

Job: The Transformation
 Job 42: 1 – 6 Mark 10: 17 – 31
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You've heard about Job, haven't you? Job is the main character in one of the oldest stories in the Bible. It's a strangely constructed book, but that may be attributable to its age and the fact that the story developed by word of mouth over a very long period of time. It is a story with great staying power and I have come to believe that the story has lasted because sooner or later in all of our lives, we all have experiences that relate to Job's attempt to find a way to face the unfaceable.

Let's begin today with a quick review of the story. In its written form it contains four very divergent parts. It begins with that odd conversation before the throne of God when Satan receives divine authorization to take everything away from God's favorite human being, Job, and then to physically harm him. His wife counsels him to curse God and die, but Job does not (Hence, that extraordinary patience that is attributed to Job). Most of the rest of the book is the script of a conversation between Job and his friends, who try to find out what he has done to bring such suffering on himself. All along, Job resists their judgments on him while demanding an answer from God. Finally, near the end of the book, God finally shows up to give an answer – sort of – but still leaving Job with a transformed understanding. I might add that there is a fourth section of the book where God restores everything to Job – and more, but since that is a much later addition and since it takes away from the real climax of the book, I choose to omit it.

When God gives that so-called answer to Job, it's hard to imagine that there would be anything left of the man. God thunders and roars, calls Job all sorts of names and puts him down in every way imaginable. Perhaps that's all Job could have expected from the all-powerful creator of the universe. The essence of the divine answer is this: Who do you think you are? Could you do everything I have done? What makes you think you have the right to question me? And even if you did have the right, what makes you think that you could understand even the tiniest fraction of what I would tell you. God then ends his diatribe with a truly terrifying self-description. So, what can Job possibly say in response to all that power, fire, and smoke?

We have to be a bit careful when we examine Job's reaction. We could easily relate only to Job's terror at God's bombast and miss the treasure in his words. We will see that there is incredible value for us in Job's reaction, so we will look very carefully at it.

Listen to this and notice what you hear.

Then Job answered the Lord:

'I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. (Then he refers to God's question to him.)

“Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?”

(Job goes on.) Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

(Then he repeats what God has said.) “Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.”

(Then Job gets it, and says,) I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.'

We should not be distracted by Job's apparent self-loathing and repentance. This is not about superficial morality. You see, if we humans can manipulate the divine by the power of either our good or evil behavior, then our God is very small, indeed. Job's repentance had to do with his transformation from a good man who deserves good treatment into a man whose experience has taught him how grand, complex, and wonderful life is, even if it sometimes includes grief and loss.

Let me repeat how Job expresses the essence of his transformation. He says: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you."

Clearly, there is no comfort in Job's statement. He's terrified, he's overwhelmed, but he's face to face with the one true God.

In the more ancient texts we find the common belief that no one could look on the face of God and live. Anyone who saw God face to face would be destroyed. But Job has survived and others who have had the experience of seeing God in the depths of human experience have survived, too. They have not, however, survived unscathed. Something new happens to them and they are changed unequivocally by the experience. All of the old forms and all of the old understandings are broken apart and thrown out the window. And in that moment of absolute terror and confusion a new point of light emerges. This light becomes a new opportunity to see life in a more meaningful way. So, we should not read the book of Job looking for comfort. We should read Job looking for encouragement, because Job does survive and, in the process of surviving, he receives a more profound glimpse into the meaning of life.

The experience of Job is really not far away from our own experience because it is human experience. Whenever we face the paradoxes of life that are too broad and too wonderful, or too deep and too terrible, for us to understand, we can take heart knowing that somehow, even in the depths of loss, the divine is present and participates in our lives.

Job's experience of finding the reality of God in the midst of human experience might be seen as a precursor for Jesus Christ and for the paradoxical Christian understanding we have inherited from him.

If we look at Jesus' life, if we hear his teaching and his witness, and if we look carefully at the choices he made, we discover that Jesus valued paradox. He often "came from the blind side" towards people. When Jesus speaks to old Nicodemus, a very wise man, and tells him about being born again, he changes Nicodemus's understanding of the process of moving towards God. When he catches his disciples arguing about who is the greatest, he turns the tables on them, by telling them that in the Kingdom of God the most important one must be the least. The one who is first is last and the one who is last is first.

We can notice that Jesus often confronts the people around him with the paradoxes of their lives so that they can grow in wisdom. But the real power in the Christian witness is that Jesus did not just talk. He lived in paradox, and he died in paradox.

Nothing is more paradoxical than the crucifixion of Jesus. If we look at it in terms of its theological meaning we end up with something like this: Jesus, the God made human, God

incarnate, God-in-the-flesh, having chosen not to use his considerable human powers, finds himself mocked, beaten, and nailed on a cross, and experiences that incredible moment of abandonment by God. In a sense, we see God experiencing first-hand what it is like to feel cut off from all purpose, from all meaning, and from all comfort.

People sometimes prefer to talk about the comforting parts of the good news, the gospel of Christ, rather than this painful paradox. The paradox is, as Kierkegaard says, being a limited human in relationship with an infinite God. This very disturbing human experience can also be wonderful, exciting, and mysterious. The paradox breaks up old ways of understanding, expands old categories, old words, old forms, and old symbols. The living divine spirit continues to disturb our comfort.

Can our response, then, to the divine paradox be any different than Job's was? How can we be committed and faithful followers when we know that to follow that divine path means embracing pain, frustration, chaos, and a great deal of "not knowing". In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says words that appear to be comforting: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Apparently, purity of heart is the goal of the follower. Not wisdom and understanding, not knowledge, not power, but the willingness to have a singular purpose in life: that of continuing to develop in our relationship with the Beyond. When we pursue purity of heart, we become ordinary seekers, ordinary human beings who are created in God's image and who yearn to have lives filled with the divine.

Once transformed, all we can do is call ourselves honest seekers. We will never find the final answer in this life anymore than Job did. We will never reach that day when it all fits in place and we say, "Oh, now I understand, now the search is over, now it's not going to hurt anymore." For the faithful that day never comes. If it does come to us, if we relax and believe that we do understand", we had best watch out because life is still filled with paradox. While I will not go so far as to say that paradox will seek us out, I will say that once we understand, or think we understand, then we tend to stop looking. We stop watching where we are placing our feet. We stop watching how we are living our lives and relating to one another. Then we do things that cause pain for others if not pain to ourselves. Those pains then bring us back to the heart of the matter, to the paradox of the cross. Paul refers to the good news as the folly of the cross, because everything is upside down, everything is changed from the way that we think it is supposed to be.

One encouraging note here is that we really don't have to do it alone. Our pain is our own but it is pain that can be shared. A great value in our being a community of faith is that we can encourage one another in this process. We can encourage one another to feel our feelings honestly and to express them honestly. We can encourage one another to ask the difficult questions and not collude with each other in avoiding the difficult questions. We can be an encouraging community that recognizes that pain will be a part of our experience and that joy and serenity will be there also. We can recognize that Jesus took the path that led him to the cross and to his ultimate confrontation with emptiness, but that resulted in the resurrection into new life. The life of resurrection is filled with meaning and it always points to the Beyond. And that is the transformation available to Job and to us all.