

Meditation – “Persisting in Integrity”

Sunday, October 3, 2021

Scripture – Job 1:1, 2:1-10

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Today we begin a series on persistence as the month of October’s lectionary readings explore the books of Job and Ruth whose heroes persevere in their faith. Persistence is the firm or obstinate continuance in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition according to the Oxford Dictionary.

Our scripture for today is Job 1:1 and 2:1-10. The prologue, which sets the stage in this ancient Hebrew story about the struggle between good and evil, introduces the characters: Job, the blameless and upright one; the *Satan*, a Hebrew word that suggests one who disturbs or is an adversary; God, who listens to the claims of the *Satan* that Job’s faithfulness is only dependent upon his prosperity; Job’s wife, who grieves; and Job’s friends, who keep silent for a time. The prologue gives no hint of fairness. Job suffers for no “just” reason. God allows “the hand of the adversary” to cause Job’s suffering and test Job’s integrity. In the other wisdom literature of Israel, the good are blessed and the evil cursed. The wisdom expressed in Job sees the matter as more complicated and beyond such simple answers. Hear now, the word of God:

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. ² The LORD said to Satan, “Where have you come from?” Satan answered the LORD, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” ³ The LORD said to Satan. “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like Job on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.” ⁴ Then Satan answered the LORD, “Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. ⁵ But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.” ⁶ The LORD said to Satan, “Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.” ⁷ So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. ⁸ Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes. ⁹ Then his wife said to him, “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.” ¹⁰ But Job said to her, “You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips. Amen.

The title of the meditation: “Persisting in Integrity”

The text: Then Job’s wife said to him, ‘Do you still persist in your integrity?’” Job 2:9a

Let us pray: O God, from whom we come, to whom we return, and in whom we live and move and have our being, strengthen and sustain us to persist in integrity during times of tragedy, loss and suffering. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The Book of Job is an ancient, yet timeless, story about integrity and faith. Written probably during the sixth century B.C.E. this book was of great comfort to the Israelites who experienced tremendous loss and suffering during the Babylonian exile. The age-old wisdom that the good are blessed with prosperity and the evil punished with misfortune could no longer be embraced by the exiled Israelites. It was inconsistent with their experience, which is not unlike Job’s experience... and so in many ways Job’s dilemma is their dilemma.

A person of integrity is one who lives in accord with the moral and religious norms of one’s faith and whose character is one of honesty and sincerity. There is congruency, a sense of wholeness, an agreement between the heart and the mind in a person with integrity. Ordinarily it would be unthinkable that a conflict would exist between a person being honest and a person being true to one’s religious beliefs.

However, just such a tension existed within Job, and is implicit in the words his wife speaks to him. *Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die!* In her frankness, she acknowledges the incongruity Job is experiencing. If Job holds on to integrity in the sense of being true to the religious beliefs in this time and blesses God as he did before, she senses that Job will be committing an act of deceit, a lie! How can one bless a God that allows this to happen? On the other hand, if Job holds on to integrity in the sense of honesty, then Job must curse God and violate the integrity of his religious beliefs, which forbid cursing.

Job hears the words of his wife and perhaps because she touches on the crux of Job’s internal battle, he calls her *a foolish woman* or the literal interpretation, one who *talks like trash*. This dialogue between Job and his wife is wonderfully honest. He has one nerve left and she is on it. I can almost hear the ancient Hebrew storytellers elaborate on this lively interaction between husband and wife as the story is passed from generation to generation.

Job responds with yet another question, one that reflects the Hebrew traditional view of life as a whole and God’s hand in all of it. *Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?* It’s a rhetorical question and a generous word. It reveals his faith and trust in Yahweh, and yet, Job’s internal struggle continues as it does for each one of us when life is cruel and unfair.

When Job speaks again following seven days of silence in the presence of his three friends, Job’s wife’s question has become his own. *How can I persist in my integrity?* Job doesn’t curse God but Job curses the day he was born. Job doesn’t die but he speaks longingly about death. Job begins his journey toward spiritual healing by asking honest and poignant questions of God and the friends who console Job by urging Job to confess the sin that has brought this suffering upon him.

Job's persistence in his integrity—both in his moral conduct and particularly in his tenacious honesty—is a gift to all of us! Job's persistence leads him beyond traditional religious piety to seeing God's face in the midst of Job's tremendous loss. Satan was wrong about Job. Job's faith was not a bargaining chip with God to get what he wanted. Job loved the life and the family he lost and the God from whose hand it came.

The suffering that Job persevered and the questions he asked expanded his worldview, broadened his faith, and extended his compassion for others. Job no longer accepted that suffering is God's punishment. Life is more complicated and beyond such simple, conventional answers to the problem of evil. God is larger than any individual suffering and any one theology.

And so, as with Job, even though our questions are never fully answered—we can find strength in the courage to ask them, we can find grace in the God who listens to them, and we can find hope in the affirmation that by asking them, we are persisting in integrity.

As we gather with Christians around the world to celebrate Holy Communion, we share the bread, the cup, the unanswered questions, and the God who forgives rather than punishes. As we walk together for CROP this afternoon, we acknowledge the suffering of our brothers and sisters around the world and within our community who live in exile, poverty, and hunger and we persist in being the hands and feet of the “God beyond all praising.” Amen.