

A Test of Faith

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on the 27th Sunday in Ordinary time, October 5, 1997: Scripture Lessons: Job 1:1; 2:1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Thomas Boogaart, a Reformed Church minister writes, "I meet every other week on Tuesday morning for breakfast with a group of friends. We chew bagels and sip coffee at a place called *The Good Earth*. The ambiance is homey and natural: live plants, a golden wood floor, a few carefully placed and slightly worn stuffed chairs, and old books in the nooks and crannies. The servers are pleasant. On each table is a small piece of beige construction paper, folded in half and standing upright. One side displays an intriguing silhouette of two people, one slightly behind and above the other, who are framed by repetitions of the line, "Awake Your Soul! Stretch Every Nerve!" The other side reads in bold print, "Coffee Break Massage by Marianna," and in fine print, "Is it anxiety, upset, job stress, or highwire living that has your back tied up in knots? Let Marianna put her skills to work to improve your level of relaxation, alertness, and mental clarity - or try it just because it feels great. \$5 for 5 minutes; \$10 for 10 minutes; \$15 for 15 minutes." Boogaart comments that *The Good Earth* offers something that we all long for - Warmth. Coziness. Homeyness. Relaxation. Safety. The reason we long for these things, he says, is because "as much as we say we want to venture out, learn more, try new things, even the bravest of us are worried on some level that violence could strike at any moment." So anxious Americans look for someplace safe and homey and cozy and relaxing like *The Good Earth*.

But someplace safe and homey is increasingly difficult to find. A nurse at Brandywine Hospital told me last week that she had a patient whose face was all black and blue and swollen. She scoldingly said to him, "You probably had a car accident and weren't wearing your seat belts." "No," he said, "I heard my door bell ring. I went, opened the door, and was confronted by a maniac with a hammer who attacked me." Last month you probably read about the little boy looking dreamingly out his living room window, relaxing, when all of a sudden, a car veered around the corner, a shot rang out, and the little boy fell dead, the victim of a random, senseless,

drive by shooting. There are no safe and homey environments. Probably every family represented here this morning has come to realize, sadly, perhaps tragically, that there are no safe and homey environments. ^{where we can be sure of being protected from violence or harm} We can run, but we can't hide from the threats and dangers. We're all vulnerable.

That was certainly true of Job. If anybody ever had a safe, homey environment Job was the man. Job lived east of the Jordan river, probably in what is today the nation of Jordan. Job was a fortunate man. God had blessed him with a wonderful family, a wife and ten children. He was blessed with physical wealth - cattle, sheep, camels, and servants. He was well known- the greatest of all the people of the East. He lived in a safe and homey environment. But all that was soon to change.

One day God was sitting up there in heaven surrounded by all the heavenly beings and he pointed down to Job. "Is there anyone like him?" God is obviously proud of Job. But Satan cynically responds, "The only reason Job worships you is because he has it so good. Take away his wealth, take away his family and he'll curse you."

But God had confidence in Job. God was sure that Job loved him because he's God, not because of all the blessings he'd given Job. So he makes a bet with Satan. "Do with Job whatever you want, but don't kill him. I'll show you that he's a man of integrity." So in one day Job loses everything. First, Job learns of the loss of his work animals, the oxen and donkeys, and the servants who tended them. Next, news arrives of the loss of his food herd, the sheep along with all his shepherds. Then, word comes that he's lost his camels (the most valuable animals because they allowed trade and travel), along with all the servants in charge of them. Then comes the worst news of all - the news that every parent dreads - in a single accident, all of Job's children were destroyed while they were feasting together.

Job falls into despair. He tears his clothes and laments. He feels anguish, confusion, despair. He reminds us that men and women of great faith feel deep sadness and indescribable anguish when bad things happen to them. Sometimes these feelings remain for long periods of time; but, somehow, they fight against their despair and anguish until, finally, they're able to

look back and affirm that even in the depth of their affliction they were in the hands of a loving heavenly Father.

