

OT 27B-18
 “Blurred by Tears” (Part 1 of 3)
 Job 1:1, 2: 1-10
 October 7, 2018
 Rev. Rob Carter

“Blurred by Tears”

(As we see through the lesson just read,) This morning we begin tackling what many have described as the most confusing, most frustrating book in all of Scripture. Job is, after all, a book that deals directly with one of the most confusing, most frustrating question of our faith. The question of suffering... and God’s place within it.

It’s an issue theologians call “theodicy,”—an argument in defense of God’s goodness despite all kinds of evidence to the contrary. Now, we don’t sit around and think about the word, “theodicy,” but I’m sure just about all of us have struggled with it before... wrestling with questions like:

Where is God when it hurts?

Does God even see us, hear us when we cry?

Does God cause our suffering?

Or if not, then how can a God of love allow such horrible things to happen?

These are powerful questions. Important questions of our faith we shouldn’t ignore. To ignore them is either to ignore our pain—and the pain of others—or to ignore God’s place within such pain. So as people of faith, we need to wrestle with these questions, as uncomfortable as they may be. For our world is simply filled with too much suffering for us not to explore God’s place within it.

So this morning, we begin a three-part sermon series in which we will use the book of Job to examine this issue called, “theodicy,” God’s place within human pain.

But as we begin this deep dive today, I need you to hear that I’m preaching this amid a series because today’s sermon needs the ones that will follow. In fact, no single sermon—and frankly, not even all three sermons I’ll be offering—will truly grapple with the total breadth and depth of this issue. So while I’ll do my best to make sure each sermon reaches some kind of meaningful ending... please know that the end of today’s sermon needs the sermons still to come. Just as those sermons will need what is shared this morning. As we traverse Job together, my hope is that we might uncover at least some answers to our questions, even if I suspect that, at the end, we’ll still have questions. I mean, I still have questions.

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But all that shared... we now dive into Job, this confusing, frustrating, heartbreaking yet beautiful book.

And where better to start than the very beginning? Chapter 1, verse 1: “There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job.” It’s not easy to hear amid our current setting and English translation, but a much better translation of this ancient introduction might just be: “Gather round, one and all, and here a fateful tale. For once upon a time, in a land far, far away called Uz, there lived a man named Job.”

In other words, this is not a historical account we're reading here. Job is not a biography about an actual man who lived in an actual town called Uz... at least not anymore than Dorothy was an actual young woman in ruby red slippers who visited an actual town of Oz.

Instead, Job is what scholars refer to as the "everyman" or "every-person." Just as the land of Uz—a place without historical record of ever existing—represents the "everyplace" or "every-town." So for you and me, Uz just might be Towson, Maryland.

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The tale then begins with a description of its namesake. Job "was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil." It might seem a small and sentence phrase, but it's an incredibly important description. For this phrase seeks to make clear from the outset a foundational baseline for all the questions that are still to come, leaving no room for readers to wonder—*Job is faithful*. Job trusts the Lord, and lives his life based upon that trust.

More than that, Job was also a prosperous man, with seven sons and three daughters, 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, servants, and more. The text makes clear, Job was faithful. Job was prosperous. In fact, the text says Job was "the greatest of all the people of the east."

But suddenly, the scene changes. We're taken from the earth and plopped into the heavens, where we uncover God and God's heavenly beings meeting in some sort of divine council. Among the heavenly beings is what the Hebrew text refers to as "The Satan," or "The Accuser."

Today, we hear the word "Satan" and probably think of some sort of devil—perhaps a red creature with thorns, or maybe just an ambiguous reality that is pure evil and separate from God. But that's not "The Satan" depicted in this text—a text written long before our traditional understandings of the devil emerged.

Instead, "The Satan" or "The Accuser" presented here is one who actually serves God as a member of God's divine council. A crude metaphor might be to think of "The Satan" as God's *district attorney*... But The Satan is one who actually serves God.

As the scene unfolds, God asks The Satan where he's been.

The Satan responds, "Oh, I've been going to and fro on the earth, exploring here and there... you know."

