

“To and Fro on the Earth”

Job 1:1, 2:1-10

October 3, 2021

Rev. Emily M. Brown

Some months ago, a friend of mine started sharing updates on her social media about a beloved family member who had contracted Covid-19 and had been hospitalized. She posted asking for prayers for him and for his wife, his young children, and his extended family. I added him to my prayer list, and let her know I was thinking of and praying for her family member. She kept updating as his health worsened – being put on oxygen, on ventilation, his organ systems shutting down. Finally she posted with sadness that he had passed. Immediately, several people posted comments, all asking the same question: “Was he vaccinated?”

There were other people offering words of comfort and gestures of support and promising to pray, but those questions stood out to me: “Was he vaccinated?”

As a pastor, I’ve walked with people through grief, and I know that there is a certain kind of question that is very painful to people in mourning. It’s when someone hears that your family member died of lung cancer and immediately asks, “Did they smoke?” It’s when they hear someone died in a car crash and want to know, “Were they wearing a seat belt?” It’s an understandable question: we know that smoking increases the risk of lung cancer, that wearing a seat belt makes you more likely to survive a car crash, that being vaccinated against Covid decreases the chances of contracting it at all, or of having a severe or life-threatening case if you do. But the folks asking these questions are not epidemiologists, not responsible for conducting an autopsy. They are expressing a deep, deep human drive: we want to believe that the world makes sense, that the bad things that happen can be avoided through correct choices, that we have control of our fates. They want assurance that if they are vaccinated, they will not die of Covid; that if they do not smoke, they will not get lung cancer; and that if they wear their seat belt, they will always arrive safe and sound at their destination, and their loved ones will never be gathered teary and pale at a funeral home, shaking their heads in shock and sorrow.

The Book of Job is a challenging one for people of faith. But I think it addresses itself to these kinds of situations, these kinds of questions, and to how we as people of faith hold on to the idea of a good God in a world where tragedies befall the innocent and undeserving.

Job is a lengthy book – forty-two chapters – and there are two very distinct styles of writing in it. The beginning and the very end are prose, and are in the style of a folktale or fable. Within that folkloric frame are long poetic monologues – first exchanges between Job and his friends, and then finally between Job and God. The linguistic style of the prose sections of Job are different from the language of historical narratives, in ways that evoke a parable. It would have been clear, from the kinds of phrasing that are used, that this story is a *story*, and that Job is not intended to be understood as a real-life figure. It also comes across in the description of Job: “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.” Certainly we all aspire to merit such a description, but in combination with the fable-like language, we are hearing that Job is kind of a stock character, a generic good guy.

Our lectionary calendar is trying to winnow 42 chapters of biblical text down to four weeks’ worth of readings, so we skip over the rest of the first chapter, but what happens is that Job’s prosperity, faithfulness, and large family are described, and then the first heavenly scene takes place: God is in the heavenly court, attended by heavenly beings, including a figure called Satan (suh-TAHN), or more accurately, *the* Satan – the Hebrew always uses the definite article, the equivalent of “the” to refer to this figure.

Christianity and Western culture have layered meaning onto the word “satan” over the centuries, but “the Satan” of the book of Job does not have all the meaning we’ve come to ascribe to that name. Much of what we now think of as connected with “Satan” comes much later – from Dante’s *Inferno*, and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, from various sections of the Old and New Testament that have been pieced together into one figure, from pagan iconography adapted into Medieval art, and more. But all of that came much later. At the time when the book of Job was composed, Robert Alter writes, “the word *satan*” meant “a person, thing, or set of circumstances that constitutes an obstacle or frustrates one’s purposes.” Some commentators have suggested that “the satan” was thought of as a formal role in the heavenly court – and in some earthly courts – a person whose role was to challenge and argue with God or with the king – to “play devil’s advocate,” as it were.

God boasts to the Satan about how righteous Job is, and the Satan responds with a challenge: Job is only so righteous because he has been blessed and protected. Surely, if he were not so fortunate, he would not be so faithful. God gives the Satan permission to take action against Job, but not to do him physical harm. Misfortune befalls Job: his family, servants, and flocks are attacked by enemy raiders, struck by lightning, and crushed in a collapsing tent. Job mourns mightily but still blesses God. Then we come to the rest of today's reading, where the exact same exchange between the Satan and God repeats, but this time the Satan insists that if Job experiences physical affliction, he will curse God. And this time God gives permission, only asking that the Satan spare Job's life. Job is afflicted with an excruciating and embarrassing skin condition, covered with sores all over his body. And still, at this point, Job resists his wife's insistence that he should "curse God."

We'll encounter Job's bitter complaints and God's response in later weeks. But this week, we hear in scripture a truth we try to escape: that bad things happen, sometimes in ways that are unaccountable. We are not protected from misfortune by our faith, or our conscientiousness. We cannot be guaranteed safety or prosperity because of our prior planning, our self-discipline, our nutrition or fitness regimen, or our financial responsibility. When God asks the Satan where he is coming from, each time the Satan replies "going to and fro on the earth."

I do not believe, and this text is not trying to claim, that evil spiritual forces are roaming the world seeking to do us harm. Rather, the Satan is presented as a kind of force of randomness or chaos, held only partially in check by God. Even before afflicting Job, the Satan is "going to and fro." It's an image of a world where bad things happen not because God plans and chooses it for some higher purpose, nor because evil forces are warring against God, but simply because that's how the world is. The Satan is a kind of personification of that painful but undeniable reality – that bad things happen, and sometimes there does not seem to be a good explanation for them. What is the coronavirus doing, if not "going to and fro on this earth"?

The questions that the book of Job wrestles with are known as "the problem of evil," which refers to the question of how to reconcile the fact that there is suffering and evil in the world with our beliefs that God is all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing. There have been many attempts to "solve" the problem of evil, but none of them really satisfy. Even those people asking my friend if her family member was vaccinated were, in their own way, an attempt: people looking

for evidence that pain and suffering are not truly random, but self-inflicted, and therefore governed by a certain order and logic.

The book of Job does not take an easy way out. There's no "everything happens for a reason" or "it's all part of God's plan" here. Job's friends will try to fault-find or explain away his suffering, and he will rightly reject them. Instead, the book will lean in to the mystery, the tension, the pain and beauty, the wonder and terror, of life in this sometimes chaotic world. And ask us to do the same. To set down our platitudes, and to sit with those who are suffering. To hold on to a faith that God is good even when the world is falling apart.

The great preacher Frederick Buechner, trying to articulate the meaning of the grace of God, once said: "Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid."

That's what the book of Job asks of us. That we not be afraid to ask the hard questions, and to acknowledge the hard truths. That we let those hard truths draw us deeper into mystery, into community, and into faith. It's not easy. But not many things in this life are.

May God give us the grace to choose hard questions rather than easy answers, to weep with those who weep, and to be open to the mystery of faith. Amen.