

Hearsay or Experience

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on the 30th Sunday in Ordinary time, October 26, 1997: Scripture Lessons: Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Psalm 34:1-8 (19-22); Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52.

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

We have been reading in the book of Job for four weeks. Today is the final reading. Let's review the story from the beginning. I'm relying heavily on a summary of the story as it's retold by a Jewish character in Herman Wouk's novel, *War and Remembrance*. In the first chapter of Job, God and Satan are talking. God says, "Have you ever noticed my servant Job. He is a good and righteous man?"

Satan answers, "Of course Job is upright. He's got it made. He has an ideal family: Seven sons and three daughters all of whom are prosperous. He's the wealthiest man in the whole country. He realizes that it's worth being good if he gets rewarded as well as he has been. But take away his family and wealth and we'll see how upright he is."

"All right, take away his family and wealth. I'll bet he'll still serve me," God says.

So in one day marauders carry off all of Job's wealth and a tornado kills his sons and daughters. What does Job do? He mourns. "Naked I came from the womb, naked I will return," he says, "God has given, God has taken away. Blessed be God's name."

So God challenges Satan. "See? I told you. Job has remained upright."

"Skin for skin," Satan answers. "All a man really cares about is his life. Reduce him to a skeleton - a sick, plundered, bereaved skeleton, nothing left but his own rotting skin and bones and we'll see if Job continues to trust you."

So God says, "All right, do anything you want to him. Just don't kill him."

A horrible sickness strikes Job. He crawls out of his home and sits on an ash heap scraping his sores with a potsherd. He says nothing. Stripped of his wealth, his children senselessly killed, his body a horrible stinking skeleton covered with boils, he's silent. Three of his pious friends come to comfort him. A debate follows for the next 38 chapters of the book of Job. His comforters maintain that a good and powerful God rules the universe. God rewards good and punishes evil. If a person is poor it must be because they're lazy. If a person is rich, it

must be because there good and have worked hard. We reap what we sow. Therefore Job must have sinned. Job must be reaping the sin that he has sown. If God is in control, if God is good and just (and God is) then God punishes the wicked and rewards the good. Job is being punished for some secret sin. "So, just examine your life, Job. Confess your sins and repent. God will forgive you and restore everything." So for thirty eight chapters Job's so called comforters try to get him to confess to wrong doing.

But Job fights back. "I'm innocent. I've fed the hungry. I've clothed the naked. I've been generous and given to the poor. I've been faithful to God. I've obeyed his laws. I sacrifice daily to the Lord. I've been a good father and husband. What I'm suffering is not my fault. I haven't done anything to deserve this."

Job knows he'd be bearing false witness if he were to confess to what he hasn't done. He's like a prisoner of War in Vietnam where the Vietcong tried to force the prisoners to confess crimes they didn't commit. Job refuses to confess. He knows he's innocent.

More than anything Job wants to defend himself before the Almighty. He wants to come before God and argue his case because he's confident God will acquit him. But he can't find God. God is silent. God is hidden. God is absent. Finally, near the end of the book of Job, Job gets what he wants. God appears to him. But God doesn't answer any of his questions. Rather God starts to question Job about stars and whales and the hippopotamus and all sorts of things that have absolutely nothing to do with Job's plight. Chapters 38-42 contain more questions than any other five chapters in the Bible and they're all asked by God to Job. And the gist of all the questions is, "Who are you to call me to account?"

Finally, in the last chapter, Job, worn out and frustrated prays to the One who has permitted his senseless suffering without answering his questions, "Now I've seen you face to face. You have revealed yourself do be One who refuses to answer my questions. I give up! I don't understand! I don't know what's going on! You, O Lord, seem to do whatever you want even when it seems senseless." In the closing verses of chapter 42, God severely reprimands

Job's comforters, God heals Job, God restores Job's wealth, gives him ten more children and let's Job live a hundred and forty years.

There's something wrong here though. The story does not end in a very satisfactory way for me. I've read and reread this story and I wonder sometimes why it's in the Bible. Even as a child the story of Job bothered me. You see, I expected the book of Job to give a reason for innocent suffering like Rabbi Kushner does in his little book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Rabbi Kushner says it's because God is not able to prevent bad things from happening to us. He wants to but is unable. That's a simple explanation but I don't see how any Christian can accept that. Albert Camus said that innocent people suffer because God is simply indifferent. That's a simple answer, but I don't see how any Christian can accept that answer either.

But Job doesn't give us any simple answers. I was hoping it would give me something comforting to say when I go to parents who've lost a child. It would enable me to explain to a grieving parent so that everything would be all right, so that a grieving parent would say, "Oh, I understand. I don't hurt anymore." But the book of Job leaves us hanging. So when I go to a person grieving from the loss of a loved one I seem to have nothing to say except, "I don't understand."

The ending of the book of Job is so unsatisfactory. So Job has seven more sons and three more daughters. Does that make everything all right? Is that supposed to make up for the ten children who died? What about those ten children that died? Where was God's justice to them? And what about Job and his wife? Can those scars on Job's heart heal, even in a hundred and forty years? And the worst part is that Satan seems to have tricked God into a foolish bet. Jastrow, in Wouk's novel says, "Satan simply sneered God into ordering the senseless ordeal." God should be ashamed of himself.

But the book of Job is in the Bible. It's inspired by God even though it puts God in a bad light. God wants us to read and study and meditate upon the mystery of the message of the book of Job. The church throughout the ages has always tried to protect God but it's never been able

excise the book of Job from the Bible. The book of Job calls us to join that great company of saints who've wrestled with God.

There is a Jewish story from the Holocaust. The story takes place at night in Auschwitz. Jews have returned to their barracks for a few hours of sleep. They have been reduced to skeletons;- sick, plundered, bereaved skeletons, nothing left but their own rotting skin and bones. And they complain to God. Someone says that God should be put on trial. So they have a mock trial. They put God on trial. God is accused of injustice. God is accused of being silent. God is accused of being absent. God is accused of going back on his promises to his covenant people. Witnesses come forward, one after another, accusing God. Though they've been faithful they've suffered the loss of wives, husbands, and children. They've been humiliated. They've lost everything. Not one stands up to defend God. Finally, after hearing all the evidence, they find God guilty of crimes against his covenant people. God is sentenced to death. And then one of the rabbis notices the clock on the wall. "It's time for our evening prayers," he says. And all the people in the compound, who have just found God guilty and have sentenced him to death, lift up their hands and pray: "Blessed art thou, O Lord, the creator of the universe."

The book of Job invites us to put God on trial. We're called to wrestle with God., struggle with God, argue with God. Faith in the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ commits us to complain, argue, and demand answers as well as to submit, humble ourselves and trust in God's purposes. The story of Job is the story of one who wrestled with God and did not give up.

Friends, we're called to that kind of faith. Not a namby pamby, saccharin, sugar coated faith, dripping with pious words and advice to grieving men and women. But a hard nosed faith that will take us through all the mystery and crises and tragedies of life with a prayer on our lips to the God who reveals himself as a hidden God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: