

I have been meditating this week on the Book of Job; God keeps placing Job, his story and challenges in front of me. Considering the pandemic, our anger and frustration with many of our leaders, the joy of learning of individual acts of heroism, our deep call to understand, our yearning to be helpful to each other, and our challenges to connect in new unpracticed methods and techniques.

We might understand the book of Job as a criticism of the concept of a legalistic covenant with God, in the manner that today's Gospel pushes back against the pharisees. The book of JOB is a monumental moral fable filled with multiple points of view, deep theology, and similar phrasing and word syntax used in the Psalms, Proverbs, and quoted widely in the Talmud. It speaks also in the developing relationship with the Creator, as we hear on our reading from Exodus.

Jewish midrash teaches that the Israelites lived for just over 200 years in Egypt, from Jacob coming down until Moses leads them out. Further, we learn that slavery did not start for about 94 years after they arrived. The teaching is that during the nearly 100 years they lived royally, and that Job was one of the Pharaoh's advisors. It is taught that JOB taught Torah, and that Moses wrote the Book of Job before he fled Egypt after murdering the Egyptian.

Biblical scholars also teach that Job is the oldest book in the bible...perhaps written before the flood... and that Job was possibly a nephew of Esau, and written about 100 before Moses and the Exodus.

The story of JOB is a simple story really. God and the Advocate, the character assigned the task of prosecuting attorney, make a wager. The advocate believes that the character and faith of Job can be broken with sufficient pain and suffering. God agrees with the wager with the commitment that Job cannot die. Job loses everything...health, children, property...only his wife is protected.

It is not much of a stretch to imagine our present circumstances as a time of JOB.

Our passage today from Exodus reminds me of the dialogue between Job and the Voice from the Whirlwind. Consider again the construct of today's Exodus reading:

I am God

I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but did not reveal myself to them by my name.

I set up a covenant

I have also heard their cry, and I will rescue them.

I have remembered my covenant.

I will bring them out of Egypt and rescue them.

I will take them as my people, be their God.

You will know that I am God who has freed you from forced labor.

Consider, there is nothing in this passage that indicates to us the relationship between the Israelites and God. The dialogue is filled with I statement, almost as though God was attempting to determine the role played in the relationship. God promises justice, and a resolution to their plight.

Job clearly is an innocent victim. His blamelessness is asserted over and over again by himself, the narrator and if not sufficient, by God as well.

It is clear that Job's faith is not contingent on expectations of worldly success or bodily health. Faith is not of the world or of the flesh but of the spirit.

He blesses God, while acknowledging that God is the source of both good and evil. We today can righteously stand in this same spiritual enigma.

What emerges in the story is not Job's spiritual journey, but his ability to go deeper, to gain a deeper personal commitment, grounded in a powerful gesture of acceptance, animated by a vision of the divine poetically painted for us in the voice from the whirlwind.

If midrash is correct, Moses might have experienced the story of Job as a moral character that he struggled to live up to at this point in his relationship with God. Moses lacked the conviction of Job, however he was still in formation.

Job explores the juncture where our human nature attempts to rationalize the catastrophes of existence, ending the viral pandemic, seeking justice in the world, to cry out with blame and condemnation. We like Job, and Moses must learn perhaps that rationalization has no relevance.

Job begs that basic question why do bad things happen to good people. We learn with tragic recognition that the ways of God can be seen as perplexing, inconsistent, and perhaps even mean spirited. He curses the day he was born and ultimately confronts God in the voice of the whirlwind...it is as if his faith are brought to their deepest fruition through adversity and rebellion.

Job's friends in their unwillingness to simply accept Job's suffering, demonstrating our own willingness to look for a cause, an explanation, a reason for suffering, a mystery that is not ours to know.

Job continues to pray, faithfully recommitting again and again his unconditional love and trust in God and equally to his own innocence. His three friends attempt to convince Job that he must have sinned, why else would he be afflicted.

We listen to the Gospel passage about the nature of sin and the blind man, and Jesus' response that his blindness happened so that God's might work might be displayed in him.

How can a loving God allow an innocent man to be punished?

If you are being punished, you must have sinned follows this logic.

It leaves us with no answers...no clear message... at some level it is the simple Koan...the sound of one hand clapping. It is intellectually the most demanding book in the Bible...

We watch in the drama the essence of Job's trust displayed as his boundless commitment... his unconditional love of God, in all circumstances.

*He believes in God's goodness and in Job's goodness and is prepared to give up his belief in the proposition that God is all powerful. Bad things do happen to good people, but it is not God who wills it. Forced to choose between a good God who is not totally powerful or a powerful god who is not totally good, the author of the book of Job chooses to believe in God's goodness. Rabbi Harold Kushner....*

Sometimes as in Job's case, or the Israelite slaves, suffering is based upon some inexplicable divine reason; totally beyond our human understanding.

We live in a world today of Job's suffering: The pandemic, crumbling of our government, massive impact on employment, scarcity, fear, isolation.

How do we react to the experience of innocent suffering?

How are we to suffer...what are we to do with our suffering, the breaking of our hearts...??

We listen to the 24 hour news cycle of the broken hearts of others...

Do we calmly accept this reality as the will of God as Job early in the drama....

Or Do we challenge God and each other from the ashes of our suffering?

Do we, like Job feel angry, bitter, isolated, and immobilized.

What Do we learn from Job that helps us to accept in our cosmic place in creation; how do we recognize that we are indeed loved beyond our comprehension.

Garcia Marquez writing in Love in the time Cholera, that love sickness is an illness. In Spanish the word Cholera means passion, or human rage

...his examination revealed that he had no fever, no pain anywhere, and that his only concrete feeling was an urgent desire to die. All that was needed was shrewd questioning...to conclude once again that the symptoms of love were the same as those of cholera. "Think of love as a state of grace: not the means to anything but the alpha and omega, an end in itself.

Love in the time of Cholera, Gabriel Garcia Marquez

In Job we experience this colera, the unimaginable events that can perhaps lead us to new deeper insight, and that fear and sorrows that appear without reason or purpose can through grace, emerge in new light. Our Pain, suffering, grief, and anger can transform us to a new deeper vision of meaning and a deeper commitment to confront the suffering in our lives. We can deepen our experience of the way of love, through helpful gestures, right actions, and finally both faith and trust.

Who is this darkening counsel with words lacking knowledge?

Prepare yourself like a man; I will interrogate you and you will respond to me?

God through the whirlwind begins the most beautiful song of creation...beginning with  
'where were you when I laid the earth's foundation'

Job Responds

You said,<sup>[a]</sup> "Who is this darkening counsel without knowledge?"

I have indeed spoken about things I didn't understand,  
wonders beyond my comprehension.

<sup>4</sup>You said,<sup>[b]</sup> "Listen and I will speak;

I will question you and you will inform me."

<sup>5</sup>My ears had heard about you,

but now my eyes have seen you.

<sup>6</sup>Therefore, I relent<sup>[c]</sup> and find comfort  
on dust and ashes.

The Reverend Rex McKee