

I invite you this morning to take a look with me at the book of Job. What is Job about? Is about why good people suffer? Or maybe, where is God when we suffer? Most of Job's 42 chapters consist of people talking with each other; relating. So I think it's a book about relationships, especially our relationship with God; God with us. How the story's characters relate, what each says, either nurtures relationships—or strains them. *So, what are they saying?*

Satan: We start with the most unsavory character, Job's accuser before God. Job 1 says that the "enemy" came before God. We call him Satan, the enemy of God and all that God loves. God, who knows all things, knows what the enemy is up to and quickly gets to the point. "Has thou considered my servant Job?" Satan replies, "Does Job fear God for nothing? . . . 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." (1:9b-11)

God doesn't waste any time lowering himself to argue with Satan. He simply gives him permission to withdraw Job's blessings; his children and possessions, then his health. But why Job? God gives us a clue in his comment on Job's devotion: "There is no one like him on the earth." Job's devotion to God and, therefore, his relationship with God, is exemplary. Seeing this relationship, the enemy finds it too attractive a target to pass up and attacks it; tries to separate God and Job. However, Job, even in the extremity of his suffering, still holds on to the Lord, thus proving Satan wrong. The enemy fails to break up the relationship . . . and we never hear from him again.

Job's wife: The one woman in the story is, regrettably, not a relationship-nurturer; not in regard to Job's relationship with God, nor in the relationship between herself and her husband. The sum total of her speaking? "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." (2:9) That's it. Sadly, she echoes and emulates Satan's cynical message and mission: "Why serve God if there is no temporal reward; no material goodies?" She doesn't see Job's relationship with God as primary, a good end in and of itself. Satan had asked God, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" The words "for nothing" are better translated as "just because." "Does Job fear God just because?" Yes, just because he loves him. Job's wife doesn't see this or isn't moved by it, so she doesn't nurture the relationship, but seeks to break it. However, like Satan, she fails . . . and we don't hear anymore from her.

Job's friends: Eliphaz, Zophar and Bildad. They did their best for Job when they said nothing at all. They came to him, grieved and sat in silence with him for seven days "for they saw that his suffering was very great." In this they emulated God, represented Him well; demonstrated God's being with Job in his suffering. They nurtured Job's relationship with God—and their friendship with Job.

Then they started talking—and it wasn't good. Their message to Job, as he sits destitute and covered with painful sores, crying out, "Why?!" and begging for death: "You sinned, Job! All this has come upon you because you sinned." Eliphaz declares, "Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? . . . As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same." (4:7-8) Sinful people reap what they sow, Job, so you must've done something pretty awful. Zophar and Bildad echo the same. Repent, they say, and all will be well. Zophar declares, "If you direct your heart rightly, you will stretch out your hands

toward him. Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish; . . . And your life will be brighter than the noonday;" (11:13-17)

Their logic: Bad things happen to bad people. Bad things don't happen to good people. Good things happen to good people. Good things don't happen to bad people. It sounds right. There's only one problem: It isn't true. We've all seen it: little children develop painful cancers while wicked people profit off of human trafficking and other corruptions and get away with it. What his friends say is not nurturing, but potentially damaging to Job and his relationship with God. They misrepresent God as merciless judge who is only about crime and punishment, not grace and relationship. As we shall see, God doesn't appreciate this one bit.

Elihu: He's a young man who at some point sat down to listen to the back-and-forth between Job and his friends. He remains silent until his elders finish speaking, then he basically says, "A pox on all your houses!" We're told "he was angry with Job because he justified himself rather than God; he was angry also at Job's three friends because they had found no answer, though they had declared Job to be in the wrong." (32:2b-3) Elihu reasons with Job, "If you have anything to say, answer me; speak, for I desire to justify you." (33:32) Mostly, he scolds Job for becoming consumed with declaring his own righteousness and accusing God of afflicting him for no reason. (Maybe Job's three friends are having an unhealthy influence?) In beautiful poetry, Elihu declares how great God is and that, limited as we are, we can't fathom his ways or why things happen as they do. He puts it: "You say, 'I am pure, and there is no iniquity in me. Look, he finds occasion against me, he counts me as his enemy;' . . . But in this you are not right. I will answer you: God is greater than any mortal." (33:9-10, 12)

He warns Job to not become so obsessed with apparent injustice that he begins to hold God in contempt as unjust and forsake him. He cautions, "Beware! Do not turn to iniquity; because of what you have been tried by affliction. See, God is exalted in his power; . . . Who has prescribed for him his way, or who can say, 'You have done wrong'?" (36:21-23) Elihu's message is that we mustn't lose our way because of suffering; we must still hold on to the Lord. Interestingly, while Job often rebuts his friends' words, he never rebuts Elihu's. Also, at the end of the book God does not include Elihu among those who misrepresented him, thus displeasing him. Additionally, it is after Elihu finishes speaking that God shows up. First, though, let's hear from Job.

Job: Finally! Job, the relationship guy. The first thing we find him doing is gathering his children together regularly to offer sacrifices for them, "for Job said, 'It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.'" (1:5b) But why would they? They live in luxury. But maybe that's it: sometimes wealthy folks think they don't need God and hold him in contempt. We learned from Elihu that great suffering can cause people to hold God in contempt. So can great wealth. At any rate, Job, fearing an ungodly attitude in his children, brings them together to nurture a relationship between them and God; to show them "God is with us."

