

Sermon: Have You Considered My Servant Job?

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Oct 6, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Have you considered my servant Job? That was the question that God posed to the accuser, not once but twice, in the story of Job. It is a story of a man who had it all, then lost it all. It is a story that many people equate with suffering, a troubling story that, at face value, appears to portray God abandoning the most honest, upright, and faithful man in the world, and leaving him to the ministrations of the accuser. What does this story say about suffering? What does it say about God? What does it say about the classic problem of theodicy, or let me rephrase it: if God is all powerful and all good, why then does evil exist?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, for the next 4 weeks (including today), I'll be preaching a mini-sermon series from the Book of Job. Our Friday Bible study group has no-too-long-ago concluded the study of this book, and the experience of chewing through all 42 chapters has been good, for me at least. So I hope to share some of my thoughts with you.

Before we begin, I will just say this is just a story, more akin to a folktale. We see this in the introductory sentence: "There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job." This introduction clues us into the book's nonliteral genre, so we can be sure that it is not a real-life account.

Some see this story as a tragedy, some call it a comedy. I prefer to see it as a parody, or a deliberate exaggeration for comic effect, intending to teach us something about life, about our view of God and our relationship with the divine. Shall we get started?

First and foremost, Job was blameless and upright. I don't know anyone in the world that can truly claim to be blameless, or deserved to be called blameless. Most of us try to live a honest life, try to be good, try to do the right thing, most of the time. But we all have our personal failings. I won't bother to list them but suffice to say that no one is perfect, as the Apostle Paul states so forcefully in Romans 3:10, "*There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding; there is no one who seeks God.*"

Nevertheless, for the sake of this story, the righteousness of Job was clearly given and established right off the bat. He feared God and turned away from evil.

He is also incredibly rich. The story, setting in the time of Ancient Near East, paints a picture of extreme material wealth in its time—of seven sons and three daughters, of seven thousand sheep and three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants. Job was described to be the greatest of all the people of the East.

The richest man on earth currently is Elon Musk, to the tune of \$250 billion dollars. He owes his wealth mostly to Tesla, the electric car company. For a while, the world embraced him as an eccentric genius, celebrated for his success and eagerly anticipated of what other great-leap-forward his inventions will bring to the betterment of humankind. But with his purchase of Twitter (yes I still calls it twitter, and refusing to call it X), many of Elon's personal flaws are exposed, as he seems incapable of restraining himself from tweeting or re-tweeting some pretty vile and ugly stuff.

The next richest man in the world is Mark Zuckerberg, the owner of Meta, aka Facebook—to the tune of \$206B. The next richest is Jeff Bezos of Amazon—\$206B. None of them is upright; none of them comes anywhere near blameless. All of them have been accused of tax-evasion, of anti-competitive behaviour, of unfair and unlawful business practices, of mistreating their employees, and so on and so on. All have allow wealth to get the better of them.

But not Job! The wealth of Job never clouded his judgement with regard to justice and righteousness before God. Not only was he upright, he regularly prayed on behalf of his children. Especially after they feasted (aka partied like there was no tomorrow), Job would offer burnt offerings for them and pray that God might overlook their momentary, perhaps alcohol-induced unrighteousness.

Now the story doesn't describe at this point, all the good things Job also did for the poor, and for others around him. That will come later in the book, during his dialogues with his three friends. But suffice to say that Job's relationship with God was picture-perfect. It was so good that God held him up as a shining example of faith: have you considered my servant Job?

The problem is God did this, as a brag, a boast, in front of the accuser, witnessed by a full court of heavenly beings. The accuser, or *hashatan* in Hebrew (as some of you with keen ears might've already

picked it up) would eventually be referred to in other parts of the Scripture as the Satan. Nevertheless, here in the book of Job, *hashatan* is simply one of the heavenly beings, who had been “*from going to and fro on the earth and from walking up and down on it*”.

Now I don't know about you, but when I hear that phrase ‘going to and fro on the earth and walking up and down on it’, it gives me the creeps. It is as if *hashatan* is on a hunt; like a lion prowling for prey; trolling to mess up someone's life so to devour their body, mind, and soul. And God happened to deliver up a righteous, innocent, and clueless Job: Have you considered my servant Job?

God was bragging, of the faithfulness and righteousness of Job. The accuser naturally countered, as any good accuser is apt to do, with an logical accusation, that Job was only faithful and righteous because God had put a fence around him, protected him, and blessed him with immense wealth. Take all that away, Job, like any other human being before or after him, will surely curse God to the divine face, thus will surely sin. So as a bet, God permitted the accuser to have their way with Job, therein began the suffering of this righteous rich man.

First his wealth was taken from him—all the flocks of sheep, camels, oxen, donkeys and servants—poof all gone. Then his children, in one swoop, all perished. But Job did not sin. He tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground, but worshiped. And he said, in 1:21, this well-known prayer, “*Naked I came 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.*”

Then an additional round of suffering befell Job. Not satisfied with the result, the accuser lob further accusations against God. Once again God permitted the accuser to have their ways with Job, only they are not to take his life. Loathsome sores began to grow all over his body, head to toe. It was so painful that Job resorted to scraping himself with broken ceramic, and ended up simply sitting in a pile of ash.

His wife, who suffered alongside of Job through all these, finally gave in. Perhaps clueing in to God's mighty hand on Job, she said, “*Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die.*”

Her words are so startling, and so irreverent, that the Masoretes, that is Jewish scribes who were tasked with hand-copying and preserving the Hebrew Scripture, had actually substituted this word with ‘barak’, that is ‘to bless’. So for generations, many of the older versions of the English bible

had 'bless God and die'. Whereas, modern translators view this as an euphemism, and rightly translated her original meaning, that is telling Job to 'curse God and die'. Whatever the case, Job maintained his integrity, and he did not sin against God with his mouth.

What then should we make of this story? Keeping in mind the story is not finished, and will continue to be our focus for the following three weeks. What should we make of this portrayal of God, who is so different from the God of Abraham, of Moses, of Isaiah, of Daniel, the God of Jesus, who refers to God in the most endearing term, of 'Abba Father'? What do we make of this God who delivered Job to evil, instead of the prayer that Jesus taught us, praying to God to deliver us from evil?

As I suggested earlier, reading this story as a parody, offers us a clue, a way forward. The key question, the so called bet between God and hashatan, should be our focus. If Job curses God, then Satan wins; then Satan would be right in their accusation that Job (and by extension anyone) only worships God for the goodies that God could give. Faith becomes transactional, shallow, and the direct opposite of relational.

It is a bet that continues to play out in each one of us, in the hearts of believers, in congregations and all communities of faith. It is a question that still haunts us: why do we worship God?

I will leave that question with you to ponder in the coming week, but will say that how the Book of Job resolves this question is good, very good. You can certainly read ahead, but better yet, come back the next three weeks and let us wrestle with it together.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**