

Source of Our Blessings

Job 1:1-2:10, 23:1-9, 16-17, 38:1-7, 34-41, 42:1-6, 10-17
October 28, 2012

I.

My sermons frequently are about the day's gospel readings, but on occasion we cover something else. Today's Old Testament reading was the last of four consecutive readings from the Book of Job. And after the first installment earlier this month I said that I would talk about the entire book when the series was complete.

And this sermon will be a little shorter than usual. After I finish, Bill Parrish, one of the Co-Chairs of our Stewardship Committee, will briefly speak with us.

We all probably have heard of Job. Parts of his story have passed into popular culture even though the entire book itself is not widely read. The term "patience of Job," for example, comes from the New Testament Book of James (5:11), and in today's vernacular it describes someone who quietly suffers or stoically endures hardship over a long period of time.

In reality, however, the person of Job in the Bible was far from patient. While he experienced much misery and pain, he did not do so silently. The story is full of Job's laments, complaints, and accusations. This is one of the ways in which the real story of Job differs from popular perception.

And it is not likely that the Book of Job describes actual historical events. Rather, it appears to be a teaching from before the time of King David that was passed down over the centuries, with some later additions to reinforce the central message. It then was included in the Hebrew Scriptures to illustrate certain principles. It might be called a case study in modern terminology.

But this does not detract from the sacred and holy nature of the story. Jesus also used hypothetical examples in parables as he taught the disciples and crowds that followed him. And we know that all Scripture, of whatever type or nature, is inspired by God (2 Ti. 3:16).

II.

A few moments ago I said the traditional idea that Job was a patient man is not completely accurate. Another misconception is that the book's main theme is about human suffering, and how bad things can happen to good people.

And certainly the Book of Job does describe great suffering by a seemingly righteous and innocent person who, as we heard in the reading today, eventually was redeemed and ended up more prosperous than ever.

So perhaps it is natural that such an outcome might lead to the idea that if we endure hardship, God will be with us and we will be blessed. In fact, the Bible supports that idea in other places. But that is not the message of the Book of Job.

Instead, Job's story is about two things. The first shows how the folly of human pride and a false sense of righteousness can interfere with a right relationship with God. And the second is a reminder of God's sovereignty and superiority in all things, and how God, who created all things, does not have to explain himself to us. Instead, we are accountable to God.

III.

So, let's look at the entire story. We heard some parts in readings over the prior weeks, and some parts that I will mention now are in the Bible but were not actually in the readings.

The story begins by describing Job as a prominent man blessed with ten children, thousands of cattle, sheep and other animals, and great wealth. Then the plot thickened. The scene shifted to heaven where God and Satan were talking. This, by the way, is one reason scholars believe the story is instructional rather than historical. God and Satan did not casually speak in this way.

But in the story God was bragging on Job's righteousness and faith. And Satan said that was only because life was good for Job. He said Job would have a different view of God as soon as he experienced troubles, and wanted to test Job.

So God agreed that Satan could do so as long as Job himself was not harmed. And Satan brought disaster upon Job. His ten children died in a storm, his servants were killed by raiders, and his livestock and possessions were stolen. Nothing was left.

But Job remained faithful, and the scene shifted back to heaven where God was giving Satan a hard time because Satan's plan did not work. But Satan was not ready to give up, and said that Job would show his true colors if Job suffered sickness and pain himself. So God agreed that Job could be in Satan's power so long as he did not kill him.

And Job endured a second trial. Satan tormented Job with painful and festering sores from head to foot, and Job was humiliated into scraping them with a piece of broken pottery. Now he truly was suffering. And this sets the stage for the rest of what happened in the story.

IV.

Job had three friends who heard of his misfortune and came to visit him. And the next twenty-four chapters in the Bible consist of dialogues and disputes among the four of them about Job's plight and what it meant.

And I should mention here that the governing theology of the Hebrews at this early time in their history was that people received what they deserve. They believed that the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished, even though in reality it sometimes was the opposite. Ideas about God's grace and forgiveness through Jesus Christ were well in the future.

And this theology was evident in the discussions among Job and his three friends, beginning with a long and poignant lament by Job in which he cursed the day he was born, and wished he was dead because he believed God had abandoned him.

Then each of his friends offered variations on this idea of rewards and punishment at the heart of ancient Jewish beliefs. They told Job, in elegantly poetic ways, that his problems were his own fault because he must have sinned. They argued that God would not have made a mistake.

But Job was convinced he was righteous and thought he had earned God's favor. In his pride he didn't think he deserved the tragedy and grief that befell him, and was angry at God for it. Job thought it was all about him.

And as the discussion continued, Job became defensive, rejected his friends' explanations, and began to challenge God. He claimed he was righteous, innocent, and faithful, and that God had betrayed him. Job even demanded that God defend what had been done to him.

No one would give in, and with dialogue developing in this way an impasse was reached. So another character entered the debate. This new fellow, who had apparently been standing on the sidelines listening all along, jumped in and criticized Job for his self-righteousness in defending himself, and for his pride in not recognizing God's sovereignty.

And he introduced the idea that God had not punished Job out of wrath but rather had disciplined him for thinking only of himself, and there was a redemptive purpose in Job's plight that actually held hope for him.

Then for the next five chapters, God and Job spoke to each other. And God basically ignored Job's complaints and reminded him that God had created the cosmos before humanity ever existed. Through example after example God defined his superiority in all things. And who was Job, God asked, to challenge and judge his Creator?

This brings us to today's reading. Job had no answer to God, and saw the error of his ways. He acknowledged that in his self-righteousness he had forgotten about God. He had relied on his own understanding and had not trusted in God. So Job repented and was blessed in the end with more than he ever had before.

V.

What a story! What can we learn from it? And what about this happy ending? Was it a reward for Job's repentance, or was it God's grace given for reasons beyond our understanding?

The story does not offer clear answers to why people suffer, although it does appear that Satan, rather than God, is the instrument of misfortune and grief. And there is no explanation of why people prosper, although it is clear that God's grace is the ultimate source of our blessings.

But there are some things we do know. They are in Job's story, they are in the Old Testament stories of God's interaction with the Hebrew people, and they are in the words of hope that Jesus spoke and the apostles later proclaimed.

That hope is grounded in knowing that we are God's creation, that he gives us life, and that he offers his love and wants to have a relationship with us. And it is not a relationship based on rewards and punishment, although consequences certainly can flow from our choices.

Instead, we know that God wants a relationship based on love and trust, and undergirded by faith that he is with us no matter what we might experience in this earthly life.

And he hears our prayers and pays attention to what we do. We know that God has plans for our lives (Jer. 29:11, Eph. 1:9-10), and that all things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28).

And so, just as God asked Job who he thought he was to question God's sovereignty, so also we as God's people are called to recognize God's presence in our lives and to accept his purpose in the blessings we have received.

But this does not happen automatically. The initiative rests with us. Our faith calls us to be prayerful, to be good stewards, and to love God and our neighbors.

Job began his story by treating God as an umbrella, to be used on a rainy day but kept in the closet on sunny days. The middle of the story addressed the shallowness of that idea. And the story ended when Job realized that the sun does not really shine at all without God's presence.

I pray we also know that God will cover us when it rains, and that no matter what the weather might be outside, we always will respond to God's call to experience the sunshine of his love and blessing in our hearts. *Amen.*