

**FACING STORMY WEATHER**  
**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan**  
Stanford Memorial Church  
June 22, 2003

The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. So Jesus told his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>i</sup> Why do bad things happen to good people? Why be good if it doesn't seem to make any difference? Why throw down your fishing nets to follow this great teacher and miracle-worker named Jesus, only to die in a raging storm in the lake with him on board? What's the point? Well, in this case it seems Jesus is able to effect a miracle; he calms the wind and the seas, and you live. But later he's not able to save himself from crucifixion at the hands of the Romans. He cries out on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And later most of the apostles from that boat trip on the Sea of Galilee are martyred themselves by crucifixion.

How are we to face stormy weather in our lives? How do we find the strength to do so? What can sustain us, especially when we actually seem to be suffering at the very hands of God, or at least with God seeming to look the other way? ("Why have you forsaken me?" beseeches Jesus, or "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" ask Jesus' disciples).

Here's where I've consistently found the book of Job to be the most powerful and the most helpful resource in the Bible. Let's go back over Job's story, which culminates in the whirlwind scene which Karen Snow read to you earlier.<sup>ii</sup> It's a fascinating and very enlightening tale -- but not at all like the one I learned in Sunday School.

The background of Job's suffering is really quite outrageous, even shocking. The book begins with these words: "There once was 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."<sup>iii</sup> So, it's made crystal clear to us from the start that this is a just man, a good man, a holy man. No hidden flaws, Achilles heels, or normal mix of virtue and vice here. He also happens to have a wife and 10 children, all of whom he appears to love very much.<sup>iv</sup> And he's very rich: "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."<sup>v</sup> Bill Gates and a Saudi prince all rolled into one.

Now it happens that Satan and God are having one of their periodic conversations up in Heaven,<sup>vi</sup> and God says to Satan: "Where have you come from [now]?" And Satan answers, "[Oh,] from going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." God then boasts, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless

and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil." Satan cleverly responds: "Does Job fear God for nothing? Haven't you put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You've blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he'll curse you to your face." So God, astoundingly, takes the bait and sends Satan off to do evil, "Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!"

Job soon learns that all of his children have died, along with all of his servants and all of his animals. Only he and his wife remain. How does Job respond? Just as they taught me in Sunday School: "Job...fell on the ground and worshipped. He said, '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.' In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong-doing."

The next time God and Satan are having a heavenly conversation,<sup>vii</sup> God boasts a second time: "Job still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason." Yet Satan responds, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." God agrees to the next test. (Can you believe it? What is he doing wagering with Satan?): "Very well, [God says,] he is in your power; only spare his life." This time Satan inflicts "loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head." Job then takes a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself and sits among the ashes. His wife comes and says to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." But Job responds, in good Sunday School style, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?" And as the Bible explains, "In all this Job did not sin with his lips."

Job has three friends who then come to console and comfort him, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. They weep, and as text puts it, "They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great."

Well, that's as far as we ever read in Sunday School -- to the end of Chapter 2. The moral was that of the long-suffering Job, who didn't complain or criticize God in any way. It was presented as a lesson of ultimate faith in God, even though we, the readers, know that God is 100% to blame for his suffering, and for the astounding reason of making a destructive and inhumane bet with Satan. Actually, I stand corrected on only reading through Chapter 2. In Sunday School we also read the account at the very end of the book, in Chapter 42, where God restores the fortunes of Job, giving him twice as much wealth as he had before. His sores are cured too, and he gets 10 new children. The book ends this way: "After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and he saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days."

But there are 39 remarkably provocative chapters in between that my Sunday School teachers

never told me about. Structurally, it turns out that those chapters are in poetic form -- in fact the longest ancient Hebrew poem that has survived and perhaps that was ever written.<sup>viii</sup> Chapters 1 and 2 and 42 are in prose form, and are probably a later addition to the original Hebrew poem, by a different author.<sup>ix</sup>

Here's the rather different way the poetic section begins in Chapter 3: "After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. Job said, "Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, 'A man-child is conceived.' Let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, or light shine on it... Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? Why were their knees to receive me, or breasts for me to suck?"<sup>x</sup> Before too long Job begins directly criticizing God: "Why is light given to one who cannot see the way, whom God has fenced in?"<sup>xi</sup>

His friends can't stand being quiet any longer, and they begin giving him traditional reasons why someone could suffer like this: First, since God surely couldn't be responsible for his suffering, Job must have done something wrong to deserve all this. Secondly, Job is certainly condemned out of his own mouth for speaking out against God, and he must make humble supplication to God now if he ever expects any relief. Thirdly, suffering will do him good and make him a better person in the end. Fourthly, God's ways are mysterious, but it's likely that it'll all be cleared up and make sense someday.<sup>xii</sup> And there's ultimately even more in this vein from the so-called comforters.

