

October 24, 2021
The Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 25), Year B
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Job 42:1-6, 10-17
Psalm 34:1-8, (19-22)
Hebrews 7:23-28
Mark 10:46-52

This is Job. I acquired him during my first year of seminary. You can tell it's Job by his tattered clothes and open sores. In case you're wondering, he's one of the ten members of the Biblical Action Figures Collection. Do you remember how some Christians pushed back against gay marriage with the line, "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve"? I used to joke about purchasing, not an Adam and an Eve, but instead two Adams, whom I would call Adam and Steve. Sadly, before I made that purchase, the Biblical Action Figures Collection was discontinued. I acquired Job from my seminary bookstore, which satisfied the student need for both religious books and religious kitsch. This was just as Amazon was taking off. Sadly, the bookstore, like so many others, was also discontinued.

During seminary, if I had a particularly vexing writing assignment, Job came down off the shelf and sat on my desk next to my computer monitor. He said little, but his presence was a comfort. I suppose he helped me keep things in perspective. You could say that Job was a better friend to me than his friends were to him. Job now lives in my office here at church, next to where my I sit my laptop when I stand to work. He's mostly been up there by himself in recent months. Maybe it's time for his fortunes to again be restored.

Today was the last Sunday of a four-Sunday stretch of Hebrew Scripture readings excerpted from the Book of Job. Let me offer a quick synopsis. Job the person is, as the scripture says, "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil."¹ Job is wealthy in children, livestock, and servants. He is a man of unusual devotion.

Conflict is introduced by the "heavenly being"² named Satan, or more accurately "*the Satán*," An even better translation is "the Accuser" or "the Prosecutor." Satan is a member of the heavenly court, and he goes around looking for people to bring to task there. God praises Job as a man of unusual devotion. The Accuser taunts God, saying, in effect, "Of course he's devoted! You've given him everything he could possibly want." So God lets the Accuser test Job, first by setting in motion events that cause Job to lose all his children, all his livestock, and all his servants, and then by covering him with sores.

Job's three "friends" go and hang out with him. They say that he must have done *something* to offend God and bring this misfortune onto himself. Job insists that he is blameless. We know he's right. Job demands an explanation from God. God does reply to Job, not to explain, but rather to put Job in his place. Speaking from a whirlwind, God describes God's own amazing feats of creative power. In response, as we heard today. Job repents of his questioning ways. In the end, God chastises Job's three unhelpful "friends" and restores Job's fortunes, giving him twice what he had before.

The Book of Job is in many places *beautiful*—and it’s in many ways places *disturbing*. Let’s not forget that God didn’t bring those original children back to live; they were gone. So Job is disturbing even if we approach it not as history and rather as parable. Job is the pawn in a contest for heavenly bragging rights. In that contest, his suffering seems to be of no concern.

We Christians tend to turn to the New Testament to correct the disturbances of the Old. We should always be careful of that, and today’s reading about Bartimaeus is a case in point. On the surface, it’s simple and uplifting. Jesus restores a blind man’s sight: “your faith has made you well,” Jesus says. His sight restored, Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the way. But what about all the other people who needed healing, the ones who didn’t run into Jesus that day on his way to Jerusalem? What about all the people who are sick *today* and won’t get well? Eventually, that will be every one of us. If God doesn’t heal me, is it because I don’t have enough faith? Is it because I did something wrong?” “Is it because God is punishing me?” In my life as a pastor, I have heard those questions and more.

All this points to the particular area of theological inquiry called *theodicy*. You don’t really need to remember that word. Theodicy explores the tension between what seem to be two opposing truths: one, that God is both all-powerful and all-good, and two, that there is evil and suffering in the world. If we take it as given that there *is* evil and suffering in the world, then one of two things must be true: either God is all-powerful but lacks goodness, or God is all-good but lacks power. Again, given evil and suffering, here’s the choice: is God *all-powerful*, OR is God *all-good*?

