

## Questioning God – Part II

Job 42

Wake Forest Baptist Church

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Two weeks ago, I offered the first of two sermons on Job, a wonderfully rich though troubling tale of a man who suddenly finds his world turned upside down for reasons he cannot fathom. But as I noted then, many of us have 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. So, I reframed the story for our day, telling the story of a successful Forsyth County businessman named Job who believed in God and tried to do the right thing. He was a confident businessman living safely and securely out in the county with his family.

As the result of a wager between God and *ha-satan*, the Satan, or the adversary, Job's life is turned upside down, first, when his home is destroyed by fire, then again when his wife dies shortly thereafter.

But things really changed when God allowed Job's body to be touched directly. The next morning, Job awoke to a transformation of every inch of skin, skin once white was now a deep, golden brown. No longer was he recognized as Job, the father, Job, the businessman, Job, the all-around good guy; he was a stranger in his own house, and was soon picked up by the police. Why would this dark-skinned man be in Job's home, carrying Job's wallet?

Job was soon to find that his personhood was all but gone, and that like so many others in Winston Salem, he was on his own, struggling to figure out where his next meal would come from, or where he would take shelter for the night.

Job could not make sense of what had happened. Why was God allowing such awful things to happen to him? Had he not been taught throughout his life that if one worked hard and did right that they would not lose homes or jobs, or be wrongly arrested or convicted? Didn't things like that only happen to bad people?

Over the course of the next few weeks, Job's eyes were gradually opened to the problems that faced the homeless. Further, he began to notice how many working poor there were, people who did have jobs, but whose wages were such that they still could not afford housing. Having now lived among and tried to find work among primarily African American and Latino folks, he was also becoming aware of the ongoing effects of racism. He began to realize that what he thought he knew about racism had all been wrong.

Job had never thought of himself as a racist because he was kind to everyone. But the more stories he heard from the people around him in the streets, the more aware he became of all the forms of discrimination that exist, and he learned that while he had

lived as a white man, he had been afforded many privileges never considered. He recognized for example, that he had descended from a long line of landowners, an ongoing inheritance that had allowed his family to build wealth over generations, a luxury that slave descendents did not have. He had never been stopped by the police while out on a drive, never been followed through a store while shopping. He had never considered that it was white people who had designed economic, judicial, legislative and educational systems.

So when he was not searching for a job, he was spending time in the library trying to understand how different his life would continue to be as a man of color. The more he read, the angrier he became, and he began, once again, to question God.

“God, why are you allowing all these injustices against people of color? Why aren’t you stepping in to protect those of us who have the deck stacked against us? How do you expect people to survive when they are facing such obstacles?”

As the biblical Job’s story is often presented, he is said to have questioned God only to receive a punishing, multi-chapter response that basically boiled down to God saying to Job, “Who do you think you are to question me?” This reading is bolstered by Job’s presumed repentance as we heard from Chapter 42 earlier. Job says: “I had heard of you [God] by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” (42:5–6)

Much commentary has been written about this particular response of Job, and scholars have pretty much narrowed the potential translations of the verse down to five main ones. I tend to agree with those who suggest the author meant something more like: “I had heard of you [God] by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore, I reject my words, and repent in dust and ashes.”

Using our contemporary Joban story, then, what might have occurred is that Job, the white, wealthy landowner, began his journey believing that he was a good, upright man to whom God would show love and care. But having experienced life as a black man, and a destitute one at that, has opened Job’s eyes. He has realized that his questions of God were the wrong ones. He had been questioning the “why” of these bad things befalling him, but he now knows there’s another question he should have asked long before. He thought he understood God and God’s ways, and believed that in order for God to love him, he just needed to be a kind, decent man.

Now, though, he rejects those ideas because rather than just hearing *about* God, he has *seen* God in the faces of those people on the streets where he has been living. He has realized that he should have been questioning, years ago, why his life was so easy and comfortable. He should have been questioning how he could live a prosperous life when so many were going hungry. He should have been psychically awake enough to understand that he, as a white man, was a participant in systems that still functioned to oppress minority groups. Having now seen God in the faces of others, he must reject his words, his old ways of thinking.

Job had begun his journey among the privileged, and serving God was not hard because, well, everything was going along swimmingly. Once his life was uprooted, though, his privileged eyes wanted God to do something, to fix things again, because it was no fun trying to live in a society where the system was rigged against you.

Benedictine sister Joan Chittister, who has written much about the spiritual life, wrote these lines about Job's questioning of God:

Indeed, the cry of Job through history has been a long, long wail.

It has been the wail of Jews on their way to the ovens, struck down by those who claimed the power of God.

It has been the wail of Cambodians in the labor camps, struck down by those who claimed the power of God.

It has been the wail of refugees on the West Bank, struck down by those who claimed the power of God.

It has been the wail of dayworkers and the unemployed and the displaced, all struck down by those who claimed the power of God.

It has been the wail of all the forgotten masses of the world.

