

"The Patience of Job"

Job 1:1, 2:1-10; James 5:7-11

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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Patience. I've spoken of it before. It's not my strong suit. It was tested again this week as the Baltimore Orioles scored a total of one run in the two games of their wild card playoff bid. So for the second year in a row they are defeated in the playoffs in the first round.

Small potatoes? Sure. Certainly nothing compared to what many people face every day...the indignities the world seems to serve up daily...and nothing compared to Job. Job is the story of a righteous man who, either in spite of or because of his moral and spiritual purity, is subjected to a devilish test in which property, children and health are lost; and his integrity and faithfulness to God are challenged.

We heard the idea of Job's patience as the expressed opinion of the Biblical author James. The King James Version says, *"Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord, that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy."* Yet the word "patience" doesn't appear anywhere in the book of Job, which is perhaps why today's New Revised Standard Version translation uses the word "endurance."

Conventional wisdom says that Job's patience enabled him to suffer while taking the long view: that despite huge losses, he would experience the compassion and mercy of God in patient waiting.

Is that right? Many adjectives describe Job – blameless, upright, faithful, long-suffering, steadfast and honest – but patient is not one of them. He does not bear his affliction calmly: *"I loathe my life"* he says in Chapter 10 (10:1), *"I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul."* Cheerful patience? Consider 17:1: *"My spirit is broken, my days are extinct, the grave is ready for me."* Quiet certainty? *"God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; if only I could vanish in the darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!"* (23:16-17)

Honest, yes. Patient, no. This is not to devalue patience. Patience is, after all, one of the *"fruits of the (Holy) Spirit"* as Paul writes in his letter to

the Galatians, chapter 5, verse 22. It is rather to say that Job's message is really about faithfulness to God and the nature of suffering. For Job, the suffering, the struggle, is real.

And for us, too. As we well know, not all suffering is deserved, nor a consequence of cause-and-effect. Job is righteous and blameless yet loses his property to raiding invaders and his children to a natural disaster. I think of tomorrow's first anniversary of Hamas' terrorism against Israeli citizens who were simply enjoying a rock concert; and the year of terror since, killing tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians who had no choice of the Palestinian "leaders" whose actions have made Gaza a living hell.

For Job, as if losing livelihood and family is not painful enough, he is covered with loathsome sores from head to foot. As the story unfolds beyond today's reading, even his friends wondered, *"What did he do to deserve this?"*

The answer is *"nothing."* Job did nothing to deserve this. Jesus elsewhere reminds us that God *"sends the rain on the just and the unjust"* (Matthew 5:45). In other passages – the man born blind that we heard last week in John 9, those killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them (Luke 13:4) – Jesus says that suffering is not always a corollary to bad behavior, and we should be careful not to assume it is.

Gerald Sittser was a history professor with a wonderful family. In one horrible moment his life changed forever when his wife, 4 year-old daughter, and his mother were killed by a drunk driver. Eight months later the driver was acquitted of vehicular manslaughter because the defense attorney was able to cast enough doubt on the testimony of several witnesses.

Sittser's rage gave way to discomfort in his assumption that he had a right to complete fairness in life. In his book *A Grace Disguised* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1996) he wrote, *"Granted, I did not deserve to lose three members of my family. But then again, I am not sure I deserved to have them in the first place."*

His wife loved him through some very hard times. His mother lived well and served people until her life's end. His daughter sparked with

enthusiasm. He concludes, *“Perhaps I did not deserve their deaths, but I did not deserve their presence in my life, either.”* Job makes the same point in the last verse of today’s reading, *“Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?”* (2:10)

Job’s story also tells us that faithfulness to God is essential. Neither Job nor Gerald Sittser abandoned God in times of trial, at least not permanently. Nor did Chuck, the brother of my friend Karen who years ago had terminal cancer. People would ask Chuck, *“Why you?”* and Chuck would reply *“Why not me?”*

Lou Gehrig’s Disease – Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) – is a fatal motor neuron disease. It causes progressive degeneration of nerve cells in the spinal cord and brain. ALS affects voluntary control of arms and legs and leads to trouble breathing. Lou Gehrig’s Disease is named after the great Yankee first baseman, a member of baseball’s Hall of Fame, known as “The Iron Horse” whose record of playing 2,130 consecutive games stood for 56 years. Stricken with the disease at age 36, he died less than two years later. Gehrig could have been bitter. But his farewell speech at Yankee Stadium on July 4th, 1939 is called “the Gettysburg Address of baseball.” You can listen to the video on You Tube. He said, in part:

“Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about the bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of this earth...so I may have had a tough break, but I have an awful lot to live for.”

We see this over and over again, don’t we? Life-giving energy, the Holy Spirit at work, bringing life and hope from the ashes of despair. Organizations and foundations too numerous to mention that are positive responses to life’s adversities, rooted in a willingness to embrace life in all its complexity. For us, people of faith, this means an honest and intimate relationship with the God who gives us this life.

In times of trial, can we yell and scream at God? You bet! Job shouts, *“I will not restrain my mouth, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.”* (7:11). Rejected in my affections for another in my early twenties, I can remember standing in my apartment, shaking my fist at the ceiling, tears rolling down my cheeks, shouting one word at God over and over and over

again, “Why?” “Why?” is not always a question. Sometimes it is a cry of pain.

But our pain must not cause us to let go of God. Job sure didn’t. And staying connected with God meant staying connected with hope. Were all Job’s questions answered? No. They seldom are. But Job moves to a place where he is at peace with God because God responds. And for those who like happy endings – which aren’t always given to us – read Chapter 42. They are given to Job, and we can be glad for him.

As for us, our challenge is to accept both the bad and the good, to make something good out of even the bad, and to remain in close contact with God through every twist and turn of life. It is to pray, with Rev. Reinhold Niebuhr, the Serenity Prayer he authored:

*“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”*

The Sacrament that Christians around the world celebrate today draws us close to the One who gave body and blood for our redemption. As we sing our closing hymn, let it not be just words but truly a reminder of the promise God offers to us all in Jesus:

*“The soul that on Jesus still leans for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to its foes;
that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I’ll never, no never, no, never forsake.”*