

Job: A Man of Integrity

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1:1 *There once was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job.*

Already, line 1, you have a good idea of what this text is all about. This is a story -- "There once was a man" -- it's a very old story. It takes the form almost of a play, with archetypal characters -- a man (it was always a man in those days) and a God, a chorus of commentators. And -- well, we'll see what we call that last character. This story is so old that versions of it are found back as far as Sumer in 2600 BCE, long before the story we have in the Hebrew Bible. And you and I know from childhood experience that any story that begins with "Once upon a time," is bound to end with "And they all lived happily every after." But what happens in between?

1:1 *That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.*

Here's a hint. He is a good man. The plot will surely turn on this goodness.

2:2 *There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. 3 He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five*

hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east.

Can there be any doubt? Job has a lot to lose. Something bad is going to happen to Job. All that wealth, all that prestige, the happiness of a large and flourishing family. He is in a vulnerable position. Job worries about his kids, just like the rest of us, and goes to great lengths to protect them. He's like a lot of us. We begin to see why this is such an old story. It's Everyman. Every generation grapples with the story of the righteous sufferer, the good person to whom bad things happen.

1:4 *His sons used to take turns holding feasts in their homes, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. 5 When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would send and have them purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular custom.*

Perhaps we should just pack up and go home now, the end seems inevitable. Something truly dreadful will happen, and it will come out all right by the last line. But wait, there may be a surprise or two along the way. We may yet learn something new from Job, something beyond the popular catchwords and time-worn interpretations. What do you think of when you hear Job's name? That old phrase, "the patience of Job" may come to mind. We'll learn just how patient Job is. I once asked my hairdresser what she thought was the lesson of Job. "Everything is there for a reason," she said, "It's all in God's plan." A young college student in a public place asked me what was that huge book I was reading. I showed him, and asked what he had learned from Job. "If you stick it out to the end, there is a reward." Then he explained to his friend, "Job gets all screwed over by God because God has this bet with Satan." We'll get to that wager in a moment. But I believe there is more to this story than either of these people may have seen.

The book of Job, as we have it in the Hebrew scripture, is composed of two layers. The beginning and the end are in prose, a version of a very old folk tale. Sandwiched in between, is a long poem – a dialogue between Job and his friends, and another between Job and God. The dialogue has a very different viewpoint and approach from the folktale which frames it. Both, however, are rooted in a school of

philosophical writing called Wisdom Literature. *Wisdom* was one of the main approaches to life and religion found among the Hebrews and many others in the ancient Near East. The viewpoint of Wisdom has a certain appeal for many Unitarian Universalists. Wisdom is not especially concerned with doctrine or grand schemes for heavenly salvation -- rather it dwells on human experience, on right and wrong, how to live an ethical life, how to be a wise person, not a fool. Wisdom, however, assumes a God of creation who is also a God of justice. God punishes the foolish wicked people and rewards the wise and just, in a reliable system of retributive justice. Theologically, Wisdom emphasizes *creation*, God as revealed in nature and the world of plants and animals, mountains and oceans, moon and stars. But like all theological viewpoints, wisdom has its limitations. Bruce Birch, my professor of Hebrew Scripture at Wesley, suggests that the central part of the story, although it was written from within the wisdom tradition, was not just an elaboration, but a critique of some of wisdom's ideas.

Back to the story. The scene shifts from Job in his glory days to God holding court in heaven. The angels present themselves with their reports. God speaks to one, the Satan.

1:7 *Where have you come from?"*

Satan answered the Lord, "From going to and fro upon the earth and from walking up and down on it.

This is the Satan's famous line, "going to and fro upon the earth." The Hebrew Satan is not exactly Satan or the devil of later Christian views. Satan is not a name, but a title, the Adversary or the Prosecutor. He is really on God's side, as a quality control agent. The Satan inspects the earth to tell God what is going well and what is not. Being an inspector general and a whistle blower has not made the Satan popular over the ages, and he has gotten some bad press. Even God is brought up short by the Satan. God, smiling benevolently, maybe even smugly as he anticipates good news, asks the Satan to make his report in more detail:

1:8 *"Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears god and shuns evil."*

Fear, here, means a sort of exaggerated respect. "Well, of course Job fears you," says the Satan. "You have given him everything and protected him from all misfortune. Take it all away and see what happens. He'll curse you to your face." This is not what God expected

to hear. The Satan has gotten God's goat. The Satan is casting doubt on God's favorite servant. God's reputation is at stake. To shorten the story a bit, the two make a bet. God places his wager on Job's steadfastness. The Satan will try to shake Job's integrity. The only restriction is, he can't touch Job himself.

