

July 7, 2019
Rev. Dr Jane Florence
“Faith Questions”
Job and Philippians 2: 12-13



Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Once upon a time in a land far, far away, there was a man whose name was Roberto. Roberto was a very good man; he had a large family and many possessions. He lived happily ever after.

By the first four words, or if not then by the last four, you knew that I wasn't reading out of a history book, or a science book, or a law book, you knew I was telling a story. You heard the clues: "Once upon a time" and "happily ever after"; these words are our story clues. The Hebrews knew storytelling when they heard it too. It sounded much the same as ours does. "There was a man in the land of Uz named Job" the book ends with ... "so Job died old and contented."

There is no doubt that this tale of Job is a story carefully crafted over the centuries. Actually, it didn't even start out as a Hebrew story. Uz is not in Israel and Job is not a Hebrew name. It's a story that the Hebrews borrowed, at least the opening and closing is. They broke open the familiar tale, stretched it wide, inserted forty some chapters of poetry and dialogue, and wrapped it up with the ancient ending. Why? Perhaps it was the only way they could broach the otherwise unapproachable topic.

Their religious teachings taught, "you reap what you sow." In other words, if you are good-, God will reward you with wealth and abundance. If you are bad, God will punish you with scarcity and calamity. That was the orthodox answer the priests provided. That was the answer that gave order to the world. It was that understanding that affirmed God was just and life was fair. Good people lived happily ever after; bad people did not. It was nice and tidy; no questions need be asked. If something bad happened people knew what to do. Apologize to God; confess; offer a sacrifice, and God would make things right because God is just.

Everyone understood. Except. What if someone's life experience didn't fit the pattern? Should he or she confess the truth of their experience, or should they say what the priests expected? If they challenge the orthodox answers of the faith, the whole system might come tumbling down. The whole faith might unravel. So the questions are cut off- the doubts and questions themselves are named a sin. Perhaps, that's why the Hebrews had to pose the story. They couldn't pose the question except in a theoretical, once upon a time, kind of way. Only in story form around a campfire in the midst of the dark night could they dare to explore the truth of their lives. Only in the story would they

admit their own experience of confusion, of divine absence, of the inadequacy¹ of their conventional theology.

In the first line of the story, the narrator and Job both maintain that Job is righteous and blameless, yet he loses everything. One after the other is taken from him, his property, his servants, his sons and daughters, then his health all are destroyed. A righteous man whose life is a mess with calamity doesn't fit the teachings of good people get good lives and bad stuff happens to bad people! His friends wrestle with faith against fact. If they agree that Job is righteous, then God made a mistake and punished Job in error-then God isn't perfect. If they maintain Job is righteous then God punished Job in spite of Job's innocence, then God would not be just. Either there is something wrong with their God or there is something wrong with their belief system. Unable to consider that their answers might not be absolute, they choose to deny Job's innocence and maintain their religious answers as they have always been.

As the story progresses, Job's friends hang onto their conventional orthodox theology; to do so, they insist that Job has sinned against God; he's not so 'righteous' as first stated. Job insists he is innocent. They spend the whole story, trying to convince Job to confess his sin to maintain their belief system. As John Holbert says, "They have God all so neat and clean. God is signed, sealed, and delivered, boxed up, dusted off during holiday times, displayed for appropriate praise the then returned to the shelf to await another showing. The God of the friends' is domesticated, restrained, and predictable"² That's why Job calls the friends, "plasterers of lies."

For many, things haven't changed that much in the last 3,000 years or so. For many, their pain is still plastered over with religious platitudes that deny their experiences of life. Many still hear "you reap what you sow" when tragedy befalls them. Many still hear their faith questions are inappropriate. When people have faced life's hardships of divorce or illness, some have been told their suffering has been inflicted upon them because they displeased God. There is great pain in the world which has been compounded by conventional Christian platitudes in order to maintain a theology that says, "God is in control and you reap what you sow." Those who dare to question rote theological answers have been told they are unfaithful and dangerous to Christianity. So those who were blamed for the difficulties of life, those with genuine experiences which were denied, those with honest questions which were silenced, those who have heard their struggles will go away when they ask Jesus into their hearts, many of those have turned their backs and walked away from the church- and the God in whose name they were wounded.

What is at issue in this story is the inadequacy of conventional answers and the space that is needed to wrestle honestly when orthodox answers no longer fit life's experience. What is at issue in our world is the same. In the letter to the Philippians, the author states, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure."