God asks about a man in whom God seems to take great delight, "Have you seen my servant Job? He's a great guy; there's no one else like him on earth, blameless and upright; one who fears me and turns away from evil."

"Oh really," The Satan responds. "You say he's faithful because he fears you? Because he trusts you? Ha! That's hilarious God. How cute. You think he's faithful because he trusts you. Well, I hate to break it to you God, but that's not why people are faithful."

"No? Then why are people faithful?" God asks. "Tell me; why are people faithful?"

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It's one of the pivotal questions this book seeks to explore—*Why are people faithful?*

You see, God says people are faithful because they trust God. God says people are faithful because they know God loves them and cares for them.

But The Satan believes otherwise, and he's not afraid to tell God. "The only people who trust you, God, are the ones who haven't suffered. People who are happy and blessed and

prosperous trust you, because bad things aren't happening to them. But the second something bad happens to this guy, Job... you'll see... he'll curse you."

God, of course, doesn't believe The Satan, insisting that whatever calamity may befall Job, Job will continue to be faithful and trust God for all things. And in order to prove it, God agrees to let The Satan do whatever The Satan wants to Job in order to get Job to curse God, with the only exception of sparing Job's life.

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It's a troubling scene, isn't it?! Could there really be an element of divine truth in this ancient tale?

What kind of God makes a deal like this? What kind of God asks for our trust and then so recklessly hands our well-being over to another?

But remember, this is not historical reality we're reading, but a tale meant to explore important questions.

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We quickly learn what The Satan has in mind. In one fowl swoop, four simultaneously disasters befall Job. He loses all of his children and grandchildren, along with all of his livestock and property. His sons and daughters and their sons and daughters... killed. His livestock... taken. His property... destroyed.

I'm not sure how Job is even able to breathe, but the text says, "Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshipped. He said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.'"

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Job's almost disturbing in his faithfulness, isn't he? He just lost his children and grandchildren and all his wealth... and his first response is to fall down and worship God? Really? *Really?* Job's first response is to fall down and worship God???

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At this point it's obvious to both God and The Satan that, so far, God is right—Job is proving faithful even amid the suffering. But The Satan's not done. He digs in for round two, inflicting "loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head." It's the ultimate double-whammy. Not only do the sores make Job *feel* miserable, they also isolate him. For they made him ritually unclean... meaning he had to be excluded from community... pushed to the outskirts to ensure nobody else could possibly catch his condition.

So with these sores, Job has now lost everything—his children, his wealth, and now his health, and even the ability to live among society. There is nothing... absolutely nothing left for Job to lose.

And yet... he still won't curse God. He won't turn from his trust in the Lord, but instead, says to his wife, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?"

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It's a question I'm not sure I could ever ask. "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" For the question itself seems to imply that God causes the bad... that God causes our suffering. As horrible as Job's life has become, he sits there, miserable, believing God caused it all to happen. Or, if God didn't cause it, God at least allowed it to happen.

So what's a person of faith to think? What's a person of faith to believe?

Does God *cause* our suffering?

The Reformer John Calvin thought so. Calvin taught that God does, indeed, cause the sufferings of life in hopes that our sufferings will help lead us back to God. He said we may get sick, but that is God's way of showing us that our health and wholeness are ultimately dependent upon God, and nothing else.

And yet, that wouldn't explain Job's situation, would it? For as the beginning of the tale made clear, Job is already faithful, "blameless and upright," one who looked to the Lord for all things. God couldn't use suffering to bring Job back, because Job never left.

In our pursuit of other answers to why bad things happen to good people, some adhere to the belief that suffering is the result of our own creation. That we suffer because we sin, or that we suffer because we have done something to cause ourselves to suffer.

But again, looking at Job, this answer doesn't fit, either. Job was blameless and upright—meaning he didn't live in sin—and yet, still, he suffered.

Still others have argued that God allows the bad things in life to happen in order to help us appreciate the good things. Sort of like the only way we can know the value of true joy is to have also experienced true pain? Perhaps you've thought or heard a similar perspective on suffering.

