

## Introduction

Welcome to the Book of Job. (Job, the name, is pronounced with a long 'o', as though you are saying the name of the letter 'o'.) This story is not an historical account. It is understood that there was not a specific person named Job who confronted all the challenges in this story. Rather, this book is a tool for exploring why bad things happen to good people and the implications for our relationships to one another and with God. A significant portion of the text is in poetic form, and it is the longest ancient Hebrew poem that has survived. Some ponder whether it is the longest ever written.

*Karma* – the understanding that actions have consequences. If people do bad things, bad things will happen to them. Fundamentally, this is retributive justice. This is generally the preference for human beings. We like the idea that those who hurt us will suffer consequences for their actions. As the story of Job tries to convey, however, God's justice is not the same as human justice. God's purposes are not the same as human purposes.

*Martyrdom* – beginning with Stephen, the Christian church has included a list of individuals who made the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of faith in Jesus Christ. These individuals did not blame God for this, rather, they saw this as an act of service to God, a proclamation of faith. Some even connect the role of martyrs to the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and his lament followed by his conviction – your word not mine. In the same way, Job can be read as a servant of God, embracing the sacrifices and struggles he faces as a tool for revealing his own faith and trust in God.

Between the two extremes of karma and martyrdom, there lies another possibility. Sometimes bad things happen. Sometimes these happenings are beyond our control. In other words, it may not be about the person suffering. This doesn't make it any less of an opportunity for us to seek God.

As you read through the texts in the Book of Job that will be used in worship this fall, consider how the text highlights these differing approaches to understanding the nature of suffering. How might these perspectives offer us a way to understand the challenges we face? What does this text invite us to contemplate regarding the suffering of others? What else might we learn from this story?

Don't forget, if you have any questions, thoughts, or surprises you would like to direct to me, you may always do so via email: [rev.chrisbc@gmail.com](mailto:rev.chrisbc@gmail.com), messenger (for those on Facebook), or text (519-965-7086). May this journey through the Book of Job be meaningful for all who engage with it.

## Reading & Reflection #1

Read: Job 1:1, 2:1-10

Notes:

- *It is important to the story that Job is portrayed as a blameless, righteous, God-fearing man who makes every effort to avoid evil. He is wealthy, loves his family, and is devout in the practice of his faith. In other words, Job is a worthy hero of the story, perhaps someone we can all relate to or at least aspire to.*

- *God is depicted as a kind of Monarch receiving word from appointed beings. Among them is 'Satan' not to be confused with the Devil. Rather, Satan is identified as an Advocate who wants to make a point that it is easy for humans to be blameless, righteous, God-fearing people who make every effort to avoid evil when these individuals enjoy the benefits of that behaviour.*
- *The challenge starts with Job losing his possessions and his children (note: inheritance is extremely important. Rules around marriage in the Bible provide protection for inheritance and the legacy of men. The death of Job's children kills his legacy.) Job is left with no financial benefits for his faithfulness.*
- *When this loss doesn't change Job's attitude, the advocate asks that he lose his health. He ends up with horrid, painful sores that would be visible to anyone. Based on the practices of the time, he would be required to set himself apart so as not to contaminate anyone else. In his ailment, he also became an outcast – on the ash heap or garbage dump of life.*
- *Job's wife – who has also suffered the first losses, tells Job his fidelity to God means nothing as God is clearly Job's enemy. Still Job persists in his faith.*

#### Reflection:

- *Alopecia is a genetic condition in which the person has little to no hair on their body. Bald women with alopecia, are often assumed to have cancer undermining the willingness of some to hire them. Others might question whether the individual is a skin head. The condition sets them apart from others for no fault of their own. Similar attitudes and behaviours are directed towards those with disfiguring ailments, people with HIV, cancer, and/or mental health issues, transgender individuals, those suffering from addictions and more. How many people are pushed aside in this world because they do not conform to a particular social ideal?*
- *What experiences do you have of being pushed aside for reasons you couldn't control? How might this create a sense of empathy for others the world pushes aside? How might we feel inclined to respond as Job's wife did pondering why God would allow bad things to happen to those we love/bad things to happen to us?*
- *To what extent might this passage be read from a social justice perspective – that ideal where all people are seen as created in the image and likeness of God, all people are siblings to Jesus and deserve support, all people are neighbours to be loved?*