But Job will have none of it, and he becomes increasingly angry with his friends and shrill and confrontational with God: "The arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me... My companions are treacherous like a torrent-bed... Therefore I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul... Will you not look away from me [O God] for a while, let me alone until I swallow my spittle?... "<sup>xiii</sup>

Then Job begins framing his situation as a matter of justice and asking for his day in court: "Though I am innocent... if I summoned God and he answered me, I don't believe that he would listen to my voice... He's not a mortal, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together. There is no umpire between us, who might lay his hand on us both... [O God,] You know that I'm not guilty, and there is no one to deliver me out of your hand."<sup>xiv</sup>

Job's cursing and criticizing and complaining, his legal defense of himself, his challenge to God's justice, and his angry exchange with his pious friends goes on and on and on for 39 chapters -- powerfully and poetically, beautifully and bravely. And then finally God answers him in the 38th chapter. But deeply disappointingly, God doesn't directly respond to any of the questions that Job has posed. Instead God simply demonstrates awesome power: "Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: Who is this that darkens counsel by words without

knowledge? Gird up you loins like a man. I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding... Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb -- when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it."<sup>xv</sup>

God goes on for two chapters along these lines, and then concludes with these words: "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond."<sup>xvi</sup> So Job does respond. How would you respond in the face of the power of a divine whirlwind? Job simply says, "See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no longer." Shouldn't that be enough for the Almighty and Everlasting, looking down upon a puny, finite human being? No. God winds up again and bellows from the whirlwind: "Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you declare to me. Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me, that you may be justified? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?"

Two more chapters go on this way. Now what's Job to say? What would you say? Here's Job's response: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted... Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

So, how satisfactory is all this? Does it help in any way with my initial concerns about why bad things happen to good people and why we should be good if it doesn't seem to make any difference? Many commentators down through the centuries, including, relatively recently, Carl Jung in his Answer to Job and Archibald McLeish in his J.B., have tried to make sense out of this story. Let it be said that my Sunday School teachers, lauding the long-suffering, never complaining Job, really missed the mark.

Here's my current take on the book of Job. First of all, the poetic section is a fantastic expression of everything any and all of us have ever felt when we've been mistreated by life, unjustly punished by the forces-that-be, or hurt by a so-called "Act of God" like an earthquake or a hurricane. Job's words are gutsy, in your face, and no holds barred. It's comforting having something like that in the Bible, for me, because it expresses deep human feelings so eloquently. Secondly, I take very seriously what God says to Eliphaz in the last chapter: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has."<sup>xvii</sup> I hear that as God saying, "Of course Job was right to engage me so personally, so emotionally, so humanly, in real relationship. You and your friends have been throwing around pious platitudes that were in no way comforting or helpful to Job and were outright lies about me. I was in fact responsible for his suffering. Suffering is an inherent part of life, of being human, in case you hadn't noticed. He's not condemned out of his own mouth by

challenging me; I expect it in situations like this, and I can take it. Suffering doesn't always do people good and make them better in the end; imagine saying that to survivors of the Holocaust. And yes, my ways are mysterious, but it's not likely that it will all be cleared up some day. In fact, it's impossible to understand the ways of the Almighty and the Everlasting from the perspective of the partial and the transitory of human existence.

God then tells Eliphaz: "Now take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done."<sup>xviii</sup>

The bottom line lesson of Job for me lies in the importance of honest, genuine, engaged relationships -- with God and with one's friends. The best thing Job's friends ever did for him was to cry with him, and then to sit with him in silence for seven days, understanding that his suffering was very great. Once they opened their mouths with their traditional explanations and then became defensive when Job disagreed, they lost their usefulness as friends and simply began furthering their own egos and transposing their own fears. And God seems to be saying, by the end, that it's all right to have real dialogue with God, especially when one is suffering deeply. In fact, that's when the dialogue should be the most profound.

It's an unequal relationship, to be sure, between the Creator of the Universe and one of God's human creations. Yet, it can be a deep and sustaining relationship, which with Jesus is clearly framed in terms of love. Jesus loves his disciples, even as they're afraid in the face of the storms of life, even as they doubt his steadfastness, even as they temporarily abandon him in his own times of need. Ultimately, God becomes a mighty fortress, who stands by our side and suffers with us amid the flood of mortal ills. Ultimately it's our job both to appreciate the infinite power and mystery of God, and also to strive to remain in faithful relationship with the most complex and complete friend we could ever have. AMEN.

## NOTES

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- i. Matthew 5:45.
  - ii. Job 38: 1-11.
  - iii. Job 1: 1.
  - iv. See Job 1: 2,5; 2: 9,10.
  - v. Job 1: 3.
  - vi. What follows in this paragraph and the next is from the first chapter of Job.
  - vii. See Job, Chapter 2.
  - viii. Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 511.
  - ix. Ibid.
  - x. Job 3: 1-4; 11-2.
  - xi. Job 3: 23.
  - xii. Peter Calvocoressi, Who's Who in the Bible (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 87.
  - xiii. Job 6:3; 7:11, 19.
  - xiv. Job 9: 15-16, 32-33; 10:7.
  - xv. Job 38: 1-4, 8-10.
  - xvi. Job 40: 1-2.
  - xvii. Job 42:7.
  - xviii. Job 42:8.