
Job's Return

Job 42: 1-17

A sermon preached at Page Auditorium on October 25, 2015

by Dr. Adam Hollowell

The book of Job begins like this: “There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants.” (1:1-3) With all these animals and all these children, the narrator seems to want to make sure that we know that Job is a man of great blessing and wealth. He is one of the richest men in the land. A little later in the book, things take a turn for the worse. The oxen, donkeys, and camels are stolen by neighboring tribes. Fire consumes the sheep. The servants are killed. His children die. Here the narrator seems to want to make sure that we know that Job is suddenly a man of great suffering and loss. “In the blink of an eye, [Job] becomes the most bereft of human beings.”¹ Today’s reading comes from the very end of the book of Job. In the end, “the Lord restored the fortunes of Job ... and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. ... and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. He also had seven sons and three daughters. ... After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations.”

What is it that the narrator wants us to know about Job in these final passages? Friends return. His fortune returns. Children are born. The animals double: three thousand camels becomes six thousand; five hundred donkeys becomes a thousand. Is this supposed to be an announcement of God’s goodness? There was once a rich man who lost everything, and his suffering was great ... but just *look* at all those donkeys! There’s something deeply unsettling about this message. Are we really supposed to believe that Job's pain and anguish can be alleviated with new fortune, new friends, and new family? Are sorrows so easily forgotten?

Let me say it plainly: *It's too good to be true*. Whatever is happening in this final chapter, whatever the narrator seems to want us to learn by these riches restored, it simply sounds too good to be true.²

Is there another way of reading this story? As extravagant as the story seems, is there a way to believe that it *is* true? And good? What if God’s blessing really is as incredible as fourteen thousand sheep and six thousand camels?

¹ Miriam Greenspan, *Healing through the Dark Emotions*, 29.

² This is how one biblical scholar captures the feeling of reading the last chapter of Job: the conclusion of the book “so egregiously disrupts” the moral sensibility of the preceding chapters that “it seems necessary to find another model for reading.” Carol Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 21.

Although Job says very little in the final chapter of the book, he does a few remarkable things. He gives his three daughters Hebrew names that mean “Dove,” “Cinnamon,” “Horn of Eye-Shadow.” As in, the curve of makeup we call eye-shadow. These are not even names that today’s hipsters use. Dove, Cinnamon, and Eye-Shadow are ridiculous names, frivolous and incredible. Job also offers his daughters a share of his inheritance alongside their seven brothers. This is a generous act, and the narrator gives us no reason for Job's behavior. He does it, as the scholar says, “just for kicks.”³

Perhaps the narrator is trying to tell us that Job has become more like God. In the 38th chapter, God speaks to Job from the whirlwind. The Lord declares, “Can you send forth lightning?” (v.35) “Who has the wisdom to number the clouds?” (v.37) “Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place?” (v.12) “From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the frost of heaven?” (v.28-29) If the Lord is a womb that gives birth to lightning and clouds, the frost of heaven and the new dawn of each morning, what should prevent Job and his wife from having twenty children? What should prevent them from giving those children incredible names?

God seems just crazy enough to bless the life of an old man who has learned to be just as crazy as God. So what if Job is reckless – God is reckless. That’s not too good to be true – it’s divine goodness, and divine truth.

God is reckless, God is wild. Go forth and be untamed in your love. Be filled with the life of the extravagant Creator, embracing a world of abundance. Be the kind of people who give their children lavish, prodigal names. Be the kind of people who give away their inheritance and rejoice in the surprise of fortunes lost and fortunes found. That is a good sermon, and it is a true sermon. There is new joy, even new life, to be found in this God. There is hope.

I need that sermon. I need joy, and hope and reckless love. If I am going to tell the truth this morning, I need to tell you that there is a part of this story that holds me back. If you are like me, then I suspect that it gives you pause as well. In the first chapter a servant comes to Job and gives this report: “Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother’s house, and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people and they are dead.” (1:18-19) And then, in the last chapter, there is a great celebration. “Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate with him in his house.” (42:11) But of course it wasn’t *all* who had known him before who gathered around the table. His children are still dead and buried. Did the wind stir at all that night? Did Job step outside, only to feel a slight breeze blow and wonder if the terror would rise again? If seven sons and three daughters died by the power of the wind while eating and celebrating in their house, would it have been hard for him to eat with this new family? To drink and be surrounded by new friends?

God does not give to Job the promise that God gives to Noah after the flood. Noah receives a

³ Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God*, 142.

rainbow and the holy vow of Genesis 9: “Never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” God does not say to Job, “Never again will the wind blow and the house fall. Never again will you know the pain of losing sons and daughters.” Neither is this the story of the Christ in the gospel of Matthew. A leader of the synagogue kneels before Jesus and says, “My daughter has just died.” Jesus says, “The girl is not dead but sleeping.” He enters the house, takes the girl by the hand, and she rises from the bed. The Lord does not say to Job, “Your children are not dead but sleeping. The Lord does not enter the collapsed house, take Job’s children by the hand, and lead them back into the arms of their father. The 42nd chapter of Job only says this: the Lord accepted Job, the Lord blessed Job and restored his fortunes.