You can imagine the unfolding of the story. Everything goes. The camels, the oxen, the sheep, the donkeys, the servants – and the children. Dead, every one of them. Each time servant comes back from the latest disaster, saying "And only I am left to tell the tale." Job is devastated. I can't imagine anything worse than losing a child. Job has lost ten children. And he's lost all his wealth besides. But he holds fast through it all.

1:21 *"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and
naked shall I return there; the Lord
gave, and the Lord has taken away;
blessed be the name of the Lord."*

I think maybe he was in shock. God is pleased with Job's steadfast loyalty. God is ready to claim the winnings. But, "Not so fast," says the Satan. "People will do anything to save their skin. Let me try again, only this time do not exempt his flesh and bones." God is feeling sure of

himself and of his servant, Job. *"OK," he says, "Do your worst. Just don't kill him."* This time Job ends up sitting stunned on the ash heap, covered with painful and loathsome sores, scraping at his itching skin with a potsherd. Mrs. Job, coming by with a cup of chicken soup and a pot of ointment, no doubt, can't imagine why Job is loyal to this punishing God.

2:9 *"Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die." (2:9)*

(Actually, surprise, surprise, Mrs. Job is treated unfairly in this account. We don't even learn her name. And those children were her children too, born of her body. But this is Mr. Job's sermon, not hers).

Job answers testily,

2:10 *"You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we receive the good at the hands of God, and not receive the bad?"*

Then he lapses into silence. Soon his friends, having heard about the disasters, gather to console him. They are perhaps the Pastoral Care Committee from the Wisdom School. They do the right thing. They

cover themselves with dust and ashes, they rip their clothes, and sit with him on the ash heap, for seven days and nights. No one says a word. This is the friends at their very best. When tragedy strikes, they show up. Silently, they weep with their friend in his misery. They mourn with him.

After a week of silence, something in Job begins to crack open. He rouses himself from his nearly catatonic lethargy. In the biblical text, the tension rises. He is getting ready to speak at last. Will he now abandon his integrity and curse God? Cursing is a serious business. It has real consequences. Job opened his mouth to speak

3:3 *and cursed the day of his birth.*

Job is still huddled within himself in his misery. He wishes he had never been conceived, that he had died at birth, that the very day of his birth be removed from the calendar. He wishes not only for death, but for total obliteration. Job knows he is innocent. We know it. The narrator tells us, and even God says that Job is upright and blameless. But the most dreadful things imaginable have happened to him, and it's not his fault.

Why do bad things happen to good people? Job can't imagine, he just wants to die and have it over with. The world is full of pain. Most of us here have seen or experienced unearned and undeserved suffering. Some suffering is beyond imagining. Children dead before their parents. Life threatening illnesses coming randomly. Living your whole life burdened by discrimination because of your race or your gender or your sexual orientation. This is not how it is supposed to be. It's just not fair. We respond with rage and despair in turn. "Why me?" we scream. Where will we find hope? And there is no easy answer.

The friends try every which way to comfort Job. They are all operating out of the same assumptions and beliefs of the wisdom tradition. They believe in logic and rationality. They believe that ultimately the world must make sense. There's got to be a reason for all this suffering. They start offering reasons.

It's God's will. Maybe it's the children's fault. Maybe they did sin -- all that feasting and merrymaking, who knows what else happened? Maybe they just got what was coming to them. God sends suffering to teach you a lesson. Or to warn you to change your ways. Then they up the ante a little. No one is blameless before God, after all. Everybody is a sinner. Maybe you did something wrong, Job. It could have been worse. They wonder how Job brought this on himself. They turn up the heat some more. It could have been worse? It *should* have been worse,

Job. God let you off lightly this time. Just get right with God and he'll forgive you and restore you to your proper place. These were all ideas out of the wisdom tradition, out of that deep conviction that the world is a reasonable and orderly place where the good prosper and the fate of the wicked is dismal. These are old ideas, but we still hear them today. And if anyone has ever tried to comfort you by saying "It's God's will," you know how frustratingly unhelpful that can be.

