

The Book of Job, 1:  
**“God Believes In You”**  
Job 1:1-12  
Rev. Clark Lynn Callender, 1/6/07

About 40 years ago, there was a young author who was struggling to break into the literary world. For over a decade this writer had submitted countless short stories and articles for publication, but for over a decade they all had been rejected. The young writer was about to give up.

Then, one day, another rejection letter came, only this time, at the bottom of the letter was a small hand-written note. The note read simply, “Nice try.” Now, most of us would not rate such a comment very high on the encouragement list, but it literally brought tears to the young writer’s eyes. It gave him a spark of hope. So he decided to try his hand at writing just one more time. And thank goodness he did, for the young writer’s name was Alex Haley and his next book was Roots.

The lesson? Not only a reminder to us of the power of even the smallest word; but even more: A reminder that sometimes what we believe in ourselves is not as important as our knowing that SOMEONE BELIEVES IN US.

Knowing that SOMEONE BELIEVES IN US. This is something of what I would like to talk about this morning...

Today we begin a new sermon series (that will take us over the next handful of Sundays), a series in which we are going to look at one of the greatest characters in the entire Bible: We’re going to look at the story of JOB.

The book of Job is the account of a person who experiences overwhelming loss and hardship, and through the example of his struggles, the Biblical author seeks to explore the relationship of FAITH TO HUMAN SUFFERING and to provide us (the reader) with help in our times of just such pain and adversity. The basic story (as begun in our introductory Scripture reading this morning) is this:

Job was a good and righteous man whom God blessed abundantly. God blessed him with seven sons and three daughters, a total of ten children, the number which signaled completeness. Likewise, God blessed Job with seven thousand sheep and three thousand camels, again seven plus three, giving us the number of perfection. Furthermore, God blessed Job with five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys which again adds up to the perfect number. In other words, the writer of Job wants to make it perfectly clear, right at the outset, that Job was especially blessed. Indeed we are told that Job was the greatest of all the people of the east. His was the home that was on the cover of all the magazines, he was the investor everybody watched!

He was so wealthy that each of his sons had an establishment of his own, and they held a family feast each day with the sons taking turns serving as hosts. This too is another sign of blessing for Job. There was harmony in his family. I mean, his children even all got along with each other - imagine that!

As if this wasn’t enough: He was a great person. The biblical text then underscores the fact that Job was just as righteous as he was rich and just as virtuous as he was great. In

gaining material blessings he did not compromise his soul - he performed constant worship sacrifices to the Lord. In fact, Job was so good and righteous that he had the distinction of having God brag on him! And herein (unfortunately for Job!), starts the drama...

One day, God is up in heaven, talking with the angels and so forth, when along comes Satan. God brings up the subject of Job: "Hey, Satan," he says, "have you noticed my good buddy, Job? He's such a great guy - virtuous, righteous!" God draws attention to Job. Satan, of course, can't stand a good person - particularly he can't stand to see God pleased! - so he looks for a way to turn this around, a way to undo God's joy. He asks a question - and it's one of the great questions of the Bible, he says, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" That is, "Yeah, God, I know Job. And I know he's a really good person. But do you think he's good for NO REASON? C'mon, he's only good because you've blessed him for it!"

Satan doesn't debate Job's apparent goodness; he simply questions Job's MOTIVE, he questions WHY Job is GOOD. Everybody's got an "angle"! "Does Job fear God for nothing?" One of the great questions in the Bible and a CENTRAL QUESTION OF THE LIFE OF FAITH, essentially: WHY ARE YOU GOOD? What do you come here? Why do you worship and pray and try to be honest and caring and loving... why? And most particularly, what if nothing good came of it, what if YOU GOT NOTHING FOR IT, what if you actually only SUFFERED for it - would you still do it? A central life question we each must be continually asking, and a key UNDERCURRENT to this whole story...

