

Whatever you think you know about Job, you need to know first that his story is an extended parable. Job is anyone and everyone. He is the person up the street, who has it all together; his is the family you secretly admire. They are not throwing their wealth in your face, (but there's no denying that they are wealthy) They live according to their means (which are substantial); they pay their taxes; they serve on influential boards and committees; Job always buys girl guide cookies, and chocolate covered almonds from the kid at the door. He's THAT guy.

Given his 'got-it-all-togetherness', it's easy to assume that Job is one of God's favourite people, because - isn't that how it works? And as it happens, in this parable, God does brag on Job to anyone who will listen. In fact, the heavenly beings are sick and tired of hearing about how wonderful Job is - and heaven's perpetually pessimistic spokes-being (let's call him Satan) is bound to speak up against this favouritism.

"Job has every reason to be God-fearing" satan says in the midst of chapter one; "for you (God) have hedged him in behind and before, and given him every protection". Satan calls God out over favouritism, and God says - in essence - "Do your best". First, God surrenders Job's possessions (which include his children) and Job is stoic in his faithfulness. "Naked I came from the womb and naked I shall return from whence I came. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21)

We need to know this because it's about to get worse. Worse than the death of his children, you ask? Yes. For all his inner torment at the loss of his good, his family and his financial security, Job will soon be stricken with a physical reminder of his situation. Boils - sores - a dread skin disease. Suddenly, his suffering is physically evident. Emotional turmoil is hard to see. Satan's final gambit changes that.

And lest we forget - this is a parable. This is not a transcript from the heavenly court. God answers Satan's challenge with an unspeakable proposition: "Do your worst". Job pays the price...and maintains his integrity.

I take the time to remind you about the nature of this text because this is just the sort of behaviour (on God's part) that people use as an argument against God - Faith - Church - Organized Religion - the whole enchilada. "God is careless and indifferent to human suffering" they say. "Look at Job - look at cancer wards and Alzheimers patients and all the other evidence of suffering..."

We think differently about God - that's what brings us out on a long-weekend Sunday morning. Faith convinces us to view God through a more hopeful, more positive lens. Our faith leads us to the conclusion that God understands our pain, and endures it with us - but to be honest, it's not as simple as we'd like it to be. Faith isn't enough to convince the doubter. Faith, while powerful, requires a companion that I'm convinced Job had in abundance...

We haven't the courage of Job - I'm convinced it was courage rather than faith that keeps Job from slipping over the edge. Courage is needed to trust God when evidence suggests that God has abandon you. Courage to keep your head up when it's clear that you are the target of misery. We lack the courage to face the worst of our days with something like thanksgiving. "The Lord give and the Lord takes away - Blessed be the name of the Lord." It takes courage to pray in a war zone; courage to rage at God when you are broken and beaten by disease or grief; courage to believe that God IS, when experience and the testimony of others makes a mockery of God's existence.

This world is not so far removed from the situation described by Job's story. Bad things are happening to good people...all the time. There is no clear picture of heavenly justice present in the war zones and mean streets of this mad world of ours. Opinions about God range from God is good - to God is dead. And people of faith are challenged to explain our convictions. And it is only with the courage that comes from faith that we are able to offer any answer at all.

For we follow the call of Jesus, who faced (like Job) ignorance, disaster, pain and loss. We follow the call of Jesus, who, as he died, offered forgiveness to those who killed him. We take Jesus' example and say of the darkness "God is with us"; we say of our misery "God is with us"; we say in times of deep despair; "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord." And we claim, in the Risen Jesus, God's promise to redeem, not just our troubles, but all trouble - all pain - all things, once and for all.