

Faith Without Reward

Will you please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Today's scripture is difficult, particularly if you know the context. Before God suddenly appears out of the whirlwind to have a sarcastic chat with Job, this is what has happened: God brags to other heavenly beings about Job—a perfect, righteous, and upright person. Job follows all of God's commandments, caring for and giving to others, praying to and serving God. God says that there's never been anyone better. But an adversary doesn't agree. He tells God that the only reason that Job is so faithful and is such a good person is because Job's life is so good. Job has a large and wonderful family, a lot of land and wealth. He's respected for his great wisdom by everyone in his community and they all come to him for advice. But, says the adversary, if God were to take all of that away from Job, he would curse God to God's face.

God doesn't believe it, trusting that Job is good for the sake of goodness, and that Job follows God out of a sense of righteousness. So God allows the adversary to find out the truth. Almost everything that Job has is taken from him—his health, his property and wealth, and his children. His community believes this is a sign that he has offended God in some way, so they shun him. His best friends also believe this and tell him all sorts of platitudes that people say when someone faces suffering: Since God is good, you

Faith Without Reward

must have done something to deserve this; Repent and everything will go back to normal; God has a plan.

And Job, rightfully feeling the full force of all of this injustice, cries out to God: Why are you doing this?! I did everything you ever asked of me! I am a good, moral person and this is the life I get? How can we call you a just and good God, if this is what we get in return for our faith?

The section we read today is God's response to Job.

When I saw that this was the lectionary reading for today, I almost skipped it and chose something else. To me, it's one of the more difficult passages of scripture because it paints God in a way that makes me incredibly uncomfortable. Both God's response and the questions that lead to God's response challenge our faith, and I wasn't sure that challenges to our faith are what we need right now. But I had a conversation with someone a few weeks back that reminded me of an important truth: In the midst of a pandemic, in the midst of terrible loss, in the midst of grief and sadness over the unjust structures in our world, most of us already feel that our faith is challenged. We doubt some of our friends and family; we doubt our leaders and our nation, and we doubt God. Now is the perfect time to talk about the book of Job because, whether we want to admit it out loud or not, we probably feel Job's doubts.

But I always feel on uncertain ground when discussing this book. It's probably the book of the Bible that I know the best, but it's still the most difficult to preach about. I have found that our

Faith Without Reward

responses to it differ drastically, depending on our experiences—particularly depending on the kinds of suffering we have endured and how we got through it. So it is with some trepidation that I step out onto this slippery ice and share with you how this book has affected me and my own responses to it. This is, perhaps, less a sermon and more a reflection.

When my nephew Josh was 3, he was diagnosed with Leukemia. He went through the necessary rounds of chemo and radiation and went into remission. When he passed the five year remission mark, we rejoiced, certain that this would mean he would be okay. When he was about 13, it came back. This time, doctors recommended a more intense treatment, since it was obviously a more tricky form of cancer. The risk, they explained, was that the treatment itself could cause a rare and more deadly form of cancer. But, they said, it was worth the risk, to really get rid of the Leukemia for good this time. So his parents took that risk, and Josh went through another round of therapy. In May 2019, shortly after I was called to this church, Josh was diagnosed with aggressive, very fast growing brain cancer caused by the treatment he had had when he was 13. No one survives this form of cancer and we were told he would be lucky to live 18 months. My brother-in-law told my husband this right before we went on an anniversary trip to Hawaii with my parents—it was their 50th and our 25th. He didn't tell me because he didn't want this news to affect the rest of us on this once in a lifetime trip. I knew something was wrong,

Faith Without Reward

though, and can still see my husband, sitting alone early every morning, staring at the ocean. What it is about the ocean, about the sea, about the Great Lakes that calls to us in these times of unimaginable grief? There is something about their vastness that is at once so overwhelming and so soothing.

John told me about Josh's diagnosis when we got home and I prayed unceasingly. I would literally fall asleep at night with prayer on my lips and wake up the next morning where I left off. I believed in the power of prayer and still do. But if it made a difference in this case, I am not aware of it. Josh lived only until October and died at about this time two years ago.

I know that I don't have to tell you that the death of a child raises doubts in our faith like nothing else will. Most of us cannot help but ask the questions: Why? Why would someone so young need to suffer and die? If God is good, why would this be allowed to happen? Why didn't God answer my prayers?