#### Reading & Reflection #2

Read: Job 23:1-9, 16-17

#### Notes:

- *Prior to this moment, Job's friend, Eliphaz, emphasises the assumption that calamity has befallen Job because he has sinned. This understanding of a direct relationship between sin and suffering is common to Christianity as well. There is something comforting in the expectation that those who do bad things will be faced with negative consequences for their actions. This is retributive justice.*
- *Job maintains his innocence. He is resolute in claiming that he has done nothing to deserve the consequences he is facing. This undermines the religious expectation that sin leads to bad things.*

- *In response to his friend and his circumstances, Job asks a question many have asked – where is God when I am hurting? Job wants to know God's presence, not solely to experience the comfort of God's love, rather, he wants an audience to justify his own innocence.*

Reflection:

- *To what extent have we experienced consequences, bad things, that we felt we did not deserve? How do we make meaning of these moments for ourselves?*
- *Have we observed others facing consequences and wondered what they did to deserve their circumstances? What did someone who lives in poverty do to deserve the precariousness of their situation? How are situations distorted to blame the victim say because she wore suggestive clothing, she is a prostitute, or she was drunk? To what extent are social prejudices used to justify behaviours towards groups including assuming those with a particular background are naturally criminals, addicts, or lazy? In what other circumstances have we acted as though it is right and fair to justify harm done to another because of something we believe about them? How does this fit with the justice God proclaims in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?*
- *Job offers a powerful lament as he longs to encounter God during his struggles. To what extent do Job's words resonate with us when we experience significant struggles? Have we had moments when we want to cry out and say the equivalent to: If I go forward, God is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive God; on the left God hides, and I cannot behold God; I turn to the right, but I cannot see God? What does it take for us to encounter God in times of hardship?*

### Reading & Reflection #3

Read: Job 38:1-7, 34-41

Notes:

- *Job has suffered. His friends have insisted that he has done something to deserve this suffering using their faith as a tool to charge him and try to compel him to repent and conform. The assumption is that by doing so, he will return to God's grace.*
- *Job has suffered but has remained faithful. The juxtaposition of Job's insistence that his suffering is not a consequence of his behaviour and the reality of that suffering remain unresolved within the human dialogue.*
- *God's voice is then heard. Notice that God doesn't speak directly to the problem of suffering. Rather, the message is that God is far more than one who punishes. God is a creator, a caregiver, and a provider. God's relationship to humanity and creation far exceeds the narrow perspective that has been presented by Job's friends based solely on the expectation that God punishes people for their sins.*

Reflection:

- *To what extent do you believe there is a relationship between suffering and sin? How has this impacted your understanding of those times when you have suffered? How has this understanding impacted your relationship to others when they are suffering? Have you ever*

*tried, as Job's friends did, to convince someone else to repent and return to a right relationship with God to alleviate suffering? What happened?*

- *How do you feel recognising that this text doesn't actually provide a concrete answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people? Is this frustrating or grace-filled? What meaning do you make from the reality that sometimes bad things happen to good people?*
- *This text is a beautiful poem about God's role and presence in life-giving Creation and beyond. How does this language fit with your understanding of God as Creator? What is different from your understanding? To what extent does this poetry challenge you to engage your imagination and see God in a new and meaningful way? How does this invitation invite you to reflect on your relationship with creation in a new way?*

## **Reading & Reflection #4**

Read: Job 42:1-6, 10-17

Notes:

- *As the book comes to a close, Job, who longed to come face to face with God, realises that prayer has been answered in a powerful way. He is humbled and laments his lamenting.*
- *Recognising the strength of Job's faith, God restores his fortunes and then some. In response, notice that Job is generous not only to his sons (as would have been the tradition), he also gives his daughters an inheritance. They are blessed in a radical way because their father is a man who understands blessings.*

Reflection:

- *In your experience, what does an encounter with God look like? To what extent have you had these types of experiences? How have you responded?*
- *Why do you think Job's response is humility towards God? Is this a response of fear of further calamity? Is it a response of hope, that God will restore him? Is it an honest response of recognising that humans beings, when faced with God, still have much to learn? Or is it something entirely different from any of these? How are each of these possibilities different?*
- *Notice that Job responds to blessing by blessing others, including those not often included by Jewish law (namely his daughters). How have our experiences of being blessed led to our desire to bless others? To what extent has this included blessing those who are outside social norms for such benefits? What does it mean for us to respect the dignity of every human being by blessing all people regardless of social norms?*
- *What do you take away from this journey through Job? What more would you like to learn about Job? In light of the story of Job, what might you say about the problem of bad things happening to good people? How do you view your own suffering and the suffering of others differently because of this journey?*