But what purpose does Job's suffering have? Why did God allow The Satan to kill Job's children? Why did God allow The Satan to inflict such a horrible disease on this innocent man?

And what about the rest of the suffering in this world? Does it have a purpose? Is it caused by our sins? Is it all a designed to help us appreciate our blessings more?

Was there a purpose behind the Holocaust? Did the Jews need to suffer? Where was God amid the torture chambers? Where was God amid the death gallows?

Was Hurricane Katrina, like Jerry Falwell once said, sent from God as a condemnation of the sin of New Orleans? Was Florence the result of some sinister plot going on in the Carolinas?

Or do we really believe there's some sort of redemptive purpose behind the suffering that has gone on in Syria or Yemen or the Congo or any of the other places the rest of the world tries so hard to ignore?

Is God trying to accomplish something divine amid the refugee crisis?

Was there a purpose behind the horrific gun violence in Baltimore these past two weeks?

Was there a purpose behind the suffering caused by last week's tsunami in Palu, Indonesia? All the lives lost... all the families grieving?

Are these disasters the result of people's sin? Is God using this type of pain to punish us? Is God using it to teach us?

To it all, the book of Job, and the rest of Scriptures, too, say, "No! No! No!"

Suffering for the sake of suffering is *not* redemptive. The African child suffering malnutrition and dehydration is NOT being taught a faith lesson. The sick Syrian with no medicine and little hope isn't suffering in order to be able to better appreciate the good in life. Your pain and your loved one's pain is not the result of some sin or some divine faith lesson.

Just as Job's suffering isn't the result of sin or some faith lesson God was trying to teach. Not at all. Not one bit.

Each of these possible answers falls short of explaining why Job suffered. Meaning, our worldly logic fails. Hard as we might try to explain suffering in this world, not one, not one of our very best answers comes close to explaining why suffering exists.

And that, friends, is the point of Job. Our best logic cannot explain. But there's more.

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At this point in the tale, Job's wife has finally had enough! "Do you still persist in your (faith)?" she asks her poor leper-for-a-husband. "Curse God and die," she tells him. "Curse God and die."

At which point, I raise my hands and shout "Alleluia!" "Alleluia!" Job's wife is the first character in this oh-so-frustrating book who makes any sense to me! She's watched her children die, and their children die. She's seen her home and life ruined... and now has watched her husband go from a great man to a poor, pathetic leper.

She's reached her limit. She can bite her tongue no longer and so finally releases the lament needing to be shared. "Curse God!" "Curse you, God!"

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I share it's in Job's wife that I find a bit of solace today, as well as a faith lesson.

For when we believe in a loving God... when we really truly believe and trust in a loving God... what are we to do when life contradicts the very thing in which we believe and trust? The words of Job's wife give credence to the Psalms of lament, and every person of faith who has ever cried out in anger or pain or confusion or despair and cursed God through a haze of terror or tears.

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In her book, *Glimpses of Glory*, Carol Bechtel recalls an example of this in the life of Christian author C.S. Lewis. She writes: "After the death of his wife, Joy, C.S. Lewis accused God of being little more than a 'Cosmic Sadist.' That a Christian of Lewis's caliber could entertain such thoughts is comforting in its way," she says. "It puts him in the company of Job, Mrs. Job, and all the rest of us who walk well-wadded in stupidity. Yet perhaps the following words are the ones that are, after all, the most profound. (For) After Lewis had gained a bit more perspective on his loss he reflected: 'You can't see anything properly while your eyes are blurred with tears.'"¹ "You can't see anything properly while your eyes are blurred with tears."

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Job's wife believes in a loving God... yet when the events of life around her completely contradict that God could possibly be loving, what is she left to do but to question... to lament... to cry... to scream... to curse the very God in whom she trusts?!

So may we, friends... so may we know that faithfulness can be found even when we cry out and curse God through the haze of our tears. Amen.

¹ Carol M. Bechtel, *Glimpses of Glory* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 107-9.