I'm condensing a lot here. The speeches of the friends go on for over 28 chapters, interspersed with Job's answers, in three complex and much analyzed cycles of dialogue. Suffice it to say, that the temperature rises steadily. The friends move from silent weeping to the offering of platitudes to giving helpful advice and finally to exasperation. They blame the victim. They forget that their job is to listen and comfort. Finally, they become frustrated and angry. Job isn't playing his proper role as the mourner. They want confession, repentance, gratitude.

But Job isn't grateful for all this advice. He doesn't accept their diagnoses. He knows he is an innocent man -- a man of integrity. That integrity is important to him. His wholeness, his very sense of self are at stake. He is supposed to be a dispenser of Wisdom, a teacher and a guide, not a victim. His relationship with God is important to him. His

integrity requires that he serve God, and he expects blessings in return. That's the way it's supposed to be. So Job is baffled by his suffering.

Why has God done this to him? Job concludes quite reasonably that God must be cruel and unjust. Job alternates between proclaiming his innocence and blaming God for his misfortune. As he slowly recovers his equilibrium after the shock of loss, he begins searching desperately for a shred of hope. He is bitter and sarcastic, often performing brilliant parodies of his friends' unhelpful speeches of conventional wisdom. Job complains vividly about the violence God has perpetrated on him:

9 He has torn me in his wrath, and hated me;

he has gnashed his teeth at me;

my adversary sharpens his eyes against me....

12 I was at ease, and he broke me in two;

he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces;

13 [H]is archers surround me.

He slashes open my kidneys, and shows no mercy;

he pours out my gall on the ground.

14 He bursts upon me again and again.

(16:9-14)

Not exactly the legendary patient Job. But, somewhere in his ranting and flailing about, Job hits on a wild and crazy idea. He will take God to court. Immediately, he rejects the idea. This is absurd. God doesn't answer summonses. Job goes back to complaining. But that idea is like an aching tooth. Job keeps going back to it, probing it with his tongue. Increasingly, he uses language out of the legal system, and plays with the legal metaphor to describe his relationship with God. The idea grows and swells, until eventually it seems so obvious that Job acts on it. He opens his mouth and he swears, not a curse, but a mighty "oath of clearance."

The oath of clearance was an ancient Hebrew legal practice to provide relief for someone who is the victim of negative advertising or whispering campaigns. A person who was under suspicion, but not formally charged, could use the oath of clearance to clear his name. The suspect goes before a judge or a court of elders and makes a formal and terrible oath. "If I have done thus and so, then may I receive this dire punishment." At this point the burden of proof falls shifts from the hapless accused to the accuser or the rumor monger. That person has to come forward and prove the accusation, or the accused's name is cleared -- the clearance stands. Job takes such an oath of clearance before God. He doesn't know what he is accused of, so he raises every possible issue,

and lists every possible horrible punishment that hasn't already happened. Let God come and prove his accusations, whatever they are.

God does come. Not immediately. First, there's another episode with another would-be comforter -- probably a later interpolation in the text. A blustery young man named Elihu speaks up for the first time. He is annoyed with the weakness of the friends, who have failed to convince Job of the error of his ways. He is equally annoyed with Job, who persists in maintaining his integrity. Bursting with all the self-righteous confidence of youth, Elihu will set them straight. He reminds them of the great themes of the Wisdom Tradition. God is too great for the likes of Job, he says. God, the creator, is in charge of this world, and God's world is an orderly and moral place -- God rewards the good and punishes the wicked. Job must be guilty, horribly guilty. God does not pervert justice. Elihu ends with a speech about the awesome majesty of God as seen in the wonders of nature, and especially the power and might of the thunderstorm. Power and righteousness are the emblems of the Almighty.

