



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

13025 Bell Air Drive, Auburn, CA 95603 (530) 823-3916 apc@auburnpresbyterian.org

“Bad Things Happen to God’s People” Job 1:1-2:10

This morning, we begin a series of messages on the book of Job, one of the toughest in the Bible. With a few exceptions, the book neatly falls into three parts: a prose narrative at the start, a series of dialogues between Job and his friends in the large middle section, and a prose conclusion. Our study of Job will follow those divisions.

I thought it would be good to have a study on Job that begins on World Communion Sunday, because the questions the book wrestles are universal questions. People all over the world would love to find answers to the problem of evil when an omnipotent, all-knowing God is said to be in charge. The problem of evil is a major stumbling block for those outside the faith; it’s a reason they often give for chucking the church as inadequate and morally flawed. Christian faith is merely a wish, many think. They’ll stick to human political, economic and military power; that’s how the world works, whether we like it or not, they’ll say. Human virtue is the only source of good, and it’s often corrupted by self-interest.

The problem of evil also makes believers squirm. How DO we reconcile the belief in an all-powerful, all-knowing God with the obvious atrocities in Burma today, in Cambodia a generation ago, in the Third Reich’s death camps, or with the Black Plague in Europe in the 1300’s? Where was the God we worship?

Not easy questions.

Today we follow Job into disaster, to see what might be going on behind the scenes of an awful string of calamities. Find Job—it’s in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, just after Psalms and Proverbs. We’ll read most of the first two chapters. Listen with me for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[text]*

Our hero, poor Job, is in a world of hurt. He’s been a paragon of virtue, a model of faith and good citizenship. And he has prospered—a large family, great wealth, much public respect. His reputation stretches to the heavens, in fact.

Isn’t the beginning of this story rather scandalous? God is holding court, convening his Cabinet of heavenly beings. [This is how the ancients saw God, as many Bible texts show; it wasn’t that there were no other gods but the God-Yahweh who had delivered the Hebrews out of Egypt. There were others gods, but Yahweh was King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. Yahweh was creator and manager of the world, and He delegated duties to other divinities, who carried out his will.]

One of those lieutenants was called, “The Accuser”. The Hebrew word for that is *ha-satan*, “the Satan”. “Satan” is an office, or function, not the personal name of this being. And “the Satan” clearly works for Yahweh. He’s been off scouring the earth for wrongdoing, so he can bring human miscreants up on charges before Yahweh, who judges all people. He’s one of

those eye-shaded bean-counter perfectionist persecutor types, peering into the lives of people, eager to catch someone crossing an established lawful or ethical line, consciously or unconsciously.

Isn't that interesting? A lot of people think that's what God does—that Yahweh is the One who lives to punish wrongdoing. Here we see how far that is from the truth. God here is interested in GOOD! He celebrates righteousness in people and nations.

He points Job out to “the Satan”. The Accuser has to admit that Job is amazingly good--blameless. But he thinks that Job's righteous record is rigged, that his motives are really self-centered. “Job only lives like that because he gets Your blessings as a reward, Your Majesty,” says the Accuser. “I'll bet, if you take away all his goodies, all that makes his life a joy, he will turn against You in a flash.”

“Prove it,” God says. “Whack away at all he has, but not the man himself. You'll see this is truly a prince of a guy.”

Well, the Satan can't believe it. He springs into action, and lines up a series of calamities that fall one after the other. Job is at home when a messenger comes, with news of disaster. While that messenger is still speaking, another comes with bad news, and another, and still another. Job doesn't have time to take in even the first of these; he cannot begin to count his losses or begin grieving, before the whole load has been dumped upon him. He is so devastated, he cannot speak. He instead acts out his grief and distress by tearing his clothes and shaving his head; he turns into “grieving man walking”. But he does not curse God. In fact, he praises God. It's not *thanksgiving*—that would be insane; but he falls to the ground, flattened in worship.

