

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Persistent Integrity”
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Ordinary 27—October 7, 2018

Lessons: Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Mark 10:13-16

Once upon a time there was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. “He was honest inside and out, a man of his word who was totally devoted to God and hated evil with a passion.”¹

It used to be that people assumed that if something bad happened to you, it must somehow be your fault. If something bad happened to you, if you got sick, if you suffered, if your best relationship fell apart, if a loved one died, somewhere, somehow it must have been your fault. In our Scriptures, this kind of cause and effect thinking is found in the book of Deuteronomy where Moses proclaims: “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. *If* you obey the commandments of the Lord your God...then you shall become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you...*But if* your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land....” Cause and effect. That’s the way some people have thought and it is the way some people continue to think. The book of Job stands in stark contrast to those who would say that if you are suffering you must have done something to deserve it. The witness of this book is that life is not so simple.

Job is blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. His was a faith of integrity. For reasons that I have never understood, God starts boasting about Job to the Satan, the accuser, the one who wanders to and fro upon the earth looking for people who are not behaving. This Satan suggests that Job is faithful only because his life is good. Take away those blessings and his faith will crumble. Thus the wager is set and Job’s suffering begins. His servants die. His sheep and cattle die. His children die. He is afflicted with sores all over his body. The man who had everything suddenly has nothing, except suffering. And he does not know why.

We know that Job’s suffering comes not from God but from the Satan, but Job does not know this. He knows only his suffering. Job’s wife suggests that he should simply give up--give up on life and give up on God--and Job’s response is: “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?” In essence Job suggests that this suffering must be God’s will and he simply must accept it. Yet one reality from Job is that in the midst of his suffering, he does not know the whole truth. He doesn’t know enough to say this is God’s will. He doesn’t know that in fact his suffering is not from God. He doesn’t know that in a terrible way he has been chosen for a great test. In the midst of suffering, in the midst of impossible times, there is much that we do not know.

William Saffire writes: “The reader wants to tell the man from Uz: ‘Hey, it’s all right, your suffering only seems unjust, but you are part of a grand design. You are not suffering for no reason, or for some sin you don’t know about; instead, you are the subject of the greatest wager ever made that [humankind] does not worship God only for power or fame or a big family or the modern equivalent of three thousand camels. Stick with it, Job—by maintaining your faith in God’s wisdom, you justify God’s faith in the purity of [humankind’s] motives for worshipping him.’”

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. NavPress Publishing Group.

“This, of course, is the straightforward message that many have found in the book: Take comfort in times of inexplicably unjust pain or senseless stress by seeing it as part of a greater pattern, known to God but not vouchsafed to mortals. The Lord gives, the Lord takes away; our blessings may not be permanent, and it is not for us to ask why.”² That is one way to understand the book of Job, but as we shall see in the next several weeks, Job is about far more than this. We shall see that it is OK to question God, even to argue with God, even to demand justice from God. This book also will proclaim strongly that there is much that we cannot and simply will not understand. For today, my focus is on Job’s persistent integrity.

Jill Duffield invites us to lean in and listen for God’s word in the midst of this word about Job. “Lean in and listen about integrity, that elusive trait, priceless and yet all too easily and cheaply sold for a little more money or a little more power or status or adulation or self-protection. Hear the Word of the Lord that bellows through all creation: Persist in your integrity. As the introduction to the Declaration of Barmen reminds believers, test everything against Scripture. If what we claim is contrary to the Word of Lord, they write, discard it. If, however, our story matches God’s, then stop at nothing and pay whatever price is required to follow this narrative. Persist in your integrity: the integrity of discipleship. Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself. Worship the Lord your God, no matter your circumstances. There once was a man, believers, who persisted in his integrity, on one day and every day. Will you?”³

That is our continued calling. Persist. Part of the reason that so many people here spend time pouring over our Scripture—on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and Fridays as well as right here on Sunday, is because we honestly desire to listen for what God is saying to us today. Persist in your integrity. The reason that we use our limited resources to support groups like Urban Promise and our Mission Co-Workers in South Sudan is based on God’s call that we love our neighbors as we love ourselves. That is also the reason we open the doors of the church to AA and Al-Anon: because we recognize that hurting, broken people need a place that will welcome them as they are and encourage them to be so much more. Persist in your integrity.

The reason that we in the church have been so concerned about the separation of children and the continuing incarceration of children at the border is because we know how Jesus welcomed children. We remember that the kingdom of God belongs to such neglected, overlooked, even abused powerless children. The witness of Job, calls us to persist in our integrity.

The book of Job also proclaims that suffering comes our way and we do not always understand why. Yet in the midst of that suffering we are sometimes given an opportunity to learn. Last year Chief Justice John Roberts spoke at his son’s graduation from the ninth grade at Cardigan Mountain School in New Hampshire. He said that typically commencement speakers will “wish you good luck and extend good wishes to you. I will not do that, and I’ll tell you why. From time to time in the years to come, I hope you will be treated unfairly, so that you will come to know the value of justice. I hope that you will suffer betrayal because that will teach you the importance of loyalty. Sorry to say, but I hope you will be lonely from time to time so that you don’t take friends for granted. I wish you bad luck, again, from time to time so that you will be conscious of the role of chance in life and understand that your success is not completely deserved and that the failure of others is not completely deserved either. And when you lose, as you will from time to time, I hope every now and then, your opponent will gloat over your failure. It is a way for you to understand the importance of sportsmanship. I hope you’ll be ignored so you know the importance of listening to others, and I hope you will have just enough pain to learn compassion. Whether I wish these things or not, they’re going to happen. And

² William Safire, *The First Dissident, The Book of Job in Today’s Politics*. Random House. © 1992.

³ Jill Duffield, 20th Sunday after Pentecost: There Once Was a Man.... *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Looking into the Lectionary. October 1, 2018.

whether you benefit from them or not will depend upon your ability to see the message in your misfortunes.”⁴

We live in a time when people are broken and angry; a time where some feel powerless and overlooked; we live in a time when people feel abused and maligned. It is a time that continues to call for our better angels, our better selves. We don’t know why people suffer, but every one of us is given an opportunity to maintain the integrity of our faith.

There once were a people who lived in the land of Wilmington. May we be remembered for our integrity.

Let us pray: In our impossible times, in the midst of suffering, where we have questions that lack answers we can understand, give us a faith of integrity that your grace might shine through our lives. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

⁴ The Hon. John G. Roberts, Jr. Commencement Address, Cardigan Mountain School. June 3, 2017.