I do not mean to be ungrateful on Job’s behalf. I just can’t help but feeling that there is something to be learned here about how complicated it can be to receive the blessing of the Lord, especially when that blessing comes in the wake of great sorrow. Job lost ten beloved children. What could be more devastating? Job received the blessing of the Lord. What could be more joyous? How do we acknowledge that what is irreplaceable cannot be replaced, while at the same time admitting that new joys *do* come? That the womb of God *does* give birth to new dawns?

These are hard questions. I don’t have easy answers. Let me try another voice. A Polish poet named Anna Kamieńska composed a collection of poems in the early 1970s on the book of Job. Before she wrote these poems, she lived through the occupation of Poland during the second World War. She recollects her early life during the war in these words:

I remember the bombardment and the great light that preceded it. At first it fell from above, that beautiful, blinding, greenish light, so bright that it seemed to illuminate the earth's every wrinkle. That light illuminates every person, every cell ... everything is ready for death.⁴

Kamieńska survived those bombings, and many years later she experienced a religious conversion. She wrote in her diary, “January 13th. This is a very important date for me. The immense light.”⁵

It is not hard to see why she was drawn so intensely to Job. A period of destruction and devastation. An encounter with God. A return to the land of the living. For Job it was a wind that knocked down the house that contained his children, and it was a whirlwind that carried the voice of God to his ears. For Kamieńska, her memories of the war were filled with the great light that accompanied the bombings, and there were no words for her experience of God other than these: an immense light.

Have you experienced something like this? Have you ever been utterly devastated, only to be lifted up again? Have you felt great in faith, only to return again to the worries of the world? If you have, I want to read to you one of Anna Kamieńska’s poems about Job’s return. It is titled “The Silence of Job.” Listen to her words.

⁴ Anna Kamieńska, “A Nest of Quiet”

⁵ Anna Kamieńska, *Astonishments*, 115.

The Silence of Job

Job

you whose mouth was
eloquent as ripples of rain
when you were arguing with God
about your morsel of life
why were you silent
when you got back everything
life health riches
almost a second happiness
Why don't you protest now
You became as meek as the sea-grass
silent as a stone on sand
You seem to scowl when you look
mutter when you talk

You had a mouth full of arguments
like a harlot hurling insults
when you clamored for your due
Your loud No resounded to the heavens
your Yes is like the peep of a night bird
Explain why misery injury suffering
are fluent as teachers
while an everyday calm
searches for words
stammering like a schoolboy
Perhaps you wrapped yourself in silence
as a cloak against the world
against the storm of events of friendships of loves
from which only trouble comes
Perhaps you pretend to be humble out of conceit
perhaps you think

I have borne the inhuman
I am chosen in happiness and in pain
Be careful Job
which of these silences
is your silence
Perhaps it troubles God
more than your protests
Do you think you've eluded human fate
because once you wriggled out
You again have a lot
a lot to lose
You're as safe as everyone else
as a fly trapped in a fist

Tell us
you who escaped death
glanced into its abyss
almost turned into earth
who choked on God
tell us
does something exist there
does your calm mean despair or hope
is your eye clouded by awareness of truth
or of uncertainty
half-closed by irony or arrogance
What are you whispering
Are those merely senile words
out of which meaning has drained
You call dull senile sleep silence
you who got to know the silence of ocean depths
during a time of storm

But Job said nothing

he only whispered Lord Lord

Astonishments, pp. 30-32

In this poem's imagination, when Job returns from his encounter with God, he does not return as a teacher standing in the city, declaring his authority. He does not return as a preacher in a pulpit. Instead, he is silent. His eyes are clouded and the eloquent words are gone from his lips. But the poem warns us that not every silence is a holy silence. Some silences are a cloak against the world. Some silences mean despair, and some mean hope. "Be careful Job / which of these silences / is your silence."

Maybe your faith feels so fragile that you can only speak of it in the softest of whispers. Maybe it feels like it has been one hundred and forty years since you last heard God speak your name. Perhaps suffering and pain have left you with a quiet calm. Does your calm mean despair or hope? Which of these silences is your silence?

I started this sermon by saying that one way of looking at this last chapter of Job is to say that it is too good to be true. Fortunes regained, family lineage restored, friendships renewed. I see it another way. The Job that returns from his encounter with the Lord is blessed and accepted, but he still wrestles with the pains of the world and the hauntings of memory. I suppose, for me, the story of Job's return is too true to be good. Sickness and death swarm the ones we love, and even the richest of riches or the friendliest of friends sometimes cannot save us from the pain of loss. Children die, and children are born. Grief and joy remain. Job lives to see children upon children – four generations. For a heart in pain, it sounds too true to be good.

Or maybe it is this: a different kind of good. At the center of the Christian faith is another event that seems too true to be good – the death of the savior on a cross. At the center of the faith is one who felt abandoned and alone. One who said, desperately, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Strangely, Christians have called this day good, not because it *feels* good, or because the anguish of suffering is good, but because God is capable of redeeming even something as true as *this*. And so it is called Good Friday.

What, then, should we pray – we who are like Job? Perhaps this. Do not keep us from your truth, Lord. Do not keep us from your goodness. In the places where you want us to live with reckless abandon, give us courage, and fill our hopeful hearts with your Spirit. When we feel like Job – when we have lost everything, screamed into the whirlwind, and returned to the land of the living – keep your name on our lips, even if it is only a whisper. Lord, Lord. Amen.