

Job: A Prophetic Narrative

Job 1:1-22; 42: 5-6

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In Greek Mythology there is an ancient story of King Midas of Phrygia (Free-Gia), a province somewhere in West Central Turkey. Midas was a generous and cultured king who loved music, beauty, and luxury, but above all, he adored gold. One summer, Midas wandered through his beautiful rose garden and encountered Selenus, the wise satyr and companion of the greek god Dionysus (god of wine and revelry). Midas, recognizing Selenus, invited him to stay and entertained him for ten days and nights with feasts, music, and stories. When Dionysus came to pick up his companion, he was so moved by Midas's hospitality that he granted King Midas a single wish. Midas thought about it for a bit and then said "Grant me that whatever I touch may turn to gold."

At first, the gift seemed wonderful — flowers, food, and even wine turned to gold. But soon, to his dismay, Midas realized that he could no longer eat or drink. His food, wine, his bed, and even his daughter turned to solid gold when tried to give her a hug. The mythical story, of course, warns us that true happiness cannot be achieved through material wealth—but only through relationships.

I tell this story because it reminds me of our prophet of the week, Job. Job is not usually thought of as a prophet. I will say more about that later. Job is a bit of a King Midas character. Not in that he was a king or a Greek god and reveled in high-class living and gold, but in the sense that everything he put his mind and his back and his effort into seems to succeed, or "turn to gold" so to speak.

Have you ever known someone for whom everything just goes right for them?

Job's herdsman skills were unbelievable, 7K sheep, 3K camels, 500 pairs of oxen (tractors of the day), 500 female donkeys, and more servants than anyone could count (vast number). Job's son to daughter ratio was favorable for those days (7 sons, 3 daughters). We aren't told that he was a ruler over anyone else. Clearly he is a successful farmer and businessman. We're told that he was "greater than all the people of the east" v3.

Not only was he successful in his farming operation and management, but the writer seems to be trying to instill the impression that Job was a successful father as well. Now, we aren't told much about his kids, other than they all seemed to get along well

with each other. And that they knew how to party, that part is clear. Each of the 7 brothers would invite all their siblings over to their house on their birthday and they would party on for days. When the “days of the feasts” had been completed, Job would go through a purifying ritual for his children in case any of them had inadvertently sinned in their partying. Now that may not sound like ideal engaged parenting to our 21 century ears, but let’s not get hung up on the details. The point the writer wants to impress upon us is that everything Job did was successful, admirable, and above reproach. Job is in exceptionally good standing with his family, and with God, the writer makes clear.

Have you ever known someone who is a little bit Job-like who just seem to succeed at everything? Their business endeavors all seem to succeed. The rain always falls on their fields, so to speak. If they are married, they have a seemingly great marriage. If they have kids, they all seem to be exemplary. Like Garrison Keillor used to say in his Prairie Home Companion radio show stories from Lake Wobegone, “where all the women are strong, the men are good looking, and the kids are all above average”.

Like King Midas, there are people for whom it seems everything they touch metaphorically turns to gold—in the sense that they seem to have this perfect balance of family and career and education, and maybe are even rooted in the ways of faith.

So it was with Job. He has everything going for him. Until, it wasn't.

The writer or writers of Job give us the impression that a life lived so well balanced and with such piety is of great interest to the heavenly beings or divine council who have been observing Job. These divine beings that include “the Adversary”, come to present themselves to God. When God sees this Adversary, God says “where did you come from?”. “From wandering throughout the earth” says the Adversary. God: “Have you considered my servant Job, who has everything going for him and is blameless?” Is God taunting the Adversary?

Now, at this point it is easy to get off in the weeds with questions about what exactly is going on here with this divine council or divine beings. Or we have a reaction against the idea of God taunting the Adversary with this exemplary person, Job. I think it's best to think of these opening lines as a setting of the stage for the telling of this ancient story—and not get too hung up on the details. There are similar stories in Greek mythology and other religions that have this same idea of a God or gods who are observing some devout or exceptional person and they are arguing and philosophising about them.

This divine council in this Job story is set up to ask some hypothetical questions which we still ask today and have apparently been around as long as there have been people walking around the earth with thoughts about God or a higher supreme being or power. The first is a question about if there is such a thing as a totally devoted and faithful person. Is there such a thing as pure devotion, or are there always mixed motives? Paul Kiem, in his intro to Job in the Anabaptist community Bible, phrases it this way, “If the righteous are inevitably rewarded and protected, then might not their devotion be driven by self-interest?”

The Adversary asks the question and puts forth a theory: “Does Job revere you for nothing? Haven’t you fenced him in—his house and all he has—and blessed the work of his hands so that his possessions extend throughout the earth?” “Stretch out your hand and strike all he has. He will certainly curse you to your face”. And God grants the Adversary power to take away Job’s good fortunes, one at a time.

You may know the story, but I will summarize it by saying that a messenger runs up to Job all out of breath and says “the Sabiens invaded and took your 500 donkeys, 500 tractors (his 500 pairs of oxen), killed all of his servants who were plowing with them”. I alone escaped to tell you.