When I sat down several weeks ago to re-read Job in preparation for preaching, I was still pretty fresh from having taken part in a public call for the resignation of District Attorney Tom Keith. Keith had made statements to a reporter indicating he believed African Americans were more violent than whites. While it was true that the taped interview proved he did not use the word "instinct," the media never reported the fact that on two occasions he had tried to justify his use of that very word. So while he never actually said the word, he thought he did, and he was still planning to stand behind his comments.

For some people, the fact that he didn't use the word "instinct" meant they felt our call for resignation was wrong-headed, and they weren't shy in sharing their viewpoints. We did not receive as many angry calls and emails as Green Street Church did, probably owing to the fact that we are nestled here in the middle of a university campus. When callers or emailers left a number or an address, I contacted them and invited them to sit down for conversation about the situation. No one took me up on the offer.

The clamor over this situation reminded me that a few years ago, after I had attended the Institute for Dismantling Racism, I preached a sermon about that experience, and about my own heightened awareness of the privilege I have in this society because I am white. Living with that privilege makes me a racist, so if I seriously want to change, I must be willing to work against the system as an anti-racist. At that time, our sermons were still going out via radio each Sunday morning, and it wasn't long before we got angry calls about my comments.

One woman said that she was tired of people beating up on white men, and that her husband and son were good people who treated everyone equally.

Since I had not made any statements that somehow made white men more racist than white women, I was initially puzzled by her remarks. Upon further reflection, though, I think what she was trying to do was to just protect the long-standing white privilege, first by trying to protect the class that had designed our American system in the first place – males. By arguing in this way, she could also protect the stories she had been taught about our country's founding, thereby protecting the males in her life, and protecting herself in the process; she wouldn't marry a racist, or give birth to one, after all.

And that's really the crux of the problem; we white people don't want to admit our privilege, so we try and short-circuit the argument by pointing out how good we are, that we never had slaves, and that some of our best friends are African-American.

Do I think Tom Keith gets up every morning with a desire to wrongly accuse, prosecute and incarcerate black men? Of course not. But if he believes that African Americans, as a race, are – whether instinctually or statistically – much more prone to violence, then doesn't that influence what he sees when he looks at a white teenage boy and a black teenage boy? Can he see two kids with equal possibilities, equal outcomes? And if the people working for him believe likewise, or feel they have to operate as though they do, how will they respond if these same two boys are seen running away from the scene of a crime; would they both be considered equally as potential suspects?

Myself and other clergy and laypeople, members of the citizens' group who called for the resignation, continue to meet and talk. We know that race is still a huge problem in our community and will continue to be until we, like our contemporary Job, are fully awakened to what is happening around us. I am not alone in the conviction that Calvin Michael Smith is innocent and am praying for a quick and full release of the Silk Plant Forest Citizen's Review Committee report so that others can read it and hopefully begin to ask hard questions as well. But I'm also aware that other African Americans in our community have – and will be – wrongly accused because they are easy targets of a system that cannot be just if those responsible for its administration cannot see humanity – cannot see God – in every face.

The experience of Job in both ancient and contemporary settings is of a man who cannot return to his former understanding of life. He has been fundamentally changed by his experience of personal tragedy coupled with new-found insight into God's world and ways. Even at the very end of the book we are given another peek into Job's changed life; in a culture where sons were expected to receive an inheritance from their father, Job would give his daughter's an inheritance as well.

And what of God at the close of this story? After all, it was God who had allowed the adversary to have his way with Job to begin with, and God who in four chapters described the depth and breadth of ways that Job was NOT like God. To be sure, some who have read and studied Job have given up on God completely, indeed, some have found that Job's words at the end were not a rejection of Job's way of life, but a rejection of God and God's ways.

While it is the case that God sets Godself apart from Job, it is not necessarily the case that God has done so to leave Job feeling like a worm. Rather, I believe God is clearly establishing that there are things God does that Job cannot. However, I believe it is also left to us to see that there are things Job can do that God cannot. For example, in this final chapter, God is angry with Job's friends, but it is Job who is able to release that anger through his prayers for them.

Scholar John C. Shelley has argued that the God to whom Job first complained was not the God who answered Job, and that this was Job's big eye-opening moment at the end; he realized he'd been focused on a God of his making. Yes, God had created the entire world, but Job had created a God who acted selfishly, punishing those who didn't do everything just so. Job had come to now see a God who had created everything out of love. If Job were to find justice in the world, it would come because he, too, was willing to act out of love rather than selfishness. Shelley writes: "Job's repentance is not a confession of sin but the acknowledgement and acceptance of a newly discovered vocation, to follow and emulate Yahweh, God of the Hebrews. And what does Yahweh ask of us but 'to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?'" (Micah 6:8) [John C. Shelley, "Job 42:1-6: God's Bet and Job's Repentance," *Review and Expositor*, 1992.]

Justice can only come when everyone is willing to question her/his place in this world, willing to challenge the "truths" about others that one has held onto, willing to have our eyes opened to a God who is not made in our image, but whose image is drawn onto every face. May we have the courage to open our eyes. Amen.