I, a pastor, who had just had my calling affirmed, who had just been called to a church that I loved, I asked these questions. It wasn't the first time, and I don't think it will be the last.

I wonder how many of you have asked them? Or if you've asked what faith is or what it is for, if it doesn't bring answers to prayers? Do you look at the 700,00 Covid deaths in the United States and the millions of deaths around the world, and ask these questions? It would make sense if you do. Our scriptures expect us to ask these questions because suffering is a part of the human

Faith Without Reward

condition. So our Bible contains the book of Job and the story we heard today from Mark, among many others.

The problem is, these two sections of scripture don't give us a lot of comfort. God's words out of the whirlwind seem sarcastic and defensive: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know!" Instead of holding Job in comforting arms, wiping away Job's tears, or explaining anything, God hits back with God's own questions. Job's questions, our questions, seem to go unanswered.

What are we supposed to do with this?

My own first answer to this question is to remind myself that we should not read any one part of scripture in isolation. The book of Job is part of a larger story and that story shows God reacting to human suffering in multiple ways—most of them much more loving than the response we see here. This same God is the one who hears the cries of the Israelites and frees them from slavery. This same God is the one who hears and responds to the pleas of regular, individual people, like Hannah, Jochabed, and Esther. And this is the same God who so loved the world that They sent Their only begotten son to live and grieve with us, to love and heal us, and to save us.

So knowing that this is that same God, how does this story, this image of a defensive, frustrated God fit in to that?

Faith Without Reward

For me, I am struck by how this part of the story of Job pairs with the story from Mark. At the beginning of Mark, James and John come to Jesus and say, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Seeing that, I can’t help but go back to the beginning of the book of Job. The one called the adversary tells God that people only have faith because of the rewards they get. People would not be good, we would not follow God, we would not be moral if we didn’t think there was some reward in it.

This is a harsh view of humanity and I’ll note that God tells the adversary that God doesn’t believe it. But what do we think of this idea? Why do we have faith? Do we have faith because we believe that it will lead to eternal life or to glory? Do we have faith because we hope Jesus will heal us? Do we have faith because we hope Jesus will answer our prayers?

Why should we have faith?

I think again of that children’s song, “Seeing is believing in the things you see/Loving is believing in the ones you love.”

After Josh died, my youngest child and I went to the shores of Lake Michigan, a different vast and yet comforting body of water. As I sat and looked at the waves, at the huge lake that always reminds me of how very small I am in this impossible to understand universe, I wondered if I needed God to answer my prayers in order for me to believe in God. Could I believe in God, could I follow God, simply because I love God?

Faith Without Reward

And I wonder if that's why the author of Job imagines God to be so angry and defensive when faced with Job's response. God had loved Job, *believed* in Job, been sure that Job would remain steadfast and faithful, even if his life did not go the way he wanted it to go. But, instead, Job seems to lose faith in God's goodness and justice. It seems that Job did, indeed, need to have a good life in order to have faith. So maybe God, who so strongly believed in Job, was hurt.

In the end, God's response to Job isn't a direct answer to his questions. But it IS an indirect answer. Hurt though God is, God still shows up in Job's darkest hour and explains as much as is possible, which is exactly what Job asked for. In the verses we read for today, followed by several more like it, God tells Job that there's no way he can understand why anything happens because Job is human. God is the Creator, literally the one who made the universe, separated the earth from the sky and the waters, who made all of the animals, and every infinitesimal aspect of their and our being. How can we begin to understand why things are the way they are, or why God does what God does? This may not be a satisfying answer, but I have become convinced that it is the truth, and am usually able to accept it.

Maybe Jesus says it better in Mark. John and James ask to sit on Jesus' right hand, to have a part of his glory. In response, Jesus says that they have no idea what they are asking. Having a part of

Faith Without Reward

Jesus' glory means suffering like he suffers; it means giving up everything to become the servant of everyone. Faith doesn't mean getting something from God; it means loving God, and loving everyone that God loves, without reward.

I don't know why my nephew died—I mean, I don't know if there was a cosmic reason, if it was a matter of horrible chance, or for some other reason that I cannot fathom. And I don't know why God didn't answer our prayers and save his life. I do know that in the midst of that whirlwind of loss, anger, and questions, God stayed with my family and grieved with us. I believe that Josh is at peace, not because of any reward granted by God for anyone's faith, but because God simply grants salvation out of grace and love. And I believe that my relationship with God, our love for each other, is stronger than my doubts. Thanks be to God.