

The lectionary attempts to cover the whole Bible over a three year cycle of Sunday readings. While passages in the book of Job appear for four weeks in what we call Lectionary Year B, it is not near enough to cover the importance of this forty-two chapter book. It reinforces the need to partner intentional Bible study with our weekly examination of Scripture in worship.

Most know the story of Job is about a righteous man who suffers, and the book of Job is the one to which many turn to answer the eternal human question of suffering: Why do good people suffer? I believe Job provides more questions than answers, more mystery about the divine than certainty of the ways of God.

Job is a transitional book in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures. Put simply, it questions the theology human suffering is a result of human sin; a theology that says if you have a cold, or trip and break your ankle – figure out how you sinned. This is the argument Job's three friends will make, encouraging Job to acknowledge and confess his sin. God will condemn Job's friends for persisting in this notion. Still, we know this thought lingered into Jesus' time as he was asked whether a man born blind was being punished for his own sin or his parents' sin. Jesus said neither.

To suffer as a result of one's sin is an understanding that would seem to keep God free from any capricious rendering of suffering on innocents. So, in the very first verse of Job, we read this man is blameless and upright. This is how we are introduced to Job in the five opening verses (Job 1:1-5):

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. ²There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. ³He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east.

⁴His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. ⁵And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." This is what Job always did.

Before we continue on to the testing and suffering of Job, it would be good to review the biblical understanding of the heavenly realm since it likely differs from our own sense of God's oneness. In Job, as in the Genesis accounts of creation, God is surrounded by other heavenly beings – much like a President has a cabinet in charge of justice, defense, energy, health and welfare and education. In Job, we find included one called the Satan. This being did not have the overlay of a competing power of evil or apocalyptic menace we often associate with it. In Job, the Satan is better thought in charge of investigating, accusing, and prosecuting – a kind of attorney general.

Initially, the Satan will challenge God about Job's integrity, essentially saying it was a no-brainer Job had integrity after all the comforts with which God had blessed him. God gives permission for Job to be tested, with the injunction Job himself is not to be harmed. Now, this permission in itself would invite a month of Bible study.

Thieves steal all the animals and kill all the servants, and then all Job's children die when a great wind collapses the house where all ten were gathered. Job grieves and cries out, but does not charge God with wrongdoing. In our reading, the Satan reports back to God, and suggests Job's integrity will break if his own body is stricken. God again agrees – another month of Bible study – but the Satan cannot take Job's life. Let's hear of this second heavenly meeting in Job 2:1-10:

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. ²The 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." ³The 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." ⁴Then Satan answered the Lord, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. ⁵But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." ⁶The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life."

⁷So 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. ⁸Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes. ⁹Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." ¹⁰But 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.

Most parents and teachers, at some time, are faced with a child's or youth's declaration, "That's not fair!" My suspicion is many of us may have also too quickly responded with something like, "Life is not fair," or, "No one said life was supposed to be fair." We know that response is far from sufficient, and perhaps even insensitive, but it is likely it is what we were once told, and we pass it along as generational wisdom.

I wonder if we really believe life is not supposed to be fair. If we have faith in a God of love and justice, deep down we may think our God should be able and willing to make all things right, at least for the innocent. Or deep down we are like Job's friends who will initially grieve with Job but then insist he must have done something wrong. If we have ever said, "What did I do – or what did he or she do – to deserve this?" then we are in line with Job's friends, holding onto the remnants of a sin and suffering, cause and effect theology.

The book of Job joins the seekings of humanity through the ages to understand the source of evil, and answer the question of why good people suffer. In my mind, that good people suffer is a fact, but “why good people suffer?” is unanswerable, even after reading Job. We recall the title of Rabbit Harold Kushner’s most famous book is not “Why...”, but “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.” I leave the question of “why?” to God, or simply the realm of mystery. We just don’t know, and as we read further in the book of Job, God will remind Job and his friends it is not theirs to know.

If we set aside a cause and effect God of judgment, whereby our suffering is caused by our sin, then often we continue to pursue the cause of suffering, the way researchers seek the source of a disease such as Alzheimer’s. It is as if once the cause or source of our suffering is found we can design our lives to avoid it or immunize against it. I believe the book of Job also encourages us to give up our pursuits of suffering’s source or cause, and invites us to focus on our response to suffering. Thus, it is Job’s response of integrity that emerges for me.

Job will, in the midst of terrible loss of family and household, and then his own physical suffering, keep his integrity. In so doing, he will baffle his wife and friends. Integrity in Job is portrayed as his unwillingness to curse God in the midst of terrible tragedy and suffering, but it is also Job’s doing so with no perceived benefit on the horizon. It is keeping faith in God when doing so has no evident reward or payoff.

