

March 6, 2011

Job 19: 2-27b

Matthew 17: 1-9

“The Ultimate Friend”

In our Grand Sweep of reading through the Bible in a year, we have swept through the book of Job over the past two weeks. This book probes the depths of faith in the midst of suffering. Bible scholars suggest that an ancient tale of a patient Job was circulated orally perhaps more than a thousand years before Christ’s birth. Then the story was written down in Hebrew, possibly at the time of David and Solomon. More detailed poetic discourses of Job and his friends were woven into the story, which has endured as Holy Scripture to this very day.

The story opens with a description of Job. Everything seems to be going his way. He is “blameless and upright” (1:1). He is wealthy, healthy, whole and socially responsible. He gets up early every morning to offer sacrifices on behalf of his children, to atone for their possible crimes of secret misbehavior.

Job’s sons each keep their own house in a regal manner. Their brotherly harmony is unusual for the time: they regularly gather for family banquets. They even invite their sisters, which was not customary in the ancient Near East.

The story now jumps to a “behind the scenes” view of God. He is depicted as a king presiding at a heavenly court. The NRSV Bible describes “heavenly beings” there with God. The actual words in Hebrew are “the sons of God”. These were divine beings who shared in God’s nature in some way. They came before their father and ruler at regular intervals—as occurred in the royal courts of this Scripture’s place and time. Then, we are told, Satan comes before God as well.

The Biblical Hebrew here includes the article “the”. The reading tells us THE Satan came before God. At this point in Scripture there is no character called Satan as we understand that term today. Many footnotes will indicate that the best translation from the Hebrew might be “the Accuser” or “the Adversary”. Satan, here, is something like a Prosecutor in God’s heavenly court.

God is interested in what he observes on the earth, and very proud and excited about the man Job, about his faith and devotion. The Adversary then raises his sly question: WHY is the man so devoted to God? Is it only because he is so blessed and prosperous? What would Job be like if he had to endure suffering? At this point the Adversary is allowed to invade Job's perfect world.

Job loses his wealth. Then his seven sons and daughters die. Still, Job in his grief says, "Blessed be the name of the Lord." (1:21) Next he is afflicted with a disfiguring, grotesque and painful disease. He ends up sitting on a pile of rubble (is that perhaps all that is left to him?- or has he selected the pile of rubble as the perfect place for him to sit in his misery?) Job's wife is still alive, but that might not have been a blessing. She encourages Job to curse God and die. Job won't. Job KNOWS God is good. But he can't understand what is happening to him.

Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, hear of his misfortune and come to comfort him. Actually they're not bad friends at first. When they see him, they don't even recognize him. They cry and sob out loud. They tear their clothes and throw dust on their heads. Then they sit on the hard ground with Job in silence for seven days and seven nights, no one speaking a word.

Job finally opens his mouth- not to CURSE GOD, but to struggle with God. Job doesn't understand what God is doing. But he is very sure he has tried to live a life of integrity. Job understands that he is no match for God, but he still wants a way to make his point, to get God to explain what has happened to him.

After Job begins to speak, so do his friends, which pretty much moves them out of the "friend" category. There is a continuing dialogue between Job and his friends, with each friend speaking three times. I want you to try to imagine yourself in Job's place. You've lost everything you own. All your children have died. Your spouse is alive, but wants you to just lie down and die. And your friends tell you the things Job's friends said.

Eliphaz tells him:

-No mortal is righteous before God, so you should be humble with God, instead of accusing God!

-You are a heretic, ignoring your limitations: YOU aren't God, so stop complaining!

-Your goodness and your suffering don't really matter to God. (This is contrary to all Biblical thought- God is never portrayed as indifferent!)

Bildad tells him:

-God's blessings are a reward for purity and goodness; since you LOST his blessings, you obviously have sinned in some horrible way!

- Your words are ungodly, watch out because one day you'll have to face your Maker!

-Humans are just maggots, worms.

Zophar tells him:

-You deserve all your misery as a penalty for wrong-doing.

- Repeats this once more: You deserve all your misery as a penalty for wrong-doing.

-God's justice never fails; it may be delayed, but it prevails (implying you are likely now receiving punishment for earlier sins.)

With "friends" like these, who needs enemies? Job reflects and responds to all his friends say, at one point offering worldly skepticism, declaring that the wicked OFTEN appear to remain unpunished.

Then we find, in chapter 19, something amazing. Job struggles with the nightmare of his suffering, saying God has "set darkness" on his path, people have all abandoned him, he is repulsive, a horror even children despise.

But he suddenly says he has words he'd want to see written in a book, or, better yet, inscribed on a stone. What are these words?

***I know that my Redeemer lives
And that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
And after my skin has been destroyed,
Then in my flesh I shall see God,
Whom I shall see on my side,
And my eyes shall behold, and not another.***

Commentators wrestle with these words. The word Job uses in Hebrew is "go-el", which means "vindicator" or "kinsman redeemer". This was the

person, according to Jewish law, who could buy a person out of debt or slavery. The person was a near relative, and not only COULD do this, but was obligated to do it.

In J. Ellsworth Kalas' words, "Job believes he has such a Redeemer, and that 'at the last he will stand upon the earth'. When will that be? Job doesn't say; I think we can rightly judge that he doesn't know. But the 'when' doesn't matter to him; he knows it 'will be', and he is satisfied."

Scholars point out that the doctrine of resurrection of the dead wasn't believed at this time. But somehow, again in Kalas' words: "That doesn't prevent Job from reaching beyond the boundaries of his time... to take hold of something that would not be fully accessible until a morning centuries later in a garden outside Jerusalem where the bonds of death were finally, fully broken. ...Job, by God's grace, caught an early glimpse of an eternal fact."

This makes me think of our gospel reading. This is Transfiguration Sunday, the day we remember Peter, James and John going up on a high mountain with Jesus. And there, Jesus was changed somehow, he shone with light. The three disciples caught a glimpse of the Redeemer of the world, in his glory and power, as all our eyes shall behold him one day.

Job somehow knew this amazing Redeemer. Bombarded by the words of his "friends" he caught a glimpse of our Ultimate Friend, the one who will not only redeem us, but who comes to redeem all the world.

Near the end of Job's story God does come to Job. Job finds himself overmatched—much more than he expected. Yet Job is grateful for this direct encounter. God cares enough to come and reveal himself to Job. Job knows he is very tiny to God, but still important to God. He says, "I had heard about you, Lord, but now I SEE YOU."

Consider this contrast between belief through tradition, what one has been taught, and belief through personal relationship and encounter. As the Oxford Bible puts it, "...the upholder of the universe cares for a lonely man so deeply that he offers him the fullness of his communion....Job ...has obtained far more than a recognition of his innocence: he has been accepted by the ever-present master worker, and intimacy with the Creator makes vindication superfluous."

Oh, and at the end God says Job has “spoken of me, what is right”, NOT his friends. God is angry at the friends, and will not forgive them until they sacrifice to him, and not until JOB prays to God, asking God to forgive them. So Job does pray for them, and God accepts Job’s prayer, forgiving the friends for their faithless words.

Remember that, whenever you read the book of Job. God doesn’t like any of that stuff the friends say. And God DOES like what Job says. So—here we are told we MUST wrestle with God, we MUST fight and argue when we struggle as Job struggled. It’s through the wrestling that we encounter God’s presence and love. May God’s Spirit teach us and show us the way. Amen.