Why We Suffer (Part 3)
Job 1:7-17; Romans 5:1-5
Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer of Illumination: *God of wisdom, open your Word to us today, and open our hearts to receive it. May your Spirit speak truth to your church and nourish us with strength and faith.* Amen.

Today, we resume our mini-sermon series on why we suffer—*theodicy*, literally the problem of God's justice, stated as follows: *If God is all-powerful and all-loving, why is there so much suffering in the world*?

In the last two sermons, we examined some answers to why there is suffering: suffering is a consequence of free will; suffering is a punishment for sin; suffering is caused by cosmic evil forces, and suffering is ultimately redemptive—something good can come out of it. We concluded that none of these answers is satisfactory. In our sermon today, we turn to the book of Job. How does it explain suffering—or does it at all?

The Book of Job has long been considered one of the great classics of world literature. Its appeal endures because it speaks to a universal truth—**the struggle of the innocent sufferer.** We all bear witness to suffering that seems undeserved or inexplicable. And often, it doesn't make sense. In Job, we recognize ourselves—a righteous person beset by loss and anxiety, yet still wrestling with God, still yearning for meaning in the midst of mystery.

According to biblical scholars, sometime during the exile—or perhaps within a century after the first return to the land—a wise teacher is believed to have compiled the Book of Job. The author or authors wrote to counter the rigid moralism that had turned wisdom into hollow sayings and neat formulas about life's issues, especially the problem of suffering. Job is a daring and unsettling work, a provocative tour de force, if you will, one that we can't just ignore.[1]

But those who search in the book for a neat explanation of innocent suffering will not find one—because none was intended. The writer's purpose was not to explain suffering, but to name it honestly. He dared to

[1]Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 575.

say that innocent suffering is real—something the dogmas and conventional wisdom of his time could not allow.

By “innocent,” he does not mean “sinless.” It means that suffering often comes to us without a clear reason or cause. Meaning may arise in time—or it may not. However, our calling, as people of faith, is to resist the easy answers and avoid the worn-out, pat explanations for why people suffer.

As I’ve said before, my goal isn’t to offer easy answers—because there are none. Instead, I hope to wrestle with you over this timeless question—one that touches all of us.

The Book of Job, however, is not an easy read. In fact, many people misunderstand it or are unsure of how to interpret it. When most people think of Job, they picture a man who quietly endures suffering without complaint. *The patience of Job* is often used to describe someone who can endure anything life throws at them without complaint.

But that’s only part of the story. The “patience of Job” has become such a cliché that it obscures the complexity of this man. Yes, at first, Job seems like the model of patience—faithful, accepting disaster without protest. But before long, we meet another side of him: Job the challenger. Job the rebel. Job the blasphemer, as his friends accuse him of, for questioning God’s ways and justice. We will address that further in the poetry section of the book next Sunday. Meanwhile, how did it happen that there are two different versions of Job—the *patient believer* and the *bold challenger*?

The key lies in how the book was written. The Book of Job, as we have it today, is the work of at least two authors, each with a different understanding of why people suffer.[2] The book comprises two main sections, written in two very different genres.

The first section is a folktale written in **prose**. The writer draws on an old, well-known story about a righteous man who greatly blessed his community and endured deep suffering with patience. This is the prologue, chapters 1 and 2, and the epilogue, chapter 42:7-17. This section speaks highly of Job and criticizes his friends. It tells us that God rewarded Job for his

[2] Bart D. Ehrman, *God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer* (New York: NY, HarperCollins, 2008), 162.

faithfulness and loyalty despite his great suffering. This is the Job we often hear about—the *patient Job*, as it were.

But the long middle section, the **dialogues**—chapters 3 through 41 and the first six verses of chapter 42—written in **poetry—**is much more complex. Here we find a different Job. In the poems, Job argues, protests, and questions. Here Job debates with his friends, who defend God and accuse him of sin. Then, at the end of this section, God speaks out of the whirlwind, challenging Job's understanding and humbling him into recognizing the limits of human knowledge (Job 38-41:6).

Most readers never get this far—understandably so, because the poetry is long and difficult. And that's why many people only know the first Job—the patient sufferer—not the second Job, the *bold questioner*.