It seems to me that is the heart of this lesson on integrity. Integrity is not about what is in it for me. It is that sense, perhaps a feeling deep in our gut, or a overflow of peace that shivers through our being, that gives us strength to hold the course simply because it is the right thing to do, especially when faced with temptations to waver.

“In his Screwtape Letters, C. S. Lewis records the advice of senior devil, Screwtape, to his nephew Wormwood, who is trying to undo the faith of a recently converted Christian. At one point, Screwtape says to Wormwood, ‘Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending to do ... [God’s] will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of [God] seems to have vanished and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.’ [as quoted in Feasting on the Word, Year B, (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, p. 127)]

This week, we had another of what we call a mass shooting. Some sources suggest the term “mass shooting” is used when there are four or more deaths in a single incident, but whatever the number, such senseless killings grieve, numb, and anger us – and I believe God as well. Yet, perhaps more than us, who are drawn to breaking news and momentary outrage, God’s grief does not wait for mass victims, but extends to a the killing of just one person.

Long before this latest tragedy, folks in Chicago started what is called Homicide Watch. They write, “We understand the reality of public’s demand for news – that some stories get more attention than others. But all murders represent a degree of human suffering ... Our goal is to tell the story of every murder in the city, so that together we might fight the tendency to view homicides as just another rising or falling number, like mortgage rates or batting averages.”

It is being reported by some, the shooter asked the religion of the victims, and those who said they were Christian were shot in the head. I hesitate to delve into something not fully substantiated but it is in the news. It does seem the class professor was killed without any question of religion posed to him. If the killer asked such a question, we also do not know his real intent, but still, my ears perked up when I heard that news clip.

I will admit I don't know how I would have responded if it was known a certain response would cause my death and a different response just my maiming. I may be making excuses, but if I did not state my religion in such a circumstance of madness, I would not see it as a denial of my faith or of Christ.

I expect there may be preachers this morning who grab onto this story as a testimony of and call to Christian faithfulness, and cite it as a mark of integrity. For those who stated their faith fully aware of the consequences, the integrity of their witness is clear. That said, I am always wary when such incidents are used to promote what I call Christian exceptionalism. So, I would suggest if it is integrity for a Christian to admit his or her faith knowing doing so would result in death, then it is also integrity when a Muslim or Jew, or Hindu or Buddhist, or Wiccan or atheist does the same.

In the first verse of Job, we are told Job feared God. Scripture teaches, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." John Calvin wrote of two ways to look at "the fear of the Lord." The first fear is servile fear, that the master will punish the disobedient servant. This is the fear upon which much of religion has been built, wherein one does good for fear that doing bad one will result in divine punishment, either in this world or the next. This is what the book of Job sets aside, but with what are we left?

Calvin also writes about "proper fear." This is the fear of offending God. It is that sense of doing good, staying with the right, not for the reward, but out of a devotion not to offend God.

I think the desire not to offend God naturally extends to the desire to please God, and moves our understanding of integrity beyond simply not cursing God, or even standing firm in stating one's religion. Integrity is also about advocating justice for others, even if they fail to acknowledge, much less express appreciation for our efforts. Integrity is putting a faith in action that does not think of self first, and thus, without even knowing his religion, I would suggest there was an integrity of action by the 30 year old father, whose son's first birthday was the day of the shooting, and he stood firm to shield others from the killers bullets.

I also look at the integrity of an organization Lynn and I support for their medical work with all people, Doctors Without Borders. Whether it is dealing with the Ebola virus or working in war-ravaged countries, the group's integrity is in putting healing ahead of safety. How tragic it is when their hospital is bombed, particularly when everyone knew it was there. How doubly tragic it is when a nation may express sorrow for the death of innocents, but then dismisses the loss by relegating it to that awful term, "collateral damage."

Actions of integrity by others challenge my own courage to live beyond an integrity of faithful speech into an integrity of faithful action. I believe the heart of integrity is in our first considering what would be pleasing to God. I believe it is at the heart of what Jesus taught. I also know it is not easy, for doing so may challenge the status quo, our personal security, and our desire for easy answers. Friends or family may challenge us if we maintain such integrity if it appears to have neither short nor long term benefits. Yet again, integrity is not about what is in it for me. It is that sense, perhaps a feeling deep in our gut, or a overflow of peace that shivers through our being, that gives us strength to hold the course simply because it is the right thing to do, especially when faced with temptations to waver. In so doing, we are given an assurance integrity has its own payoff.