Well Satan thinks he knows the answer. Satan believes the worst of Job and so decides to put a challenge before the Lord to prove his point, he says: "I tell you what, God. How about you put your money where your mouth is? I'll bet you that if you take away all Job's blessings he will TURN ON YOU so fast it will make your head spin - he will CURSE YOU to your face!" It's an ingenious wager for it puts God in a seemingly NO-WIN situation: If God says, "No, leave Job alone"; well then maybe he doesn't TRUST in Job's goodness quite as much as he just said he did. On the other hand, if God says, "Yes, do bad things to him"; well then God comes off as an uncaring, manipulative, monster!

A seemingly no-win situation. Of course, God initiated this encounter so it's safe to assume he had some idea where it would head - or where he wants it to head, the point he hopes to make. And in this, notice which choice God makes: God chooses to AFFIRM his TRUST IN JOB at the COST of his OWN REPUTATION!

It makes NO SENSE! The LOGICAL choice for God to make is to defend his OWN HONOR - to not allow suffering or injustice, to not trust in one mere human being}. But in a dramatic turn of events, God does exactly this - God demonstrates complete FAITH IN JOB at the EXPENSE of HIS OWN REPUTATION! God, in effect, announces for all to hear, "I BELIEVE IN JOB! I BELIEVE IN HIM!", and with this the whole drama bursts into motion: In the verses immediately following our text, Satan quickly sets about putting the challenge into motion: taking away all Job's blessings - property, children, health - plunging him into profound suffering; Job, and the reader, struggling to make sense of it all! And all of this, I would argue, being representative of the whole drama of HUMAN EXISTENCE!

That is, it is very important to understand, at the outset, what the story of Job IS and what it IS NOT. It is not a description of how and why there is suffering. We are not pawns in some spiritual chess match. Our lives are not the result of some heavenly wager. In point of fact, the text will never specifically explain why there is suffering - it just presents it as a "given"!

Rather, from the life of one individual this story seeks to symbolically explore certain UNIVERSAL REALITIES. Notice how Job is presented in almost MYTHICAL PROPORTIONS: An absolutely PERFECT LIFE, an absolutely PERFECT PERSON... God himself even says, "There is no one like him"! Job represents the very BEST IN US - IDEALIZED HUMANITY facing the ABSOLUTE WORST-CASE SCENARIO - thus showing us the IDEAL WAY THROUGH the ABSOLUTE WORST life can throw at us!

And in this, notice the key opening theme presented here, namely: That GOOD and EVIL, BLESSINGS and HARDSHIPS, exist and they come to ALL - no one is exempt, not even the most righteous, or the most undeserving. And why? Because GOD BELIEVES IN US even at the cost of his own reputation and our momentary happiness. That is, there's something FAR GREATER AT STAKE HERE. Think of it this way...

God could hold back the BAD (and undoubtedly LONGS to); but to do so NEGATES some of OUR EXISTENCE. To be FULLY ALIVE the FULLNESS OF LIFE must be at our disposal; and thus, while it pains God, God allows it all. It's much like PARENTING:

A parent never wants to see their child hurt. But if you keep all bad away the child never truly lives. At some point, in fact far more often than you would like, as a parent, if you love your children - really love them - you have to STEP BACK and LET IT ALL COME RUSHING AT THEM - the good, the bad, and the ugly - that they might STAND OR FALL ON THEIR OWN (which is what it truly means to be alive.) You do this, trusting that your FAITH IN THEM is not unfounded, trusting that the KNOWLEDGE of that faith (that you have communicated to them) will HELP THEM STAND!

In effect, the STRUGGLES of this life, as much as its blessings, are DEMONSTRATIONS of GOD'S LOVE! Hold back any part and we cease to be entirely alive. We often seek this but don't realize what we're asking, what we're giving up! God believes in our ability to take hold of all this - our need to take hold of all of it, and out of love risks everything for it! Despite our most fervent pleas, God BELIEVES IN US even though we so often believe far less in ourselves and him! This is what is at stake here! This is what the story of Job is about - it's not just the story of some guy's really lousy day!

