

**Questioning God**  
Job 23: 1-17  
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October 25, 2009

Just recently, I heard about a college student - and not a student here at Wake, by the way - who, like so many young people this fall, contracted the H1N1 virus. Unlike so many others, however, her symptoms worsened, and believing she would be OK on her own, she did not seek any medical treatment and stayed in her dorm room, and basically in her bed, for several days before her parents recognized that something was very wrong. They brought her home, and on the drive she complained about a pain in her leg. Later that night, she became very confused and they rushed her to the hospital where she became non-responsive. Because of her days in bed, and lack of proper fluid intake, she had developed blood clots in her legs and one had traveled to the brain. She had been in wonderful health before contracting this flu, and now her future is uncertain, at best, because she may have suffered serious brain damage.

Stories of such rapid demise from the traditional form of influenza are not uncommon among those of advanced age, but the number of youth and children who have suffered or died from H1N1 has been startling to many officials. We are always taken aback when the young die in unexpected ways.

But there would be no shortage of sad stories surrounding us, even if there were no H1N1. Company closings and subsequent job losses are still happening. Tragic accidents still occur. Weather-related events bringing losses to life and property are always blowing about the earth.

It's little wonder that sometimes we refuse to turn on the nightly news, or throw the morning paper to the side. Some days we're just not sure we want to hear or read any more bad news. If trouble has been living much too close to us, there's the inevitable question of "why?" Or, if we've seen trouble visiting a family member or close friend too frequently, we'll ask ourselves why that person seems to be getting more than his/her fair share of heartache. If we believe in God, the "why" questions can become more pointed.

"Why, God, did that student have to die?"

"Why, God, did those kids have to lose both parents to sudden deaths within just a few months of each other?"

"Why, God, did my baby have so many problems that it could not even be born?"

"Why, God?"

Now given this uplifting beginning to the sermon, I'll understand if you need to take a moment here to consider whether you need to sign up for – or increase your dosage of – a nice anti-depressant. I'll wait!

Questions of human suffering have been with us since, well, since there were humans. So it should come as no surprise that one of the stories that made it into the final canon was that of Job. Job's story is one that we think we know well because allusions to the story have long permeated non-biblical literature. The question many people place at the heart of the story is "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

We know from experience that there are a lot of people who believe God punishes bad folks by bringing trouble down on their heads, even though they would also be forced to agree that they are not without sin, either. But humans have this amazing way of relativizing *their* personal failings versus *your* personal failings. With sin, I guess the saw would have to be that the sin is always worse on the other side of the fence, because what we do is never bad enough to justify the kind of punishment heaped upon Job.

And the story of Job is tough on those who have a very concrete view of God's trustworthiness and fairness. After all, it's God who allows *ha-satan* the opportunity to see how Job would respond to having his world fall apart. Hear the beginning of the story of Job:

"One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before God, and *ha-satan* (the satan) also came among them. God said to *ha-satan*, 'Where have you come from?' *Ha-satan* answered God, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.' God said to *ha-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.' Then *ha-satan* answered God, 'Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.'"

Before long, the many animals of Job's flock are stolen away, his servants are slaughtered, and a great wind from the desert comes upon the house where his seven sons and three daughters are, and the house falls, killing them all. These reports come to Job in an ever-increasing arc of terror, the next report more horrible than the preceding one. It's not hard to imagine Job staggering at the weight of each awful announcement, unable to regain his footing before the next dreadful details find their way to his heart like a dagger.

A popular way of understanding Job is the well-worn "patience" Job is said to have shown, moving us on to the happily-ever-after ending where he is restored to wholeness. All's well that ends well. Except when it's not.

Like so much of scripture, we've become accustomed to hearing Job's story in a certain way, a way that flattens its meaning and strips it of the nuance, the challenge, the tension of the actual story. Perhaps if the story were reframed for present circumstances...

There was once a man in Forsyth County named Job. He was a good man, a successful businessman who believed in God and tried to do the right thing. He had several wonderful children, a thriving cleaning business, and acres of beautiful property where he and his family lived quietly, but securely, far removed from the big city where bad things were prone to happen. Nope, he and his family were safe and secure.

What Job didn't know is that his world was about to change. You see, God and a group of other heavenly beings were curious about whether Job truly had faith in God, or whether God was just part of his safe and secure little world, and easy to worship because, well, life was just good for Job.

God allowed one of the heavenly beings, *ha-satan*, or the adversary, to see what would happen if Job's life were changed. First came the big fire, and the lovely house in which Job's family lived was destroyed; the family barely escaped with their lives. Then, as if the fire weren't bad enough, it was found during the medical treatment following the fire that his wife had cancer; she would die within the month.

But Job managed to keep going, telling himself that there must be a purpose, something good that would come of all this heartache and loss. Maybe God was trying to teach him something?

When the heavenly beings got together again, though, the adversary reminded God that Job himself had not yet been affected – physically – so the adversary asked that God touch Job's very body.

Job awoke the next morning and could scarcely believe his eyes. Overnight, his skin had been transformed from its winter white pastiness to a deep, golden brown. Everywhere, the skin had changed. Job looked more like the African American men employed in his cleaning service than he did the man who stared back at him from family photos. No one, not even his own family and friends, still recognized him as Job.

His children called the sheriff's office, and he was evicted from his home; clearly he was not the owner. He was taken to the county jail for evaluation as a psychiatric patient, particularly since he continued to argue that he was Job, the business owner, Job, the property owner, Job, the upright man who had followed God.

Job was charged with identity theft since he carried the wallet of the man who was now missing, and whose children expected that this black man had had a hand in their father's disappearance. Not being able to make bail, Job was thrown into a holding cell with other inmates.