That's pretty hard for most of us to assert when we've lost, not only wealth, but loved ones. We understandably wonder if God is in control of this world and of our individual lives. In his book *The Spiritual Life of Children*, Robert Coles tells the story of a young polio victim back in the 50s. The young man, a teenager, had been playing football, basketball, enjoying school, healthy and strong one day, and the next day he was kept alive by an iron lung. In one of his conversations with Coles he looked out the window where the sun was shining out of a cloudless, brisk, October sky and he said, "I could be there playing football, basketball. I could be doing math, my favorite subject. Why me? How did this happen? What did I do? That's all I do, ask these questions. I figure, there must be someone to answer them! God is the one, my mom says, but can He hear each one of us? I wonder. I've got so much time to think and think, and ask these questions. I remember in Sunday School, we read of Job, the guy who got sick, and everyone around him got sick or died - I forget a lot of what happened. He didn't know what to make of it all, and I don't either. When I go to sleep, I have these scary dreams. I'm in a car - my cousin's - and he's driving, and we're going faster and faster, and I can see that we're going to crash, and I shout, 'Joey, Joey, put on the brakes,' but he doesn't, and I hold on to my rosary beads, and I figure: Jesus, here we come! then I look, and there's no one in the driver's seat, and I don't know what to do."

Sometimes we wonder if God is in the driver's seat. Life comes crashing down around us, like it did for Job, and we wonder if there's anybody behind the wheel of this world. Does God hear us? Does God care? And yet the man or woman of faith, fights through the doubts and temptations and continues to believe, however tenuously, that in all of our afflictions we're in the hands of a loving and faithful heavenly Father.

Rita Waggoner, in the Wheaton Alumni magazine, wrote a testimony on behalf of one my English professors, Dr. Rudolph. She writes, "There's in all our lives the season of grief, pain, loss, or confusion which has not yet seen resolution or redemption. I had a college

professor who moved me by his faith in the midst of unresolved grief and doubt. It was my first semester at Wheaton College. I expected college professors to stand before me as great intellectual generals, commanding my attention and inspiring me to go out into academic battle, proving the indisputable truths of the faith. Into this classroom of eagerly devout recruits came a different sort of man. Looking out at us with watery brown eyes, fumbling as he placed three frayed books on the metal desk, he began to speak in a low voice hoarse from emotion. 'It was only this past August', he said, when his son had his life stolen by an illness which had sapped his strength for a year. I waited for Dr. Rudolph to assume the professional role and to assure me of Divine Providence in Zeke's death. But instead of a preacher's voice booming reassurance that would echo off the walls, I heard the poet's voice acknowledging the fear of nothingness. 'I have a sinne of feare,' Dr. Rudolph said, quoting John Donne, 'That when I have spunne/My last thread, I shall perish on the shore.' Dr. Rudolph sighed, 'I have a fear that there's nothing after we die; that Zeke is gone forever.' A silence followed. We were all embarrassed by his grief, confused by his uncertainty. Our own shadowy fears of non-being were called forth in the poet's words. We looked away, dropped our pencils, fidgeted with our notebooks. But then, Dr. Rudolph did the unexpected. He led us in prayer. Although I no longer remember the words of that prayer, I was embraced by this tender man's faith. I was touched by this one who could not see his God in the darkness, but who called out to his God nonetheless. I heard this man who spoke of unbearable sadness and prayed as an act of unspeakable hope."

Then Rita ends her tribute to Dr. Rudolph. She says, "The God I've come to know through the words of Job, of John Donne, of Dr. Rudolph, is a God who embraces all of life. Our dark seasons of confusion are as much a part of our faith as the cross is a part of the empty tomb. I learned from Dr. Rudolph and Job that **our doubts don't need to be resolved for us to act in faith**; that God's presence endures even when we're isolated by our grief." Job teaches us that whatever happens to us, good or bad, we remain in the hands of God. Whatever evil comes our way, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, will turn it to our good. God is determined to turn it to our good. Amen.