

God – in Good Times and Bad

Job 38:1-7
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First Presbyterian Church
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A 5-year-old girl and boy were playing with a toy fishing rod. The girl took the first turn. And then the boy gave it a try, but had no luck. With that, the little girl leans in and asks, “Should I help you?” and she gently takes back the fishing rod. She quickly catches another fish she says, “Okay, we’ve caught your fish. Now it’s my turn again.” The two smile and go on playing together. That actually took place in a psychological study of dominance and submissiveness, a study to show who’s in charge – the boy or the girl?¹

The Book of Job is also a study of dominance and submissiveness, this one, between God and us, a study to determine who’s really in charge around here. How we answer that question says a lot about what kind of life we’re going to live, what blessings we will receive, what struggles and heartaches we will endure.

Like many of us, Job is a faithful soul with whom God is well pleased. And yet, Satan tells God that Job’s faithfulness is merely the result of what he’s gotten in life, the blessing God has given him – a loving wife, a big family, a great homestead. Satan tells God that without these blessings, Job would surely curse God and turn from him forever.

God disagrees. So Satan puts it to the test. He puts in motion events that destroy Job’s livestock, kill all his children, ruin his health, and cause his wife to leave him. Job has nothing.

And while Job does curse the day he was born, he does not curse God. Instead, he gets mad at God, he argues and yells at God, he prays to God, trying to bargain his way back to a blessed life. And all the while, Job professes his innocence, saying it’s just not fair that God would allow such things to happen to a good and faithful person like Job.

And the surprising thing is, God agrees with Job. In describing Job, God says, “There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.” That’s in chapter 1, verse 8.

¹ Richard Conniff, “Want to be boss?” Discover, May 2000, 79, telling of the work of Psychologist Patricia Hawley, Southern Connecticut State University and Yale University.

So, the truth is there is nothing that Job did to deserve what happened to him, just like when bad things happen to us for no fault of our own. Often in life, there is nothing we've done to deserve the struggles and heartaches we face.

But face them, we must. And that is the lesson of today's sermon – how do we face the struggles and heartaches that devastate our lives while remaining faithful – and thankful – to God through it all?

The first thing we learn from the story of Job is that it's OK to get mad at God. It's OK to argue with God. It's even OK to bargain with God (though good luck with that). What's not OK – as we see in Job – is to take over for God. Job comes dangerously close to taking over for God, to putting himself above God, as if he knows better than God.

In the despair of Job's suffering and amid his lack of understanding – his inability to see how God could let such terrible things happen to a good and faithful soul like Job – in the midst of all this, God comes to Job to show him the way forward.

But first, God must shake Job from his despair and bring him to a greater knowledge and love of God. God says to Job, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man." With that, Job is put in his place as a child of God, a child who doesn't know everything God the Father knows, a mere mortal who can never know the wonder and greatness of God.

And so it is with us. Whether we are in a time of blessing or despair, faith or doubt, we can never know the wonders and greatness of God. It's like the image a friend of mine once described for me. He told me about a litter of puppies that was born in his garage. Throughout the day, my friends would look into his garage to check on the puppies and just marvel at all their different personalities, which dog was biting whose ear, which one was sulking in the corner by himself, which of the puppies were roughhousing, and which one was lying down snoozing, oblivious to the commotion all around her. My friend said to me that's how God sees us. God looks down at us and says, "Oh, look. There's Dave biting on Yuri's ear – how cute is that. And there's Emily jumping around playing with her sisters and brothers (in law). Oh, and look, there's Bob piddling in the corner. Aren't all my children precious and wonderful?! Oh, how I love them," says God.

That's how God sees us; that's how God sees Job. After God assures Job that he's large and in charge, that he knows and sees things way beyond what Job could ever hope to know or see, Job changes his tune.

In chapter 42, Job finally shows understanding about who's really in charge here, saying, "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ... I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." That's Job.

So the question for us is, how do we respond to the struggles and heartaches we face? Who do we see as large and in charge here? Do we find ourselves turning our backs on God's love for us, God's desire to bless our lives, and thus step headlong into the living hell of having no faith, no hope?

Or do we cling to our faith in God and put our hope in blessings to come, sure of God's ability and desire to deliver us from our struggle and despair? It's OK to have a lapse in faith. It's OK to question God's presence in our lives and in this world. But it's not OK to lose all faith in God. It's not OK to lose yourself in such struggles, convince yourself that this is evidence that there is no God or, that if there is God, then surely God has abandoned me – abandoned you.

No! Our times of struggle and despair are not evidence that there is no God. They're just a signal to us that we need to double down on our faith, we need to reach out to our church family, we need to pray for and watch for God's blessings, we need to be open to God's guidance, and we need to live into the future of hope and faith and blessing that God desires for us.

The only thing we can do to separate ourselves from God's love and blessing is to separate ourselves from God. And that indeed is a fate worse than hell – or equal to the living hell of being without faith, losing all hope. That is not the life God wants for you. God wants us to commit here and now and everyday that we will never separate ourselves from God and God's people – from the church and the family of faith. Because in that commitment there is hope – a hope that can never die, and faith that will never leave you.

Job, through his struggle and despair, finally sees God as the loving and wondrous God that he is. God is not like some employer who rewards faithfulness or a parent who punishes disobedience. God loves us and wants nothing more than to bless us as his beloved children, in both our happiness and our times of despair.

God brought Job through the loss of his livestock, his family, his health; he brought him through his doubts and fears. The Book of Job ends with God restoring all that Job had lost, and blessing him all the more as his faithful and humble servant.

Likewise, God will continue to bless your life, in both happy times and in times of despair, being with you in both good times and bad. And all we have to do to receive that blessing is not turn our back on God, but rather be open to and hopeful for the blessings that God has out ahead for us – blessing for you ... and me, and blessings for this community of faith, which comes together as the beloved brothers and sisters in Christ that we are. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Source of all light, Creator of all heavens, we stand in awe before the vastness of the universe. Remembering the miracles of creation, those that happened long ago – like the birth of the world – and those that happen every day – like the birth of a child – we cannot comprehend your marvels.

Surrounded by life's mysteries, giving thanks for the knowledge you share and the resources you provide, we turn to you in worship and praise.

Giver of all life, reveal yourself in our worship. As your Spirit breathes life into all that lives, blow the winds of your divine presence among us now, that we might be refreshed and enlivened.

Grant us hearts to worship and voices to sing your praises.

And for those unsure of your goodness and your desire to bless, draw near to them now, giving them peace, hope, comfort and care.

We pray too, for those dealing with life's toughest struggles, and especially those we've been keeping in prayer these many weeks.

We pray all this in the powerful and loving name of Jesus, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**