I’m not going to try to answer that question. Faced with either doubt about self or doubt about God, a common solution is this simple statement: “Everything happens for a reason.” There’s a close corollary, “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle.” I will never say those things to anyone, but I hear them a lot, and not just in the church. Our societal identity as a Christian nation may be rapidly dying, but a sort of public religion has survived, and its dogma includes “Everything happens for a reason” and “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle.” But horrible things turn up in the news every day, things that I can’t imagine our loving God has reasons for. And some people do in fact get more than they can handle.

Many years ago, on the radio show *A Prairie Home Companion*, Minnesota-based humorist Garrison Keillor said that, if a person doesn’t shovel enough snow in their lifetime, their eternal salvation is in question. At the time I was living in Vermont and enduring a particularly snowy winter. My first thought was, “Well, then, I am all set!” It was funny, but like many of Keillor’s observations about life in fictional Lake Wobegone, it contains a kernel of truth about the corporate American identity. As Keillor illustrates, in our public pseudo-religion, a certain amount of suffering is considered valuable and might even be necessary. In response to that, let me say this: Jesus died on the cross, but I question the assignment of redemptive suffering for him, and I flat-out reject it for the rest of us. The assignment of redemptive power to suffering merely aids in suffering’s propagation.

It is a human imperative to make meaning of suffering, but that's not the same as calling it redemptive. It's not the same as saying that everything happens for a reason. Individuals who endure or witness suffering do need to seek their own meanings from it. But that's not the same as saying that those events happened in service to some greater good. Despite Garrison Keillor's news from Lake Wobegone, our salvation comes not from Jesus' suffering, but rather from his resurrection. Through his resurrection, Jesus denies suffering the final word, and he does this without minimizing it, rationalizing it, or glorifying it. That's a useful model for us, even when we're clenching our teeth as we do our best to hold on to that promise of the joy that awaits us in the end.

Maybe you've heard of Kate Bowler. She's an author, podcast host, and professor. Her bio describes her this way:

Kate Bowler is an associate professor of the history of Christianity in North America [at Duke Divinity School]. Her book, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (Oxford University Press 2013), received widespread media attention and academic praise as the first history of the movement based on divine promises of health, wealth, and happiness. She researched and traveled Canada and the United States interviewing megachurch leaders and everyday believers about how they make spiritual meaning of the good or bad in their lives.

Bowler's bio continues with this dose of irony:

In 2015, she was unexpectedly diagnosed with Stage IV cancer at age 35. In her viral *New York Times* op-ed, she writes about the irony of being an expert in health, wealth and happiness while being ill. Her subsequent memoir, *Everything Happens for a Reason (And Other Lies I've Loved)* (Random House, 2018) ... tells the story of her struggle to understand the personal and intellectual dimensions of the American belief that all tragedies are tests of character.³

At the time of Bowler's stage IV cancer diagnosis, her son was two years old. Today, some six years after her initial diagnosis, she is still alive and well and doing great work. I should add that her academic credentials include a Master of Arts in Religion from Yale Divinity School. In her book, *Everything Happens for a Reason (And Other Lies I've Loved)*, Bowler writes this:

"Everything happens for a reason." The only thing worse than saying this is pretending that you know the reason. I've had hundreds of people tell me the reason for my cancer. Because of my sin. Because of my unfaithfulness. Because God is fair. Because God is unfair. Because of my aversion to Brussels sprouts. I mean, no one is short of reasons. ... When someone is drowning, the only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason.⁴

She also writes this:

What would it mean for Christians to give up that little piece of the American Dream that says, “You are limitless”? Everything is not possible. The mighty kingdom of God is not yet here. What if “rich” did not have to mean “wealthy,” and “whole” did not have to mean “healed”? What if being the people of “the gospel” meant that we are simply people with good news? God is here. We are loved. It is enough.⁵

There are so many things that we will never understand. In our lives of faith, there will be people like Job, who just need our presence, and people like Bartimaeus, who lead us on the way. In their company, we learn to know and to say: “God is here. We are loved. It is enough.”

Notes

¹ Job 1:1 NRSV.

² Job 2:1 NRSV.

³ From Kate Bowler’s biography on the Duke Divinity School website, available at <https://divinity.duke.edu/faculty/kate-bowler> (accessed October 24, 2021).

⁴ Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason (And Other Lies I’ve Loved)* (New York: Random House, 2019), 170

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.