears in a whirlwind, demanding of Job to know if he has knowledge of the infinite, intricate, glorious mysteries of the universe: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Can you send forth lightnings? Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?" And, as the Lord speaks, we realize that he and Job are alone in the whirlwind – gone are Satan and the Heavenly Beings, by whose sneaky intimation came all of Job's troubles in the first place. In fact, perhaps the heavenly beings were never really real, perhaps they were only a figment of the childish way Job used to understand God – and the question of why the righteous suffer has always been one *solely* between humanity and God.

So finally we reach the portion of the reading for today, and we realize that Job didn't get an answer to his question about why such suffering had befallen him. He received no assurance from God that he had always been a good, faithful man. But God did appear from the Heavens to meet Job face to face – and that's what he had really wanted most. Job needed to know that he was not merely the victim of a cruel game played among the inhabitants of heaven. He needed to know that the Lord who afflicted him now cares enough to meet him where he is, in the dust and ashes.

Job's faith has finally grown up. "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees you," he says. Job had spent most of his life honoring the God he had been taught to worship – a God whom he believed would always be just and fair by human standards. Along with his friends, he believed that calamity ought to be a sign of disfavor and abandonment by divine. Now he realizes that the world God creates is far more beautiful and wild than he understands, and that God is *intensely present* in all the beauty and the chaos and the suffering.

You and I, and people of all religious faiths are going to be pondering the problem of suffering for a long time. Perhaps many of us can remember a moment when we realized that bad things do happen to good people, and our faith was deeply challenged. That faith has to either diminish or mature. The God we *heard of* when we were small children isn't necessarily what God is actually like when we grow older and *see* how complex and untamed and marvelous the world really is. And, as Christians who believe in a God who suffers *with* us, it is all the more important for us to enter the conversation about pain with God.

When I worked as a hospital chaplain last summer, I heard many chronically ill patients and their families say, "I know you're not supposed to question God... but sometimes I do wonder why all of this is happening to us." There is almost nothing less biblical than the notion that we are not "supposed to question God," yet that is what many people are told. That is what the crowd and disciples are saying to the blind man, Bartimaeus, in our Gospel story – "*be quiet,*" they say. But Bartimaeus yells out anyway, seeking Jesus' mercy. Back in Genesis, Jacob wrestles all night with an angel, until he receives God's blessing. Even Jesus himself cries out from the cross, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" At the beginning of the story, Job was probably the kind of person who never would have questioned the disappointments God dealt him. But even he is pushed over the edge, and cries out for God to appear to him.

There's never much insinuation that one might actually *win* an argument with God. What we do have is a biblical witness that says even our most passionate denouncement of God is an act of faith, and even words spoken to God and anger are still prayer. Job gets to see God, not because he has remained naively faithful, but because he has continued to be in conversation with his Creator in a very real and raw way. Job reminds us that even our harshest words, when spoken to God, bring us closer into his wonderful and humbling presence. And, lest we forget that God truly *is* good and loving, an epilogue is tagged onto the Job story: God restores Job's

fortunes, not for the sake of compensating him for his troubles nor for rewarding his faith, but for the sake of upholding God's end of God's relationship with Job.

So as we continue to wrestle with God about the difficult questions, let us respond to the world with the faith of mature Christians who know that God's goodness is sometimes hard to see – but who are confident that God is faithful **ALL THE TIME**.