¹ Kathleen M. O'Connor. Feasting on the Word. Year B, Vol 4, Louisville, Westminster John Knox, p. 198.

² Ibid.

Work out your faith- wrestle with what you hear- not lightly, but in awe and reverence - for God is in the midst of the ‘working out.’ Dow Eggerton speaks of the need for a “safe container” to allow transformation and healing to take place. We need a safe space to wrestle with the heavy questions of life and faith. A place to question and grow , and ‘work out our own salvation answers.’ He says that an environment must be created– a time and a place – which is strong enough to ‘hold’ the process of change. ”³ For healing to occur, the old words which wounded must be stripped of their power to control. A safe space must serve as a container where the old can be examined and the new can come to life.

For the ancient Hebrew people, this story of Job was a safe space to challenge conventional wisdom and traditional religious answers. The end of the story is more than a happily ever after. The story ends with Job having struggled honestly with his experience, having challenged God for understanding, having denounced the inauthentic answers of his friends. In God’s response to Job, God reveals to Job the majesty and mystery in creation. God affirms Job in his denial of pat answers, and God chastises the friends for their shallow insistence on pat answers. Job experiences God, and in this safe space where speaking the truth is allowed, Job is transformed.

Job did not lose his faith because he questioned God. In the end, Job’s faith is strengthened. Job knows the mysteries of the universe are greater than he can ever understand; and he knows there are not a simple answer to all of life’s questions. In the end, Job “sees” God. Job knows God is present with him. The paradigm of God in OT theology was challenged with a new alternative in the story of Job. Job learns that the experience of life requires new ways of speaking of God. ⁴ Job is ‘summoned beyond himself to a heightened sense of divine presence in his life and in the world’ ⁵

Jesus continues to transform the faith in his challenge to the imperial theology of the powerful that was dominate in Judaism in the first century. He interpreted anew the scriptures of old and attempted to reshape the community as inclusive and diverse, welcoming the vulnerable, the wounded, and the seekers. Just like Job’s story, Jesus broke open old paradigms and stretched them wide. In welcoming the outcasts, honoring women, lifting up children, and blessing the poor, Jesus created space for authentic faith which transformed people’s lives.

I learned a new quote in one of our listening sessions this month; it struck me as a powerful truth. Credited to Muhammad Ali, “A man who views the world the same at fifty as he did at twenty has wasted thirty years of his life.”⁶ “Work out your own salvation” is not about maintaining rote beliefs handed as absolutes; it is about a faith that requires times of challenging and doubting and questioning in order that simple answers can be broke wide open and deep

³ Dow Eggerton. “Worship and Transformation” Chicago Theological Seminary Register. Vol LXXV No 3, Fall 1985. p.11.

⁴ Kathleen M. O’Connor. Feasting on the Word. Year B, Vol 4, Louisville, Westminster John Knox, p. 194.

⁵ Ibid. p 196.

⁶https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/muhammad_ali_136675

growth can occur drawing and transforming. We are wise to journey to mature faith in the company of others who create safe containers for growth.

Like the example of Job's story and the model of Jesus' teachings, this church has become a safe container for healing and transformation. God has worked through the people here to create a space where all are honored and welcomed and blessed. It's a place where people can question rote answers. It's a place where those who have heard of God, can come to experience the compassion of God. It's a place where well-intentioned but harmful theology can be unpacked and examined. It's a place where our life's experiences are not silenced or denied with simple platitudes. It is a place where God heals and transforms.

That's why it is important that we gather here surrounded by sign and symbol, engaging in ritual of word, table, font, and song. So that this sacred container may continue to offer glimpses of the Holy One, moments of God's grace, for us and for all those seeking wholeness.

The space is wonderful, but if people do not gather, church does not happen. You are part of the safe container. Your presence here for one another as listening ears, as welcoming smiles, as open arms is a way God's Spirit lives in this space. I give thanks for each of you that come to create this place.

My heart grieves for each empty seat here. Because I know for every empty space, there is someone who would delight to know there is a place for them. There are so many who have questions and know of no place to ask. There are so many who have wounds but know of no place to heal. There are so many who don't trust church to be anything different than what they've heard judging and condemning. You know them. They are your co-workers, classmates, neighbors, friends, and family. They go to your gym and sit next to you at the symphony. You can give them the gift of what you have found here. You can extend an invitation to a place that welcomes their questions, honors their experience, and lives God's grace.

May it be so today. Amen.