

## **A Miracle Occurs**

*B Pentecost 3--Job 38:1-11*

Today's Old Testament passage comes to us from Job, one of the great books of the Bible because of the way it rushes head-on at the central problem of religious faith: why do the innocent suffer? How can God be just when the world God has created is so clearly not? I suspect that for you, as for me, this is not an academic question. We look around the world, we think of the people we love who have suffered, we feel back through our own histories to the places that still make us wince, and we want to know why. Why cancer? Why freak accidents? Why random violence and drunk drivers and heart attacks and bad luck and trouble? Why the undeserving alongside the deserving?

Well, during the first thirty-eight chapters of this book, Job takes up this very line of questioning. Every kind of evil has befallen him: he has lost all his land, animals, and wealth; his children have been killed; and his skin has been covered with sores. Job's friends, who've come to "comfort" him, try to convince him to repent of whatever he obviously did to deserve this punishment, but Job insists, as does the narration of the book, that he is a "blameless and upright man" (1:1, 2:3). In fact, it becomes clear that whoever invented the phrase "the patience of Job" didn't spend much time reading the book with his name on it, because Job wails and fumes and rants at God. He's so mad he wants to put God on trial for his situation. He wants to make God answerable for mocking "the calamity of the innocent" and for giving the "earth...into the hand of the wicked" and covering "the eyes of its judges" (9:23-24).

Finally, after thirty-eight chapters of Job and his friends arguing with each other, God addresses Job directly. At last, we think, we will get an answer. But all God utters

is a long and poetically rich version of the question: "Who do you think you are?"

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth," God says in today's segment of this response, and God goes on to describe the awe and beauty of creation, the dawn and the rain and the beasts and great monsters of land and sea, all of which sprang into being under God's hand and obey God's bidding. That's all God says. That's it. And yet--and here's the mystery of the thing--somehow, miraculously, Job is satisfied.

What is going on here? How could this divine smack-down possibly satisfy Job's hunger for fairness? Job has issued God an ultimatum: "Either restore my life, explain yourself, or stop pretending to be a God of justice." God responds, "You're just a fleck in the vastness of my universe. You don't get to issue ultimatums." And Job's like, "Oh, now I get it. Thanks." Huh? It reminds me of this pretty famous cartoon by Sidney Harris you may have seen. It features two scientists standing in front of a blackboard with a huge equation on it, and right in the middle of all these fancy numbers and symbols appear the words, "then a miracle occurs." The one scientist is saying to the other, "I think you should be more explicit here in step two."<sup>i</sup> That's what I want to say to the author of Job about the miracle of his transformation: "I think you should be more explicit here in step two."

What does this story mean? How can it help us to answer, or at least live with, our own rage and bewilderment at a supposedly loving God whose world is so messed up? Well, one point in this story's favor is what it does not do. The story does not condone the easy answers. The story adamantly opposes Job's friends and their cheap insistence that Job's misfortunes are a punishment. The story insists that the station in life into which chance thrusts us, and the good or bad luck we encounter, are *not* signs

either of our sinfulness or of God's will. And when you think of all the ways we are tempted to believe otherwise, to equate poverty with shame and survival with fitness, bad luck with laziness and success with manifest destiny, then this refusal to endorse such a belief itself is a powerful affirmation. Luck and divine favor are *not* one and the same.

But what about the answer which the story does provide? How do we pierce the mystery of its effect on Job for ourselves? Well, I don't know. But maybe the satisfaction Job finds in God's answer has less to do with the answer itself than with the experience of God which seems to accompany it. Job suggests as much in his response to God, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you." In other words, Job has had an epiphany: an indirect knowledge of God has been replaced by a direct experience of God. "Therefore," Job goes on to say, "I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Only an ambiguity in the Hebrew could render it, "therefore I *recant* and am *consoled* about *being made of* dust and ashes." So Job has not received a justification for the way of the world. Job has received a vision of his own finiteness in a visitation of the Infinite, and this experience has, in some mysterious way, consoled him.

Well, if this response to the problem of suffering fails to bring us a similar consolation, than at least it directs us to where we might find it: not in the pages of this or any other book, but in experience itself, in the physical flesh-and-blood world of suffering and inequity that buffets the righteous and the unrighteous alike. In one of his memoirs, the writer Frederick Buechner describes his own Job-like struggle to come to terms with his father's suicide when Buechner was ten years old. Over a lifetime, he struggles with this tragedy. And finally the healing he does find convinces him of God's presence in the events of the world, "not as their cause, but as the one who even in the

hardest and most hair-raising of them offers us the possibility of that new life and healing which I believe is what salvation is." A little later, he adds, "Even the saddest things can become, once we have made peace with them, a source of wisdom and strength for the journey that still lies ahead"<sup>ii</sup>

So, the Bible advises us, go ahead and be like Job. Rant and rage and cry to God over the tragedies that make no sense. This is no blasphemy. God is in them somewhere and though the answers God offers may not be the ones we seek, still, God can help us to make our peace with them. God can bring us healing and consolation. And this itself is a miracle.

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<sup>i</sup> This cartoon may be viewed at <http://www.sciencecartoonsplus.com/pages/gallery.php>, which I accessed on 6/19/09.

<sup>ii</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets*, New York: HarperCollins, 1991, pg 31 and 33.