

The Job of Faith©  
A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz  
Sunday, November 6, 2022  
Unity Church Unitarian, Saint Paul, MN

Why? Why? That's the question that is at the heart of this sermon and the book of Job. Written somewhere between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century, BCE, the question that Job asks continues to reverberate through the centuries to this present day. When we ourselves are faced with enormous suffering – or when we know of a family member friend or beloved who's lives are struck with one calamity after another, when people suffer and die prematurely - we want to know “why.”

This service begins a monthly reflection on the theme of “Faith—” a word which can multiple meanings. The Hebrew word for faith is Emunah, and it's an action oriented word that means “support?” In other words, to what can I give my whole-hearted support? But this opens up even more questions for us - What does it mean to be a people of faith? To lose or to find one's faith? And, what is the “job” of faith in our complex, modern lives? We turn to Job to begin searching for answers.

As you heard from the readings, Job is a righteous and pious man; his large family, wealth and stature are surely a sign of his goodness. So when the Adversary says to God “Yeah, sure it's easy to be pious when you're living in comfort – but bring calamity on his head and on his body, and he will curse you before he dies,” Yahweh shrugs and says “Go ahead...we'll see what happens.”

And thus, the calamities begin. After his herds have been finished off by marauders and gushes of heavenly fire, and his children have been flattened by falling masonry, and he himself has been covered in running sores from head to toe—after all this happens to the blameless man, he cracks. He sits on an ash heap, seeping and scratching, and reviles the day he was born.

And there he sits. And there we sit with him. Because we have been Job ourselves or know of those close to us who have. I've had many conversations with members here at Unity particularly around the diagnosis and death of Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs and of Rev. Janne's cancer diagnosis. We have shook our heads together disbelief and said this “Job-like” that two people, who had worked their entire lives to retire in comfort and ease, surrounded by family, friends and grandchildren would be struck so cruelly. The question that haunts all our conversations is “why?” When I worked in the emergency room as a hospital

chaplain and witnessed sudden and terrifying diagnosis, accidents and violent deaths, sometimes all in the same day or to the same family, I thought of Job, sitting among the ashes, seeping and weeping and asked “why?”.

But Job is not suffering alone. His wife also lost ten children in this tragedy, but Job is unable to console her for he is absorbed with his own suffering. After seeing Job sitting in the dust and scraping his sores silently, she bursts out: “Curse God and die.” She cannot bear her husband’s seemingly passive acceptance of these tragedies. Job looks at her and says: “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?”

Enter now, Job’s three friends, Bildad, Eliphaz and Zofar. They have heard of his tragedies and come to sit with him. It is written: *“They met together to go and console and comfort Job. When they saw him they did not recognize him and they broke out into loud weeping...They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights. None spoke a word to him, for they saw how very great was his suffering.”* After sitting in silent mourning with him, they then attempt to comfort him by offering their own explanation of—why?

I would guess that most of us have had similar friends attempt to comfort us when something goes really wrong. The phrase that I heard most while serving as the chaplain was from family members, who would look at one another, shake their heads and say “well, everything happens for a reason.” Behind that statement is an assumption – that there is in fact a God or a cosmic force or a divine presence who has a plan for everything including the sufferer. And while that suffering may be great, it is one tiny part of the whole. For some, this is an important theological and spiritual truth and for some they find great comfort in it. We don’t know the reason – but someone or something does – and we can put our faith in that.

That statement has never worked for me because it would require me to believe first, in a Cosmic Manipulator; who smites and smotes and creates suffering for what possible purpose? To say “everything happens for a reason” is almost a kind of arrogance to believe that we humans are at the center of some Divine and Cosmic Plan.

To believe that everything happens for a reason is an intellectual statement of certainty instead of an emotional response to the random callousness of suffering.