Then there is how he relates to his wife. He responds to her terrible suggestion to curse God and die saying "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks." (2:10) Seeing how Job is about relationships, it's possible to hear his rebuke anew. He doesn't say, "You are a foolish woman!" He says she's speaking *like* a foolish woman. He tries to reason with her. "That's how a foolish woman talks. Don't be that way. Remember, it's about our relationship with God." He uses the word "*we*"; "shall we receive the good at the hand of God," . . . As awful as what she said is, Job is still striving to keep their relationship together—as well as their relationship with God.

In the presence of his friends, Job finally breaks down, curses the day of his birth and wishes he were dead. He describes his affliction saying, “. . . days of affliction have taken hold of me. The night racks my bones, and the pain that gnaws me takes no rest.” (30:17) He begins to accuse God of afflicting him and cries out, “Why have you made me your target?” (7:20) Note that Job says this after Eliphaz’s first speech accusing Job of sin and saying that’s why he’s suffering.

Yet Job doesn’t just send his friends away when they start their accusations; doesn’t just tell them to go home! No, Job is about relationships, so he stays in the conversation. He does, however, let them know how he feels, saying they are “withholding kindness from a friend.” (6:14) He implores, “Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has touched me!” (19:21)

He observes, “you see my calamity and are afraid.” (6:21b) Job is very insightful here. This explains why some people tell a suffering person “this bad thing happened because you sinned”; why people often “blame the victim.” They think “As long as I don’t do anything wicked or foolish, nothing bad will happen to me.” They are trying to keep safe; avoid the truth that suffering comes to everyone. They are afraid.

Under the weight of his friends’ accusations, Job goes from denying their accusations to declaring his righteousness to accusing God of afflicting him for no reason. He struggles to hold on to his faith, his vision of God with him, professing, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, . . .” (19:25-27a) Eventually, though, he begins to despair that God really is with him, crying out “O that I were as in the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me; . . . when the friendship of God was upon my tent; when the Almighty was still with me, . . .” (29:2—5b) Job fears the loss of his relationship with God. In his despair and outrage at the perceived divine injustice, he demands that God show up and explain himself. . . . Careful, Job, you may get what you ask for . . .

God: God shows up! He makes an entrance in a whirlwind. There’s no preamble; Elihu finishes speaking and “Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind.” (38:1) We’re not told the whirlwind is coming. God is just suddenly there speaking out of it: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.” (38:2-3) Funny . . . Job had been demanding God show up and give an account of himself. Instead, God shows up—and demands Job stand and give an accounting. He asks Job, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding,” (38:4) God seems to be pointing out to Job that he was starting to consider God his equal. God continues: “Have you commanded the morning since your days began, . . . Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? . . . Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, . . . Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high?” He gives Job an overwhelming, exquisitely beautiful reminder of the infinite magnificence of God—and the infinite smallness of humans in comparison.

And yet, God is still with Job.—Though at the moment, Job may be wishing he weren’t so close. God asks Job, “Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond.” (40:1) But Job, having gotten way more than he bargained for, wants out of this exchange. “See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth.” I’m sorry, Lord, I’ll be quiet. We’re good now. This whirlwind can just whirl away. But God isn’t finished yet: “Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you declare to me.” (40:7) Oh, no, Job. You wanted this conversation, so you got it—only I’m the one asking the questions. This whirlwind isn’t going anywhere. God continues, “Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?” (40:8) Then, God continues

declaring his wonderful works. He makes the message very clear to Job: I am the Creator and you are the created. *And great as I am and small as you are, I am still with you.*

Some points here: First, God showed up. God heard Job's cries, so he was with Job the whole time. God didn't have to visit Job, but he did so to heal their relationship. It was important to God. Next, God did not punish Job for his doubts and questionings, though he did give him quite the cosmic lecture. Job's doubts and questionings were part of his relationship with God; if there were no relationship, Job wouldn't have addressed anything to him. Additionally, God does not explain the reason for suffering to Job. God never tells Job about Satan's appearance and accusations. God doesn't come to explain to Job; he comes to restore and protect the relationship.

But that started way back when God asked the enemy, "'Has thou considered *my servant Job?*'" When God honored Job with this designation, he claimed relationship with and ownership of Job, placed Job firmly in his camp and on his side. Job belonged to him. That was never going to change and God knew it. God was with Job.

So, God's message to Job is that he does not and cannot know the reason for suffering, but that God is with him always. And Job gets it. So he gives God an answer of reconciliation and renewed devotion: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. . . . I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." He repeats God command to him, "you declare to me." And Job declares to God, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (42:2-6) He accepts his place as a humble human before a great—and loving God who is always with him. Job's material blessings were ultimately restored, but more importantly, God was with Job in both suffering and blessing.

Finally, God speaks to Job's friends declaring, "My wrath is kindled against you . . . for you have not spoken of me what is right . . ." (42:7) This tells us to be very careful how we represent God to others in our actions and words. People, especially the young and those who don't know the Lord well, get an impression of God from how we treat them. They see God through us. Job's friends told him that his sufferings were a punishment from God—which was not true. They claimed knowledge that they did not have. God was angry with them because they lied about him. Their message was "God is not with you." The Lord commands them to ask Job to pray for them. Thus, the Lord uses Job to reconcile his friends to both God and Job himself.

Jesus: Emmanuel, his very name means God with us. He is the very embodiment of God in relationship with us. In our Gospel today, Jesus invited the disciples to come visit with him, to start a relationship. In the same way, he invites all of us to fellowship with and relationship with him. Jesus bids, "Come unto me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens," (Matt. 11:28) If you have answered that invitation, he has a special promise for you. If you haven't answered that invitation, that special promise awaits you. It is "I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Heb. 13:5) Forever "God with us." Amen.