What initiates, and indeed drives, this entire story is GOD'S FAITH IN JOB (symbolic of God's faith in us, in humanity) - a faith that must ALLOW suffering (even though it is so unwanted) because it is part of the fullness of life. The point being that the first step in COPING with life's WRONGS - making sense of them and getting through them - is TAKING HOLD of this FAITH GOD HAS IN US (which is what is being asked of Job here)! To put it another way...

No matter how much we believe in God; we need to recognize that God believes even more in us - in the greatness that is in us, in the fullness of life he longs for us to have. God believes in our ability to handle it all and that's the core of our existence. That's why, and how, we are here! I mean, we talk a lot about OUR FAITH IN GOD - like it's the be-all and end-all of everything, the whole secret to getting through life; but there's another EVEN GREATER FAITH that this most ancient text wants to talk about, a faith that drives all creation, namely: GOD'S FAITH IN US. Centering ourselves in this, taking hold of God's great faith in us, is the first step in making sense of the struggles of life! So what does this mean in a practical sense? Two starter thoughts...

(1)

First, it means **ALLOWING MUCH TO BE ASKED OF US.**

As mentioned, once the challenge is made and God accepts, Satan immediately sets about destroying Job's entire life. What happens is this:

One day, like strikes of lightning, four different messengers came to inform Job that trouble had come. The first tells him his oxen and donkeys had been stolen. The second tells him his sheep have been burned up. The third informs him that his camels have been stolen and his servants slain. But the worst is yet to come. A fourth servant arrives and announces the greatest calamity of all. He tells Job that all of his children have been killed in a hurricane while they were feasting together at the home of the eldest son. In sum, in one afternoon, everything that Job had worked for and cherished was lost, and with the exception of his wife, he was left poverty-stricken and alone.

Well, as if this wasn't bad enough, his doctor calls.. That is: Satan next attacks Job personally - his PHYSICAL BODY. As Satan argues to God, "A person can handle a lot of loss, but when their own health deteriorates, that's when they really fall apart." And don't we all know that to be true? Satan inflicts Job with horrible, oozing, painful sores from head to toe. Job is now in utter agony. And this is where the opening scene ends: Job having lost everything of value, virtually everything he loves... and now even his mere physical existence is pure torture.

Now, I don't want to make light of Job's situation, but... I'm reminded of an old Country-Western song... Have you ever heard the song "My Everyday Silver is Plastic"? In it, there's a line that says, "I used to live in the lap of luxury... but then luxury stood up!" This is Job: he was in the lap of luxury but then luxury stood up. Well, in each instance as Satan attacked him, it's interesting to note Job's RESPONSES:

First, when he loses all his property and his children, Job says, "Naked I came into this world and naked I will leave it. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord." He's in pain, but he recognizes that everything he has lost was never his possession to begin with but rather a gift from God - a gift God was free to give... and take.

Then, when his own health is taken from him, his wife comes to him and says, "Why do you persist in your integrity? Curse God and die!" She can't stand to see him suffer any more. What's the point? Why not just end it all? A moment we all will come to at times in our lives. Job's response: "Why do you speak as any foolish person would speak..." Literally: "Why do you speak like someone who has not thought things through? Will we receive the good from the Lord and not the bad?"

In each case, Job says the "RIGHT THING", he speaks WORDS OF FAITH. Now, one can say that these are just "pious platitudes" that Job himself doesn't totally believe. And a strong case can be made for that: As we will see, Job will wrestle greatly with what he truly believes; much the way it is with any religious person - with any of us: We often say the nice words of faith; but hardship presses us to see what's really there!

Still, whether Job totally "buys" his own words or not, it's interesting to note the issue that both of his comments center around, namely: An awareness that life is NOT SIMPLE, that it is NOT ONE-DIMENSIONAL. "The Lord gives, the Lord takes... good and bad must both be received..."

Whether Job likes it or not, he expresses the first issue that is before him, that he must grapple with: Will he insist on a simplistic faith, a simplistic life; or will he allow MORE -

MUCH MORE - to be asked of him? Job, however tentatively, however cautiously, acknowledges that GREATNESS is being asked of him. And in so doing, he communicates to the reader that this is the first thing being asked of them as well: GREATNESS. To have to want more than a simplistic life and a simplistic faith! To want MUCH ASKED OF US NOT LITTLE!

