



"Love in the Ashes"

a sermon by

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Our scripture lesson for this morning comes to us from the book of Job 1:1; 2:1-10. Up to this point in the text, God has allowed Job's herds to be driven off and his children killed to see if anything would cause him to curse God.

"There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil...One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. The Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason." Then Satan answered the Lord, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life." So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes. Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die." But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips."

The book of Job makes for some great drama. It reads a lot more like a stage play than it does wisdom literature, though wisdom literature is exactly what it is. Written around the fifth or sixth century BCE, it is grouped together with the book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes because of its intent is to tell us something about the standard of the moral life for an individual and to reflect how that single moral life influences a community. We know that it was written by a highly educated author or series of authors who sought to create a sort of parable about faith and life. Job is written like a folktale only it is much more sophisticated, drawing together streams of ancient near-eastern legend and writing styles and weaving them into a singular piece of wisdom for Israel. A word of caution is given to take the book neither too literally nor too figuratively, but to assume that it does point to truths about God and being that can be quite difficult for our modern minds to accept. A friend of mine once told me that he believed that the Lectionary was actually formed by Lectionary gnomes. Sinister little figures spinning away in their workshops looking for ways to throw preachers and congregations off track with difficult texts. Unfortunately the placement of Job in the lectionary, or in the Bible at all for that matter feels, to many, like the work of these gnomes- it seems like it is in the cannon just to throw us all for a curve on our innocent walk through faith and life. And make no mistake, there is much to be wrestled with in this book.

God accepts a challenge by Satan to inflict suffering on his servant Job, a righteous man, to see if he will buckle and curse the Lord. In the verses before our reading not only is Job stripped of his land and livestock, but his children and servants are killed. And all for the sake of proving a point. The outrage over what seems like the cruel and arbitrary actions of God tends to consume the conversation and rightly so. The encounter between God and Satan is almost casual, and the consequences deadly. In fact, the story raises a host of issues about the nature of God, divine justice, and the suffering of the righteous but does not even try to answer any of

them. Which makes me think that the author is interested in a different question altogether. A question that invites us to seek wisdom in the experience of Job and turn a critical eye within.

The Satan we see in this book is not the same Satan that we know from the New Testament. Not the proper noun Satan. The Hebrew word for Satan is literally an adversary, or accuser, and here the idea is that the role of this heavenly host is much like that of an officer of the king who is sent out to monitor the king's subjects to ensure their loyalty. His job is to defend God's honor by accusing those who threaten it with their slander or disobedience. God holds up his servant Job as a winning example of spiritual integrity before Satan. "There is no one like him on the earth (he says), a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil." But Satan calls his hand, 'of course Job is upright,' he says essentially, 'Job has everything he could ever want, his life has been charmed since the day he was born. Why wouldn't he persist in his righteousness?' This is where the challenge begins. Because Satan indirectly threatens God's honor himself by implying that God's people love him only for that which they receive from his hand. "Stretch out your hand against him, and he will curse you to your face." Satan says. Talk about threatening the honor of God. Here Satan calls into question the most fundamental element of the relationship between God and humanity by suggesting that humanity's devotion is motivated more so by the fact that the benefits are good than they are by the fact that God is God. In the ancient mind a challenge to one's honor cannot go unmet and so begins the drama of the text. And a righteous man is put unwittingly to the test.¹

It is interesting to note the degree of our own discomfort with the fact that the righteous man Job is struck with the greatest calamities of life when he did nothing to deserve them. Regardless of where you place the agency of God in the conversation, it is interesting to note that centuries of Christians have cried out against the sham of injustice that was dealt to our blameless brother Job who was inflicted with suffering for no apparent reason and indeed the cry still goes up today. Countless cries, for that matter, against the suffering of the innocent who never deserved to be malnourished, diseased, neglected, or abused or worse. After all, if God is a just God, then how in the world can he allow so much suffering to persist? I for one, am growing weary of the suffering and issue my own cry with each of you and millions more. But I am challenged at the same time by that statement of Satan to our Lord, "Stretch out your hand against him, and he will curse you to your face." I am challenged to reflect on if, in my own faith and life, what he says isn't more than a little true. For I fear that my own discomfort with this text and the suffering of Job comes because I too carry an imbedded notion that I am entitled to some benefits as a believer of God. And if the righteous man Job could not be spared, then certainly neither can I.

In the ancient covenant with the Israelites, God's favor toward the people could be measured by heads of cattle. I say this not entirely literally and not in any way to diminish the power of the covenant tradition, but it is true that throughout the Old Testament God's favor is equated with bounty, and disapproval met with want. As the book of Job presses on, so too do his friends press in around him pulling out all their best theology that says if a disease of the skin strikes you then that means that you have sinned and need to repent. Or that you must make an atoning sacrifice for sins yet to be committed in order to spare the lives of your children. Oh that

¹ Roland E. Murphy, The Lectionary Commentary, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001, p. 260-264.

this could be the case! They are confounded by him because he refuses to repent, knowing that he is righteous, and they can only discern then that it is he who is bringing suffering on himself.

There is a modern equivalent to this message. We call it the ‘gospel of health and wealth.’ Obey God and enjoy material bounty forever. Confess your sin and your disease will be cured. Be stronger in your prayers and you will get the reward you seek, and there is reward on the other side of these things to be sure. But to assume that we will be saved from suffering and tragedy or spared our material possessions is dangerous and can lead to despair. Because it implies that we are trying to hold God to a contract that he never signed and worse, that we believe we can broker the grace of God and the movement and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. 2

We often speak of the patience of Job. But perhaps an even greater lesson is to reflect on the wisdom of Job. Job loses his patience with God and laments bitterly that such suffering to come into his life without warrant. But even in the grief and the ashes Job refuses to turn away from God. For he knows that the love of God is unchanged even as all that he knows and loves lay in ruins because the things he loves aren’t his to spare. If you are finding it difficult to see the wisdom in this let me tell you that, believe me, I understand. But in a strange way for Christians that wisdom gains some clarity when we stand before this table. And we are reminded that we are creatures built to feel the heights of elation and the depths of despair. Vulnerable to sickness and health. Capable of laughter and of tears. Of crucifixion and life and God knows it all quite well in Christ. And the body of Christ tells us that we can know with all our being that when we suffer it is not because we are godforsaken and abandoned, but because life is life but God is still very much God and he is powerfully with us. And so we gather at the table to acknowledge and, yes, to celebrate that. Part of embracing the wisdom of Job means reflecting on if our belief in God relies upon the benefits we receive. And if so, which it surely always in part does, to pray and search our souls for what it means to love God for God’s own sake for he certainly loved us for ours. May the Lord grant us his blessing as we seek after him. Amen.

2 Carol A. Newsom, The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Nashville, Abingdon, 1996, p. 319-338, 343-357.