The Accuser is now embarrassed and frustrated. The next day, when he appears in the King's Council Room to give his report, he has to admit that Job has withstood this terrible test, faithfully. “Ah, but like they say in the market, ‘skin for skin’—a man buying an animal pelt will pay any price up to the point where he has no profit; he won't agree to exchange a skin of equal value for the skin he is seeking. Just wait and see what happens if you take his health from him,” the Accuser says. “He'll do anything to get relief, short of suicide. He'll curse You in an instant!”

“We can settle this quickly,” says The Lord. “Go ahead; make his every breath a misery. You won't break him. Job, I know.”

Off The Satan goes, and “bang”—Job's got running, itchy sores all over his body—even on the soles of his feet so any walking is too painful. Skin sores like this might have been seen as “leprosy”, as the Bible calls it, which would make Job unfit to worship God with any Israelite. Job's in agony; he picks up a piece of broken pottery, and scrapes his sores to try to ease his suffering.

Even his wife cannot stand his misery. “Give it up,” she says. “Obviously God has it in for you. Curse God, and let Him kill you; at least your agony will be over.”

But even with all of this, Job holds firm. He ain't happy—far from it. But he holds firm, his mind still reeling from this punishing series of calamities and now, disease.

That's as far as this part of the story takes us. Don't you have a ton of questions? Clearly, bad things happen to God's people. Job's not unique, many people suffer without cause. But this writer brings these tough questions right to our faces, through Job's suffering.

What's going on here? God and The Satan both judge Job to be blameless. So why is he being crushed—how can this be justified, if God is a just God? That's not the way life is supposed to work—The Accuser doesn't think so, for sure, nor does Job (as we shall see), nor his friends (whom we'll meet next week). The righteous are supposed to prosper; they are the ones who get God's blessing. Of course, many of the Psalms disagree, and God often sends prophets to indict His people, because their society has become corrupt, and God wants repentance and reform. I guess it's not just Job in our Bibles that asks the question about justice. And of course, it's not just the Bible, but these questions rise in all cultures where people can aspire to justice.

If there's no justification for this, is God just a sadist, delighting in Job's suffering because He likes to see people in pain? No, that would seem to go too far, from what we read here. Then, is God weak, or just uncaring?

The character of God seems on trial here. And if the character of God is on trial, then all we think we know about life might be upside-down. Does anything matter? Is there anything we can trust about life? Is it all just a roll of the dice, with the strong oppressing the weak?

Don't you wish we were doing the whole series today?

Will our hero prevail? Will Job's friends get there in time, and provide him the help he needs? (Isn't that what friends are for?)

Stay tuned—same time, same channel—for our next episode of “Job Jones, Hero of the Land of Uz”, and a hero for us!

INTRO TO COMMUNION

We move from the brutal honesty of God's Word, to the Board of Wonder, where we see again God's suffering for us. Clearly, the Meal reminds us, God suffers, too. And the meal we share with Christians all around the world today is a meal of those willing to suffer for God. Jesus suffered. He gave us this bread and cup, his body and blood, to strengthen us for our suffering that comes, even as we serve God and other people.

All followers of Jesus, all who are baptized in Christ, are welcome to this Table. Let this meal be the means by which we join with Jesus in His suffering, so that (as Paul says in Romans 8:17b) “...Indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.” (NIV)

But this will be a hollow ritual if we do not sense the presence of Christ, himself, with us in this Supper. It will just be a fragment of foreign bread—Russian rye, for one--to demonstrate our connection with other Christians around the world on this World Communion Sunday. It will just be a thimble full of grape juice, without Jesus. But if it IS Jesus who serves us, then this little Meal will be “a snack that sustains”, that builds us. We will remember being here, eating and drinking with committed brothers and sisters the gifts of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. That memory--of how real was that bread, and how the flavor of the grape juice lasted in our mouths--we will take that connection with Christ into our service for him that begins as we get up from our seats today.

(Apostles Creed, Prayer of Consecration, Words of Institution, Elements Shared—“The Body of Christ, for you.” “The Blood of Christ, for you.” Prayer of Thanks.)

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on October 7, World Communion Sunday, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]