Understand, this is the constant tug of the opposing forces in this text: "Take the easy way, follow the path of least resistance!" We will see this throughout the story and we see this still in our own age, right within our own faith: "Why believe in God, why come to church? Well, to GET ANSWERS, of course - nice simple solutions to all of life's problems! Just memorize the magic Scripture reading, just recite the special prayer three times a day... just send your money to this 800 number! And your life will be perfect!"

Wrong! What's the old saying? "For every problem in life there is neat, simple, easy solution... and it is invariably wrong!" Job's struggles first point us toward the need to ALLOW MUCH TO BE ASKED OF US NOT LITTLE. Particularly, in times of suffering and hardship, to not just want the easy solution, the quick way out; but to want something MORE of the experience, out of the time, out of ourselves, out of our faith... for God to USE it, and us within it, in some greater way! This opens our lives to God, the other closes God out!

Now, understand, this doesn't mean needing to be strong and confident and unflinching. As we will see in this story: Job himself will have great fear, profound doubts, will (for a time) sink into suicidal depression, will shake an angry fist at God! Inviting great things be asked of us in our hardships doesn't mean heroic faith; quite the contrary, it simply means inviting God to ask something greater of us than we would naturally fall into. For each individual, and each specific situation, this may take very different form: For someone trapped in depression, it may mean just getting up out of bed today. For someone with consumed with their troubles it may mean putting themselves aside and listening to someone else's problems for a moment. For anyone facing loss or pain or tragedy, it means asking God to use the wrong for something good: to change them, to help another, to change the world... Whatever.

The first step in coping with suffering is TAKING HOLD OF GOD'S FAITH IN YOU - believing that God believes in you. And the first step in doing this is ALLOWING MUCH TO BE ASKED OF YOU. One author writes:

"World-renowned violinist Itzhak Perlman was stricken with polio as a child. As a result, he wears braces on both legs and walks with the aid of crutches. At concerts, getting on stage is no small achievement for him. He slowly crosses the stage until he reaches his chair. He lays his crutches on the floor, slowly undoes the clasps on his legs, tucks one foot back and extends the other foot forward. Then he bends down and picks up the violin, puts it under his chin, nods to the conductor, and proceeds to play.

"One fall evening in 1995, while performing at Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center in New York City, Perlman had to deal with one additional handicap. Jack Reimer, a columnist with the *Houston Chronicle*, describes the scene: 'Just as he finished the first few bars, one of the strings on his violin broke. You could hear it snap - it went off like gunfire across the room. There was no mistaking what that sound meant. There was no mistaking what he had to do. People who were there said, "We figured he would have to get up... to either find another violin or find another string for this one."'"

“But he didn’t. Instead he waited a moment, closed his eyes, and then signaled the conductor to begin again. He and the orchestra played from where they had left off. Perlman played with passion and power. Of course, it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just 3 strings. Everybody knows that. But that night Perlman refused to know that. You could see him modulate, change, re-compose the piece in his head. At one point, it sounded like he was de-tuning the strings to get new sounds they had never made before.

“Perlman played the entire concerto on the 3 remaining strings of his violin. It was one of his greatest performances ever. Thunderous applause greeted him at concerto’s end. When it had finally died away Perlman said to the hushed audience, ‘Sometimes in life the task is to see how much music we can make with the strings we have left.’ And with that, he handed his defective violin to his assistant, retrieved his crutches, and shuffled haltingly off the platform.”

In coping with suffering through taking hold of God’s faith in you, first: ALLOW MUCH TO BE ASKED OF YOU. Let God ask something great of you in your hardship. And then secondly - and finally...

(II)

**REMEMBER THAT GOD WILL RISK EVERYTHING FOR YOU.**

In the end, returning to where we began... Do you remember how, we noted, God’s faith in Job was ultimately expressed? Through God’s willingness to LOOK BAD, right? God’s was willing to TRUST IN JOB at the EXPENSE of his OWN REPUTATION. To even allow Job to HATE HIM, to open the door to that possibility, just so that Job might have that greater possibility of FULLNESS OF LIFE.