Before he was even done speaking, a second messenger runs up to Job: “A raging fire fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and devoured the young men.” I alone escaped to tell you. Then a third messenger, of course before the second finished his announcement, “The Chaldeans are here—they took the camels and killed everyone who tried to stop them”, and of course “I alone escaped to tell you”. And then before Job could even begin to formulate a possible response like “at least I still have my family” a 4th interrupts with “Your sons and your daughters were eating and drinking together in the oldest brother’s house and the house blew in on them and they all died. I alone escaped to tell you”.

And Job arose, tore his clothes, shaved his head in a sign of deep grief, fell to the ground and said “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, naked I shall return. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away”. Wow. What a guy.

The Adversary’s theory or hypothesis about Job is wrong. His devotion to God has not been undone by taking away everything Job has been given. Chapter 2, the divine council of beings again assembled. They’ve been watching this unfold. God again says to the Adversary “Have you thought about my servant Job who is so devoted that he holds on to his integrity even though he has lost everything for no reason?” Wow, if we were the referee in this game we’d throw a penalty God’s way for taunting! Remember,

this story is not about that, it's about raising and answering some age-old hypothetical questions! The question of "is there such a thing as pure devotion?" has been answered—at least for SOME people, like Job, their devotion is not contingent upon the number or existence of the things we humans would consider good fortune, or blessings.

"But wait, what if you take away the one thing that he still has, his good health?" asks the Adversary. "Have at it" God says, only don't take his life". And of course poor Job is covered with severe sores from head to toe. Boils, or shingles. And as Job is sitting in the ashes scraping himself with a piece of broken pottery his wife comes to him and says "are you still clinging to your integrity? Curse God and die already!" Not sure where she was when all the other calamities were happening. I heard a preacher say once that the Adversary spared her because she knew how to increase his pain. I'm not sure I like that comment. And I was the preacher that said that! Everyone thought that was a funny joke. But as I think about this today, that's kind of a cheap shot. Perhaps she really cared about her husband Job, and seeing him in agonizing suffering and misery. And she has lost all of her children too, even though we hear nothing of her until they need someone to increase his pain even more. They are *both* steeped in pain of unimaginable loss. But the writer of the story only needs her to help tell the story about Job in that male dominated patriarchal society. Ok, I have definitely gotten off the fairway and into the weeds! The writer wasn't concerned about this, and for the sake of getting the story that the writer is portraying we'll not dwell on this today either. But it is a great example of how women get minimized or ignored or blamed in the telling of stories in the patriarchal world of the people God inspired to write this stuff down.

So what does Job do? He sits there and takes it. Doesn't curse God or sin with his lips. His devotion to God or to a higher power is not based even on his good health.

But he does curse the day he was born. Chapter 3 is a long poetic discourse of misery and lament for his loss and suffering, not unlike some of the Psalms. His 3 friends that had come to visit sit there in the ashes, their clothes torn and ashes on their heads as well in support and solidarity with his suffering. For 7 days and nights they sat with him while Job in silence while he pours out his heart in lament and misery.

That was when they were being good friends to him. But they can't take it anymore. And who could blame them? They sat there in silence 7 days! They probably should have taken turns going to get some respite from their vigil with poor Job. But they instead start to lecture and question him. Something has caused this. People reap what they sow. Do you have some unconfessed evil lurking in your heart. NO! Says Job. Come on Job, everything happens for a reason. NO, No it does not! I have not

brought this on myself due to choices, thoughts, or unconfessed anything. I am hiding NOTHING. The question “is there such a thing as pure devotion” has been answered. Yes. Yes there is. Job, with it all stripped away, where will you stand? (lyric from the Steel Wheels). Devoted. Pure.

And with that question settled, a second question seems to emerge through the long chapters of poetic musing about the ways of the natural world. The question of humans and suffering. If God is a good and loving and caring God, why do the righteous suffer? The question of Theodicy.

Richard Rohr says that Job refuses to believe that God is punishing him. He also refuses to punish God, against the good advice of his friends. Instead, he rebukes his “religious” friends after they bring out all the classic arguments of retributive justice to lay guilt and shame on poor Job. He totally rejects—with all evidence to the contrary—any logic of divine retribution OR reward. God is totally free because that is the nature of divine love. God does not need to carry out our judgments that we want to project onto God.

And by the time we get all the way to chapter 42 and God has finally spoken, Job’s demanding questions and demands that God answer for this suffering, Job says through the tears that he started with, that have been his food through his lament, and now are still his mainstay says “I am the man who obscured your designs with my empty-headed words...I knew you then only by hearsay; but now, having seen you with my own eyes, I retract all I have said, and in dust and ashes I repent.” In a nutshell, God became real to Job. God stayed with Job through the dark night of his suffering. “And now”, Job says, “I get it”.

