

## Awareness

Psalm: 34:1-8, 19-22

Epistle: Hebrews 7:23-28

Gospel: Mark 10:46-52

Sermon text: Job 42:1-6, 10-17 (courtesy Vanderbilt Divinity Library)

42:1 Then Job answered the LORD:

42:2 "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

42:3 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

42:4 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.'

42:5 I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you;

42:6 therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

42:10 And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before.

42:11 Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring.

42:12 The LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys.

42:13 He also had seven sons and three daughters.

42:14 He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch.

42:15 In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers.

42:16 After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations.

42:17 And Job died, old and full of days.

---

Somehow I feel like I hear the voice of Garrison Keilor telling this tale and saying about now, "And that's the news from Lake Wobegon - where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average."

The book of Job has a happy ending. Over time his fortune had not only returned to him, but had doubled! What have we to glean from this ending? That those who are good and true will have a fortune one day? This myth is found in so many fairy tails. I believe this sort of happy ending; when the poor maiden marries the wealthy Prince, living happily ever after, or the impoverished young man who trades his cow in for beans ends up wealthy; this feeds a part of our human need for balance. As though only a great deal of wealth can balance out the pain of poverty. The intent of such myths is to nourish that part of ourselves that needs hope in the face of overwhelming odds. And every little bit of hope helps.

So Job becomes our symbol of the ideals of a life in dialogue and connection with God. We keep struggling with our lives, we keep talking with others, we keep discussing, even arguing with God and in the end there will always be hope and *some sort* a balancing reward. And if the reward in real life isn't wealth, then our spirituality helps us to realize that some rewards in life are greater than earthly wealth.

Living contentedly and simply - knowing there are no bill collectors at your door or warrants for your arrest - knowing that you experience love in your home and that you are capable of helping others - these things have no value on the market, but this is a rich life!

Many find simplicity boring. And some see examples of neurotic miserable people, who take pride in their humbleness, as proof that in this world we have to be aggressive and beg, borrow or steal whatever we determine will give us pleasure in the moment.

In our Wednesday morning discussion group, we just discussed the commandment, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" from Joan Chittister's book on the Commandments. It is her contention that coveting, period, is a sign of being spiritually underdeveloped. Covetousness, she writes, ". . . is the inability to be at peace with the self, with life, with necessities. It is self-aggrandizement gone mad and life gone totally narcissistic." She continues later in the Chapter saying, "The power to chose for more than things, for more than satiation, is the glory of God in us. The ability to say no to ourselves is the crowning glory of being human."

And Job was able to find his glory in this experience. He is put in his place, and he sees how arrogant he had become in his suffering. In defense of those who are suffering, it is only natural to become arrogant. As each bit of pain is placed upon us, our world seems to become smaller and our animal nature comes more to the fore.

That is why the tradition of going to and mourning with people is so important. In talking about what is happening to us we lift ourselves up a bit, we don't succumb totally to the animal nature. We are given something to hang on to while we ride out this phase of being human. When Job's friends came and stayed with him for days there were some arguments and frustrations in the conversations, but they all stuck together until God spoke to them all.

This reminds me of a joke. A man was lying in bed, his loving wife is next to him, and he looks to her and says, "You know what just occurred to me?" "No, what, darling?" "Remember when I got that flu and you were with me day and night until I got better?" "Yes" "And when I had that accident and was in the hospital, you were there everyday." "Yes" "And when the market crashed and I lost all that money - you stayed by me through it all." "Yes, darling, I remember all of that, what about it?" "I'm beginning to think you are bad luck!"

I think it is very interesting that our scriptures say, "And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job *when he had prayed for his friends.*" The suffering process wasn't over until Job was thoroughly at peace and contented. He couldn't move on in life as long as he was hanging on to any resentment of his friends, who in their confusion and attempts to help him had said some painful things. When Job prayed for them, that was also a sign of understanding and compassion. He had come to learn his place in God's world and therefore he had all the more empathy for others.

It is a blessing when we can have empathy for others without having to experience a similar pain, but for some odd reason it doesn't seem to happen that way too often. But it *can* happen when we get outside of ourselves and bond with others. When we are connected to other humans there is a natural *desire* to understand their experiences which makes it easier to empathize. That is what God's covenant is all about - the old covenant through Moses and the new one through Christ. We have that bond with God and God with us, and the ability to share each other's pain is a part of that.

Another aspect of Job's recovery from the suffering is when he came to the point of despising himself. Sad, but true. We don't like to admit it, but self loathing can have its advantages, as long as it is for something in particular and doesn't dominate your life. Specifically being able to feel and say, ". . . therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" is a gift at times. Recognition of our failings is vital to personal growth and communal living. Without it we are narcissistic sociopaths.

Humbling ourselves before God is a matter of trusting God, because we realize there is a greatness about God that we will never understand. Humility is a vital part of our spirituality. The Flemish mystic John Ruusbroec wrote that humility is "an interior bowing of the heart and mind before the transcendent majesty of God."

So it is then no surprise why the story of Job has stuck with spiritual people throughout millennium! The process of pain and recovery are all there. The importance of God, hope, companionship, forgiveness, self reflection . . . and more - it is all in there!

This scripture text today is the moment of Awareness for Job. He is fully aware of God's majesty, and furthermore, he sees himself as he is, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me . . . therefore I despise myself and repent." He becomes aware of his need to reconcile and come to peace with his companions, and the necessity to experience contentment in his life. And when he comes to these awareness's, his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before came and lifted him up more.

His hope is restored, his life is restored and he receives riches. But the riches aren't the goal of the story, and the riches would never have come, if he hadn't come to be aware of God's splendor, his humility, and the need for reconciliation with those around him.

So in this we can see some benefits to suffering. Not that we go out of our way to experience them, they happen all by themselves. But perhaps this in some strange way explains Halloween, a time when we officially go out of our way to get scared and watch gory movies? Like a toothache - it feels so good when the pain goes away!

I don't know - but I did get a plug in about Halloween in the sermon! Amen!