That description of the thunderstorm is God's cue. No sooner does Elihu finish speaking, but God appears, and addresses Job out of the whirlwind. It is an intimidating interview.

38:3 *Brace yourself like a man, I will question
you, and you shall answer me.*

4. *Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?
Tell me, if you understand."*

This is God's classic line, "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?" What do you know about the rigors of creation or the inevitability of suffering, God implies. God describes the cosmic structures of the universe, the stars and the phenomena of the weather, the cycles of nature, the earth and sea and all the creatures, each with its own ecological niche. Every desolate corner of the world, every being, no matter how forlorn, receives God's love and care. No one, not even Job in his misery, is godforsaken. Even the great chaos monsters, Behemoth and Leviathan, have their place. God implies that suffering is simply part of the world; it is built in by necessity. If you step off a cliff, you will be smashed at the bottom -- by the same gravity that makes life possible in the first place.

This is a great hymn to creation. The chaotic -- the source of suffering and despair -- is present in the world, but there is mostly goodness. The chaotic elements are contained within usually secure boundaries, in an order of creation that is rich with possibilities.

God does not directly answer Job's questions. God makes no charges against Job. He lets the oath of clearance stand without a word. By the rules of the oath of clearance, Job is innocent; his name is cleared, he is a man of integrity, vindicated by God's very silence on this issue. But that isn't quite the end of the matter. Job has known all along that he was innocent. So this vindication doesn't teach him anything new. Now God offers Job a wider picture of the world. The narrow view taught and endorsed by the wisdom school is not adequate. Divine justice is not retributive. It does not guarantee that the good will prosper and the wicked suffer. Bad things can happen to good people.

Job is overwhelmed. He cannot answer God. He can only climb back down from his soapbox and start over.

42:3 *Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know....*

6 *Therefore I despise myself and repent in
dust and ashes.*

Job's words are so ambiguous in the Hebrew that we cannot interpret them for sure. To *repent* here does not mean that he accepts blame. Repent means to turn, to take a new direction. Job now knows in his heart that the real question is not "Why me?" but "How shall I live

in this world?" Job has experienced a major insight. He sees things in a new way. Job has not received a definitive answer. God has blown away the house of cards constructed by Wisdom. God has not reinforced for him his tidy world view of right rewarded and wrong punished. God has only given Job a pile of sound lumber with which to reconstruct a house. Job, with his own integrity and the building blocks supplied by God, must somehow rebuild a trusting and secure relationship with God and with the world.

God makes this easier for Job. As the book draws to a close, it returns to the prose of the ancient folktale. God restores to Job everything he ever had, twice over. Sheep and oxen and camels and donkeys and servants. And ten new children. God rebukes the inadequate comforters, and then magnanimously agrees to accept Job's prayers on their behalf and forgive them.

Of course, we never learn how Mrs. Job feels about all this. The first set of children are still dead. She is still a bereft mother. She has had to put up with Job's complaining and his abusive friends. Now she has to produce another set of children. But this is about Job after all. He lives a very long time in his restored condition, happily ever after you might say, and even the girls receive an inheritance when the elder Jobs finally pass on.

This morning we have just begun to unpack the story of Job. There are all sorts of loose ends. Other questions clamor to be answered. Theodicy, the question of the justice of God. What kind of God allows such things to happen? Brittle and supple thinking -- what are the dangers and temptations of dogmatic thought in a world that covers the spectrum from orderly to chaotic? Pastoral questions -- how do we as caring religious people respond to the suffering we see all around us? I hope to get to all of these this year in a sort of intermittent sermon series, but you never know -- some of them may have to wait until next year.

For this morning, however, let us remember that we all find both joy and sorrow in this world. May we remember that we are never utterly forsaken, that there is care and kindness all around us, that the friends may be narrow minded and clumsy, but at least they show up and try to express their love for their friend. May we be grateful for the many blessings of our lives. May we strive for a wider vision of the reality and hope of the universe. And, like Job, may we hold fast to our integrity, for in the end, as Job asks, "Is not. . .

4:6 the integrity of your ways your hope?

May we all find hope in integrity. Amen. Shalom. Blessed be.