Job doesn’t buy it and he lashes back in anger to his so-called friends, telling them that their answers are a way of distancing his suffering from them. *“A friend owes loyalty to one who fails...my comrades are fickle, like a wadi, like a*

*bed on which streams once ran. They are dark with ice, snow obscures them, but then they vanish... at the sight of misfortune, you take fright.”*

Ah, his friend Eliphaz steps into the breach now. He says “well, maybe there are two reasons for why you’re suffering so. “It’s part of life and must be patiently endured; and in the end the righteous will find a blessing and the wicked will be punished.” The first part – that suffering exists – is true. It’s the first of Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths. Plain and adorned. Suffering exist and it will happen to all of us. Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Han’s Five Remembrances speak to this truth: *I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old. I am of the nature to have ill health. There is no way to escape ill health. I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death. All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them. My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground upon which I stand.*

Maybe if Eliphaz had stopped with Buddha’s First Noble Truth, it wouldn’t been so bad. But he then goes on to suggest that he may be disciplined by God and if he would just be patient, he will enjoy a happy future. His other friends chime in and say “Well, maybe you aren’t so good. Maybe you just *think* you’re good. Maybe you are really stained by sin, from your birth. And that’s why you are suffering.”

This belief that people are the cause of their own calamity is not uncommon. The contemporary version of this is when we try to find a reason for another's tragedy. Someone is diagnosed with lung cancer – and the first question – spoken or unspoken, “did they smoke?” A child is born with a disability – perhaps its something their mother did or not do during pregnancy. This belief – that equates sin with calamity is a theological statement. It means that you are being punished because deep down inside of you are a sinner- is one that our Universalist forebears flatly rejected. Does anyone really believe this?

Some faith traditions do, but not here. It’s why we offer Celebrations of New Life or Child Dedications instead of baptisms. Of course, baptisms in the liberal Christian tradition have many meanings, but the one that we rejected earlier was that somehow, we were born in original sin and that the stain of sin is forever with us. Universalism began with the belief in the salvation of all souls but been developed into a philosophy that all humankind were born as original blessings. Coinciding that belief is a rejection that somehow whatever ill befalls us is because of our innate sinful nature.

But – I can understand Eliphaz and his friends’ arguments – because when something bad happens – we want to know why. We are meaning making creatures. When we’ve lead a good life, only ate organic foods, exercised righteously every day, never drank a drop of alcohol or smoked cigarettes or did any kind of drugs – when we went to church ever week and had a deep spiritual practice and were kind to our elders and children; when we gave money to the church and charity – when we did all these things and then – sitting in the sterile physician’s office – she says “Cancer. Inoperable. Get your affairs in order!” we want someone or something to blame. It must have been the plastic that my soy-based burgers were made of. Maybe it was the junk food I ate as a kid. Maybe it was living near the Cuyahoga River that caught on fire in 1968. We want something or somebody to blame. Because to not be able to place blame would mean that we live in a random universe – as it says in the book of Matthew 5:45, using the patriarchal language of the times “For he causes the sun to rise upon evil and good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.” If we can’t blame God anymore, because we have stripped that God of the traditional attributes of being all powerful, all knowing and all compassionate – who then do we blame?

Job blames God – but he doesn’t do the one thing that would give Satan, the Adversary, the upper hand. He does not curse God. And he continues to argue with his friends that he *is* blameless, that he *does not deserve this suffering*. And in most of his speeches, he rages against his suffering; he does not endure it silently or stoically. He is P-O’d with God and with his friends. In fact, when his three continue to insist that they know why he’s suffering, he says:

*“My eye has seen all this, my ear has heard and understood it, What you know, I know also, I am not less than you. Indeed, I would speak to the Almighty. I insist on arguing with God. But you invent lies. All of you are quacks. If you would only keep quiet it would be considered wisdom on your part.” (Job 13: 1-5)”*

No one deserves suffering, even our worst enemy --even criminals who are given the harshest possible punishment. Although there have been people in my life who have done harm and public figures that regularly inflict harm, my wish for them is that they would fade away into oblivion and obscurity. As a matter of faith, my Unitarian Universalist faith, I cannot allow myself to wish for them harm. To do so would be the equivalent of Job cursing God. It would mean making my heart so mired in disgust that I have, essentially cursed myself. I have doomed myself

by hating another. Job debates, he rages, he argues, he insists on his innocence, but he refuses to curse God.

Maybe it's easier to curse God – or consider that this invisible all-powerful being is both malevolent and generous – than to believe something that most humans really struggle with -- that the universe has no inherent purpose or design and what happens to us is entirely amoral. In other words – it's not personal, Job!! Is that too hard to bear? Let's consider that answer, the one Job's friends don't offer him. It's just bad luck or genetics or random chance. For some, that is a more fearful truth than any of the answers to Why? that you'll find in Job or in any emergency room. "God wanted another angel." "Everything happens for a reason." "God doesn't give you more than you can bear." These bromides are intended to comfort, but they provide less comfort than the answers we just heard from Job's friends: "Maybe you looked innocent, but actually you were to blame! Maybe you'll get your rewards in the next life! May God is using your suffering to teach others a lesson." Wrong. Not helpful. Cruel, in fact.

