

## Questions for God

A Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

October 3, 2021

The Rev. Robin Teasley

*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.*

*One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. The 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." The 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."*

*Then Satan answered the Lord, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life."*

*So 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. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.*

*Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." But 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. Job 1:1; 2:1-10*

If you could ask God anything, what would be your question? Maybe you would ask why there is so much injustice in this world, or something about scripture, or perhaps your question is more specific, for example, why is this thing happening to me, where are you when I need you, God, or what am I supposed to do now? There are times in our lives when we long to ask God these questions, whether our distress is on display for the world to see, or we are walking around looking just fine on the outside but falling apart on the inside. So often our closest family members and friends have no idea of our struggle, and we are afraid God has no idea either.

So, when Job appeared in the lectionary, he got my attention, because Job addresses so many of the prayers and questions we all have. It seems good, in the middle of a pandemic, to take some time to sit among the ashes with Job to hear what God would speak to us. Maybe we need a potsherd, a piece of a clay pot, to remind us to be still and listen to God.

What do you think of when you think of Job? Is this book about suffering, the patient faith of Job, the character of God, or maybe all of the above? Before exploring these questions it's helpful to know some background about the text, about Satan, and about the theology of the Hebrew people.

First, some textual background. The book of Job is a combination of prose and poetry. Many scholars believe the author took a well-known Near Eastern tale and used this prose to frame his meditations on suffering. The center of the book is a poetic dialogue between Job, his friends, and God. We don't know exactly where Uz was located, but it was likely in what is now Iran. Job and his friends are not even Israelites, but they did worship the one God.

Wherever the word “Satan” appears in the text of Job, the definite article “the” is attached to this Hebrew word. Think of the way we say the mailman, the pastor, or maybe these days the Democrats or the Republicans! In other words, Satan is not so much a name as a title – The Satan. A more accurate translation would be the Accuser, a member of the heavenly court, who is given the task of investigating what human beings are up to on the earth. (I don’t know about you, but this is not a job I would want right now!) The Satan in Job is not the full-fledged demonic figure portrayed in the New Testament and in other later Jewish writings.

Theology in the Hebrew Bible is often based on the idea of retributive justice. This is the idea that there are rewards and punishments for behavior, the idea that there is a connection between deeds and consequences. Most of the time, this is how things work. There are logical consequences for our actions. If we walk in traffic we may get run over by a car. If we eat too much junk food we will gain weight. If we cheat on our spouse, eventually it is going to cause pain to others. We are always trying to make logical sense out of the world, and we can see this occurring even in scripture. Today’s gospel on divorce can be interpreted far too logically, but that won’t always result in justice. But what if there is no rational explanation for a consequence? Why do bad things happen to good people?

This is Job’s dilemma, and it is also our dilemma, because sometimes the rules of logic do not apply. Sometimes, we don’t understand why some things happen the way they do, or where God is when we are suffering, or what we have done to deserve what we may perceive to be punishment from God. We want people to get what they have coming to them – good or bad, and if that doesn’t happen, we lose hope in the possibility of justice. That’s when we find ourselves right there among the ashes with Job, potsherd in our hand, questioning God.

Our lectionary leaves out some important parts of the first chapter of Job. He was a man of great wealth, owning sheep, camels, oxen, and donkeys. He had a beautiful family of seven sons and three daughters and was the greatest of all the people of the east. One day God held a meeting of the heavenly court, and one of the heavenly beings, the Accuser, suggested to God that Job was righteous only because he was blessed by God.

This sets up a bit of a contest between God and the Accuser, and although this is a parable and not a historical text, we can still learn something from the story that is true. The Accuser afflicts Job two times. The first time his possessions and his children are destroyed. Job’s reaction was to tear his robe, shave his head and fall to the ground in worship saying, “the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” The second time, the Accuser destroyed his health. His wife loses her faith and mocks Job for his. But despite all of this loss, Job appears intent on holding onto his integrity and his faith.

One of the most important questions in Job is not included in today’s text. It occurs in chapter one verse nine when the Satan, The Accuser, says to God, “Does Job fear God for nothing?” In other words, does Job love and worship God without expecting a reward? Can humans believe in God without looking for rewards or fearing punishments? Do we have faith because we get something from it, or because we are afraid of punishment if we don’t have enough faith? Do we expect and practice retributive justice or restorative justice? Why do we serve and love God? These are good questions to ask ourselves.

In the next few weeks, Job will challenge us to view justice from a restorative perspective, from God's perspective. Job's experiences will help us see that we do not have all the answers, and that not all suffering is a consequence of sin. And Job will teach us some things about suffering and being honest with God and ourselves. Job will give us permission to bring our deepest hurts, fears, and anger to God in prayer and to know that God hears.

It can be helpful to have a focal point when we are praying and listening to God. There are potsherds in the baskets at the doorways and you are invited to take one home with you to remind you of Job's story, which is also our story. It can be a reminder that we were formed from the earth, will return to the earth, and in between God is always shaping our lives, as a potter shapes clay, into new containers of grace.

For now, we will hold onto our potsherds and sit among the ashes and wait with Job.  
Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Amen.

For more reflection on Job, see the watercolor art of William Blake  
<http://www.blakearchive.org/copy/but551.1?descId=but551.1.wc.11>