This, you see, is the other crucial side here: That as God’s faith in us asks great things of us; we need to remember that it asks even greater things of God. Things God gladly does, without missing a beat, out of love for us! God’s faith in us - the greatness he sees in us, the fullness of life he longs for us to have - is ultimately expressed in God’s SELF GIVING: God’s willingness to risk all, to give all - to even sacrifice our losing him - on our behalf. This, of course, being what the meal we are about to share is all about: A reminder to us of God’s sacrificial love.

You know, there’s an old saying that, “Even if you don’t believe in God, that doesn’t stop God from believing in you.” “For God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Whether we accept God or reject God, God gives his life for us!

And this is the other, very simple, complimentary, point in all of this: To remember, particularly in our times of suffering, that not only is much asked of us; but that God is doing even more for us from his side. That God is continually at work for the very best he sees for our lives - doing whatever it takes, risking whatever it takes to bring this about! As in the story of Job, it may often seem very hard to see this - impossible, at times, to see it, in fact - things may even seem the exact opposite! But as Satan is always thinking the worst of us and seeking to make that our reality; to remember that God sees only the best in us and is continually at work is at work doing whatever it takes to bring that about. We need only TRUST this and LOOK for it! Author Nancy Kennedy, in an article entitled “The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad year” writes:

“I’m sitting in yet another hospital waiting room. Ever since my husband, Barry, first

underwent open heart and quadruple bypass surgery 15 months ago, I've been in this waiting room, or one just like it, more times than I can count on one hand, waiting for him to come out of the operating room. In little more than a year's time, my vocabulary has increased to include words and phrases such as aneurysm, atrial fib, and EP study. They all mean I have to put on a cheery face, kiss Barry good-bye, and promise I won't worry about him or forget to eat lunch and lock the garage door at night while he's in the hospital again. With all Barry's surgeries and procedures, we've had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad year - one of the worst in our 32 years together. Yet, ironically, it's also turned out to be the best.

"I learned just how deeply Barry loves me. As he was all prepped and waiting to go into surgery to repair his aortic aneurysm, Barry looked at my friend Tara, who was waiting with us, and said, 'Make sure Nancy takes care of herself. Promise me, or else I'll worry.' He wasn't worried about being sliced open again - he was worried about me. I still can't get that out of my mind: that Barry would be concerned more about my well-being than about his own. I fell in love with him all over again. I love him because he first loved me. Sounds biblically familiar, doesn't it?

"I came to faith in Christ three years after Barry and I married, and for almost 30 years I prayed about my husband's relationship with the Lord. Then the day of Barry's open-heart surgery, he told me if he died, I'd see him again, because he knew Jesus was his Savior. He prayed with me, he prayed with a friend, and he prayed with his surgeon. Barry hasn't stopped praying - he prays with me every day. What I'd asked God for all these years - to heal the spiritual rift in my marriage, to bring my husband and me close - God had given. He'd performed heart surgery on us both, ripping us apart and knitting us back together. And I remembered the apostle Paul's words: 'God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.' God's been good. He's been faithful and terribly, terribly kind!

"Barry and I talk often about this past year, how it's been awful... and awfully good. We wouldn't wish this kind of year on anyone and wouldn't want to go through it again, but we're glad it happened. We thank God for the good days and the bad, because in all our days God's held us both securely in his grip. We've known God's incredible kindness to us. Our hearts are in his hands. We've had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad year - and I praise God for it."

"Sometimes what we believe in ourselves is not as important as just our knowing that someone believes in us." This morning, we take our first step into the great story of Job. How do you suffer, this day? What hardship and pain is there in your life? Does your faith struggle? Try a different approach: Quit trying to have faith and instead just rest in the faith God has in you.

Step One: TAKE HOLD OF GOD'S GREAT FAITH IN YOU - Allow much to be asked of you, and remember that God will risk everything for you.

God believes in you!