Richard says that the Book of Job could be considered the conclusion, the summit, and the dead end of the OT. It leaves God utterly free and mysterious, instead of presenting God as a punisher. Richard makes a case that we would do better to read Job as a prophetic narrative, not a fairy tale or myth of a patient man. Job is a prophet as much as, if not more than, many of the others. “You could do far worse than allowing the other prophets to lead you to the mind of Job.”

Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, all 3 Abrahamic monotheistic religions all are still saddled with an image of a fearsome, capricious and angry God. Like Job’s friends, we keep creating God in our own self-justifying image. Because of this, we find it so hard to hear Jesus' message of God’s grace and mercy!

Jesus himself was confronted with this same line of thinking, “Who sinned, this man or his father that he was born blind? Neither”, says Jesus. This is not about who sinned or retribution or punishment or shame! There’s no reason! Things just happen. We live in a universe where good fortune and suffering are woven throughout our lives. And God is in the business of bringing good out of hard situations. God stays present and gives strength and comfort to those who suffer.

The prophets were an early warning system, Richard says, against an angry picture of God. The prophets struggle with this entrapment themselves, and they *overcome* it throughout their prophecy, with the exception of those “unfinished prophets” that Pastor Lois highlighted last week. And we see them, as they progress through their lives, move from anger and language of retribution—to brokenness and weeping and finally letting go of the need for retribution, and the need to project this need onto God.

The transformative journey of the prophets from anger to tears to compassion is the journey of those who read the Bible with love. Can you read the Bible this way? Without demand that someone pay, or be punished, or suffer in order to make our faith universe work out?

Releasing the correlation between humanity’s behavior and God’s reward or punishment may just be the challenge of our lifetime. The illusion of having to hold these together has been reinforced so strongly for so long, even by so many strong religious leaders. The retributive substitutionary theory of atonement most of us have been fed from childhood where someone has to be punished in order for humanity to be “reconciled” to God, and for us Christian—Jesus being that someone—who takes the beating for us, plays right into this reward/punishment dichotomy that Job’s 4 mistaken friends hold on to so tightly.

Did God just send Jesus to die? To take the punishment in our place? What kind of a God is that? God has a grudge against humans because of our sinfulness, and someone has to be punished because God doesn’t have enough mercy and love to overcome this deficit? Did God just send Jesus to die, or does God become human with us to show us how to live? And that got him killed, as he confronted the power of evil in us...and his resurrection breaks and exposes that power for what it is, deception.

Perhaps I have got you thinking and maybe squirming a little. Maybe you trace the beginning of your journey of faith to a Billy Graham style altar call. Pastor Chris, are you saying that wasn’t valid? Not at all. What I am challenging you to do is to consider the prophets. They don’t stay in the same place as when they were called. As they wrestle their way through life, they keep growing, evolving, re-imagining through tears

and struggle to eventually find that, like Job did, God is who God is. God doesn't love us because we are good, or because we are right. God loves us because GOD is good. God doesn't love Israel, your family, or Alexanderwohl because we are faithful and true. God loves us because God IS love!

Will you, like the prophet Job, stay on the journey with God, sometimes walking, wrestling, and weeping our way along to joy? We can only find so many words to describe this rationally. And AI will not get us there. We need poetry, music, the arts to get underneath our rational thought and to hint at these deeply universal truths.

Yes, we may still find ourselves daydreaming and wondering why some people seem to have all the good fortune in the world and everything they touch turns to gold, and others are like George Clooney's Odysseus-like character in "O Brother Where Art Thou?"..A man of constant sorrows.. And our sense of fairness may trip us up. But we can get up, dust ourselves off. Like the prophets, we too learn by trial and error. But if we stay with the process, we eventually witness and experience the infinite mystery and powerful mercy of God. And then, we can say with Job in chapter 42 "I have indeed spoken of things I didn't understand, wonders beyond my comprehension...my ears had heard about you, but now, my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I relent and find comfort in dust and ashes."

Can we trust and hold on to this for dear life, even when the randomness of life brings hard things our way?

The book of Job ends with everything being restored to him, doubled. Scholars pretty much agree this was a later addition to the book, probably from someone who couldn't stand to leave the story of Job with Job being satisfied with having drawn closer to God and finding comfort in God's loving presence. They fell right into the reward/punishment dichotomy by adding that God restored everything that the Adversary had taken away. As if someone we've lost to death can simply be replaced and it will just make up for all that was lost.

But maybe rather than dismissing this addition to the end of Job that almost undoes everything we've just learned, we can look at the restoration of Job's losses in metaphorical ways:

When we find ourselves, as sinners not in the hands of an angry God (Jonathan Edwards) who is angry and retributive like we are, but instead find that we are held tenderly and loving in the arms of a fathering and mothering God who celebrates with us when blessings come our way, and weeps and is present with us in our times of loss, hope may flood, or trickle into our lives in new and subtle, and beautiful ways.

And this, my friends, is pure. solid. Relational gold. And we'll want this treasure for everyone around us.

And this, this is a life well-lived. Amen? Amen.