So, Job, after two rounds with three friends who are trying to convince him that there's a reason for his awful suffering, finally gets an audience with Yahweh himself. In chapter 38, the scripture says "*Then the Lord replied to Job out of the tempest and said "Who is this who darkens counsel? Speaking without knowledge? Gird your loins, I will ask, and you will inform me? Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Speak if you have understand. Do you know who fixed its dimensions? Or who measured it with a line? Onto what were its bases sunk? Who set its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the divine beings shouted for joy?"*

And God goes on like this for another three chapters, citing all of God's accomplishments in creation. It sounds like God is pulling out his resume, but setting all the amazing poetry aside – I think what God is saying here is "What do you know – really? And who do you think you are? Why not you? "

Job is not very reassured by that response. I must admit, I am not either. Is this a God that simply sidesteps the Why question by this divine mega-monologue? It's hard to accept with all our intellectual understandings, that suffering doesn't make sense. It's why I bristle when someone says "senseless violence" or "senseless suffering." Violence and suffering are never sensible, never rational. They come to us unbidden and they wreck our lives and we, like Job sit amongst ashes and sores and wondering how on earth we will survive?

How will we survive the loss of our love? How will we survive the loss of our planet? How will we survive, we wonder, when it all falls down?

So here's the answer that comes to my mind when I think about this book of Job and what it has to teach us about loss, and grief and suffering and faith. It's not really an intellectual answer to the question Why? Instead, it's a response. I found this answer emerging first in one of the translations of the book of Job I've been reading, the Greenstein translation. In most translations, after Job is overwhelmed by God's recitation of his resume, he finally answers God by saying essentially "Wow – I had no idea. The scripture says: *I spoke without understanding of things which I did not know. Hear now, and I will speak, I will ask and you will inform me. I had heard you with my ears, but now I see you with my eyes. Therefore, I recant and relent, being but dust and ashes.* and Job falls on his face and repents. But Greenstein translates those last words differently. Instead of "repent" his translation says "There I am disgusted" , and instead of "being but dust and ashes" Greenstein says " and I take pity on humanity." Now, that's really different isn't it? In other words, Job's last words to God are "What a world you've made, God. I feel sorry for everyone."

Was Job faithful because he didn't curse God? That's part of it, but it's not all of it. Job was faithful in the end because within his own suffering, he came to feel compassion for others. The job of faith is to expand our awareness of suffering beyond ourselves – which is very difficult to do as suffering collapses our focus and attention. How, in the midst of great pain, do we realize how it connects us ever more deeply with one another and to world of hurt and beauty and mystery? If you remember at the beginning, Job was so absorbed with his own suffering that he could not even comfort his own wife, who also experienced a devastating loss. At the end of the story, Job is moving to a different place – beyond being mad at his wife, beyond being mad at God, beyond the pity and sorrow he was feeling for himself – to a different place in his heart where his pity and sorrow can become compassion for humankind and all the fragile vulnerable courageous and beautiful individuals that are a part of us.

I've been pretty dismissive of simple phrases to help navigate the unbearable truth of suffering – but I have one that helps me. One is: In the end, everything will be all right – and if it's not all right – it's not the end. Spoiler alert for the end of the book of Job – after his eye-to-eye encounter with God, he gets everything back! He gets his health, his house, his land back. He has ten more children –

which of course cannot replace the ten he lost. But what the text doesn't say is how Job and his faith was changed by this experience.

The job of faith is not to alleviate loss or grief or disappointment or sadness, but to expand our awareness so that we can see more fully the suffering and struggles of others. And when we do so, we will likely know better what to say and what not to say when we are at the bedside of our loved ones' suffering. The cliches we often hear which are meant to comfort will not. Instead, we can take a lesson from the best thing Job's friends ever did. It wasn't what they said that mattered. It was that they showed up. They saw his suffering. They sat with him. They listened. They cried with him. No matter what else might be said, that's what faith asks of us.

That's what our faith tells us is enough.

May it be so.