Through that night and several others to follow, his three cellmates taunted him, telling him that he was a crazy black man to think he could just take over that businessman's house and family. When Job tried to protest that he had done nothing wrong, that they had arrested an innocent man, they only laughed at him all the more and reminded him that even if he had done nothing wrong, that wouldn't mean a thing. A black man would be naïve to believe that innocence alone was worth anything in the criminal justice system.

After many days passed, the powers that be decided he was not a danger to himself or others, and that he really had not done anything wrong, at least that they could yet prove. They thought that by letting him out of jail, he might lead them to more information on what had happened to the real Mr. Job.

So Job was released to the streets with no identification, no money, and no friends – and no idea where to turn. He found a kind shopkeeper who let him make a couple of local phone calls to business acquaintances, but in addition to not looking like himself, he also didn't sound like himself, so his former friends turned him away as a prank call.

After wandering the streets for a while, he decided to talk to a man who was selling newspapers at one of the intersections, and asked the man if he knew where he might go for a meal. He was directed to Samaritan Ministries and began the hike to their location. Along the way, he was startled to see so many other men with dark skin heading the same direction, and even more startled to see how many women with children were on their way, too. As he arrived at the corner of Paterson Avenue and Northwest Boulevard, he was astonished to see all these faces of people who, like himself, were in search of a meal.

During lunch, he sat quietly, listening to the conversations around him. One older man had recently lost his home. An illness and a lack of insurance coverage had bankrupted him. He had tried to hang on, but losing his job at Dell had been the final straw.

A younger man sitting next to him said, "Well at least you had a job. I haven't worked in over a year, but I keep trying. I stood in line over three hours yesterday waiting with hundreds of other people for the chance to get one of a handful of jobs. They were filled before I got to the head of the line."

A young mother was there because her boyfriend was in jail and she didn't have enough money for food. She said he had simply been a black man standing at the wrong place at the wrong time. The police had arrested him and because he couldn't account for his whereabouts when a brutal beating had occurred, he'd been arrested. It was days before she heard from him what had happened. He had been interrogated for 14 hours, continually telling them he was innocent, but they would not hear it. She said that they had found some witnesses who said they had seen her boyfriend near the place where the beating occurred, and that's all they needed to conclude he was guilty. She had seen it all before, she said; she knew he would not be coming home for a very long time because the

DA would go after a conviction regardless of their having been no evidence to show that her boyfriend had done anything wrong. There were several other young black men at the table; they all nodded in a knowing way because they, too, had seen friends disappear into the criminal justice system.

Job kept quiet. He knew better than to believe such stories because, after all, if people worked hard and did right, they wouldn't lose their homes or jobs, or be wrongly arrested and convicted. Things like that only happened to bad people. Satisfied in his thinking, he smiled to himself and stood up to leave. And then it hit him. Where was he going to go? What was he going to do for his next meal? For shelter? For a job?

Shocked by the reality that was now his, he walked out onto the street, stumbling along the concrete sidewalk, his head spinning. Grabbing a seat along a low wall, he dropped his head into his hands and began to cry. "God, what have I done? I've always been a fine, upstanding guy. I've treated people well. I've gone to church. Why is this happening to me? [pause] Oh, I wish I knew where to find you God, because I'd bring you up on charges. This isn't right, God, and you know it. Answer me!" But God didn't answer, even though Job sat there, waiting, for what seemed like days.

Let's pause Job's story here, for now. One of the problems with most interpretations of Job is that folks get hung up on *ha-satan*, and into their heads come images of a big red guy with horns and a pointy tail, doer of all things evil. Yet the biblical text tells us that *ha-satan* was very much under God's control; he could do nothing without asking God's permission first.

In 1995, scholar Elaine Pagels published a book called *The Origin of Satan*. As she argues, Satan did not appear in this story as a dangerous outside enemy, a sinister stranger, but as an "intimate enemy." She suggests we should see the interaction between God and Satan as being emblematic of human conflict. It's not about what God does to us, or what God allows some other heavenly being to do to us – it's about what we do to ourselves, to each other. Too often, we are the intimate enemies, close enough to others to touch them, determining by our touch whether we will harm or heal, comfort or condemn, redeem or reject.

One mark of growing wisdom is recognizing that there are many things we do not yet know, and being willing to be vulnerable in learning those new things. If we hope for an end to human conflict, an end to our becoming intimate enemies to each other, we must allow ourselves to be vulnerable to those who are different.

As part of my Doctor of Ministry project work, I recently led a group in a retelling of the story Jerusalem to Jericho, a parable we know most commonly as The Good Samaritan. Their task was to repopulate the parable with folks at opposite sides of the religious spectrum, intimate enemies who find little common ground in any discussion. This class was made up of people from very similar backgrounds and beliefs, and they managed to recast the characters such that those with whom they most often disagreed were either the priest and Levite who passed by the man in the ditch, or, were

the man in the ditch. Only one group decided that the role of the Samaritan could be played by someone the group despised.

Not surprisingly, the exercise generated a lot of conversation both that night and on the next morning when we resumed our conversation. After all, these were good folks, fine, upstanding people who love and serve God, yet the recasting of this story had bothered them through the night, with some continuing to ask questions, and others processing the story in their dreams. They finally admitted that the biggest problem was the thought that someone they despised might actually care enough about them to help them. Being at the mercy of an intimate enemy seemed overwhelming, a concept frightening to consider. It might require them to change their thoughts about that person, or a group of persons, or more frightening still, it might require them to change their thoughts about themselves.

We'll return to our contemporary Job in two weeks. If you haven't read Job's story in a while, I encourage you to read it before November 8 when we once again pick up the story. I hope to see you then.