The prose story in chapters 1–2 and 42 likely came first—an old folktale about a good and faithful man whom God allowed to be tested. Later, another writer expanded it into a deeper reflection on human suffering and divine justice. Still later, a third writer added Elihu's speeches in chapters 36–38 to prepare the way for God's final word.[3]

So, two different views of suffering in the book of Job, and to understand the book, we must hold both together—the Job who suffers faithfully, and the Job who dares to ask *why.*

Let's now dive into the prose section.

"There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright." That's how the Bible introduces one of its most unforgettable characters and how the prose section begins.

At the outset, we're told that Job is innocent. God also says it so, saying Job is *blameless and upright* (1:8). It's important to establish Job's innocence because his friends say otherwise in the poetry section. And one of the most challenging questions in the problem of suffering is Why do good people or the innocent suffer as Rabbi Harold Kushner asks in his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

[3] Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 482.

The prologue describes Job as a pious and very wealthy man. He has thousands of sheep and cattle, hundreds of donkeys and oxen, and many servants. He's been blessed, as we would say today. In addition, he has ten children: seven sons and three daughters—again a sign of blessing.

In the next scene, we're transported into the heavenly realms. God is having a meeting with members of God's heavenly court, a common image in the Old Testament describing how God runs the world. One of God's cabinet members, if you will, is *ha-satan* in Hebrew. Unfortunately, some Bibles, including the NRSV, the ones we're using in our pews, have translated the Hebrew word as "Satan." And so we get the idea of the devil. But the word *ha-satan* is not a proper name but a common noun as indicated by the definite article, *ha*, and it means "accuser" or "adversary."[4] It's a title or a position. The *ha-satan* is not Satan (capital S) as we understand it to be. He is a part of God's heavenly court, a divine being. His job is to seek out and accuse persons disloyal to God, a role that combines the functions of a spy and a prosecuting attorney, if you will (cf. Zechariah 3:1).[5]

By the way, there is an updated version of the NRSV (NRSVUE 2021). It now translates *ha-satan* as "accuser," which is more accurate to the Hebrew text and the historical context.

In our passage (Job 1:6-7), he responds to God, who inquires what he has been doing. He says he's been roaming the earth, presumably trying to find out who is being disloyal to God. God said to the accuser, "Have you considered my servant Job?" And God brags about Job as a truly righteous man. The accuser challenges God, claiming that Job is loyal to God only because God rewards Job for his piety. Let Job suffer, then let's see if he remains obedient and righteous. So, here the *ha-satan* acts as a kind of "devil's advocate," as it were, challenging conventional wisdom to make a point. And God allows the accuser to inflict bad things on Job. What happens next is that Job loses everything: his possessions, his servants, and his children. Still, Job refuses to blame God. He says, "Naked I came

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[4] Carol A. Newsom, "The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Vol. IV, Leander E. Keck, et al, eds. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press,1996), 347.

[5] *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, revised edition, Harold W. Attridge, ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2006), 694

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" (1:21).

Then, in a second round of attack, the accuser destroys Job's health. Job suffers from terrible sores from head to toe. His wife urges him to curse God and die. Job responds, "We take the good days from God—why not also the bad days?" The narrator assures us that in all this, Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing (Job 1:22).

At this point in the story, we, the readers, wonder why God allows Job, who is innocent, to suffer. And then we assume that God will answer the question of why good people suffer. But God doesn't. In fact, nowhere in the book does God answer.

However, the message of the prologue is clear: *sometimes the innocent suffer as a test of whether their devotion to God is genuine.* Will people remain faithful no matter what happens? For the writer of this part of Job, God is worthy of praise even in the worst of times.[6]

And yet, this story raises a hard question: Is God right to let Job suffer when he's done nothing wrong? His suffering comes for no reason except to prove to the accuser that he would stay faithful no matter what. Remember, Job is innocent, as God acknowledges. God allows Job to suffer. For what? To win a bet with the accuser? But is God just in doing so? That's the issue, for as Bible scholar Bart Ehrman points out, this picture shows God standing above human standards. Ehrman further observes that if anyone else destroyed your property, took your children's lives, and struck you with disease—to make a point—we would call that cruel and unjust.[7]

We might also ask: Is God beyond justice—free to do whatever God chooses? But if that's true, does it make God seem arbitrary or unfair? How do we make sense of a God like that?

And here, let's pause for your questions or comments.

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[6] Bart Ehrman, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer* (HarperCollins, 2008), 167.
[7] Ibid., 168.