**Eating Humble Pie**

**Text: Job 42:1-6**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Frankly, I think Job’s being a little hard on himself. He’s been batted around like the ball in a peculiar game between God and Satan, he’s lost everything because Satan wants to win at all costs, he’s demanded answers from God which have never come, and now that God has finally, sort of, kind of answered him, he’s blaming *himself* for being a jerk! I mean, what’s wrong with this picture?

Perhaps the Book of Job engages in exaggeration and hyperbole, as Jesus himself did in some of his parables. A good writer sometimes pushes the outside of the envelope to the point where you have to laugh, even when the subject matter is dark indeed. So we’re told over and over again that Job is blameless, that he’s done nothing wrong, that he doesn’t deserve any of the suffering with which he has been afflicted – yet here he is pouring ashes on himself – a traditional Old Testament ritual of repentance – as if he’s done something horrible!

So, maybe we’re supposed to laugh – partly because it hurts too much to cry – and then we’re supposed to step back and listen for the core meaning of the book’s conclusion. And perhaps the meaning is this: there’s something to be said for humility. “A humble and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise,” we’re told in Psalm 51:17.

You see, when all is said and done, Job emerges from the story looking pretty good. He didn’t fold under the pressure, he didn’t collapse under the burdens, and despite Satan’s best – or worst – efforts, he didn’t abandon his faith. He might’ve thought that God had abandoned him, but he did not abandon God.

To review – for those of you who haven’t been here for the first 3 installments in this series on Job – the Book of Job depicts a righteous man who is made to suffer horribly at the hands of Satan; through no fault of his own. And God permits all of this to happen; or so the story goes. Satan takes Job’s property, and children, and just about everything else, thinking that if Job suffers enough, he will turn his back on God. But Job remains steadfast in his faith. He gets angry, he doubts, he asks God a lot of questions, he shakes his fist at the Almighty, but he remains faithful and blameless to the end.

But…the suffering does seem to have humbled him. As suffering often does. A man of faith before his trials, he became a man of even *deeper* faith by the time it was all over.

The same could be said of many of the saints: the historic saints of the Church, and saints that we ourselves have known. One thinks of St. Mother Theresa, who was called to her ministry of caring for the poor of Calcutta through a powerful religious experience. Yet her diaries reveal a servant of deep doubt – *painful* doubt – during the years when she served so faithfully. It seems that her spiritual pain helped her to empathize with the physical and emotional pain of the abandoned and dying souls whom she rescued from the streets; children of God who were given a place to die with dignity. Deep as her suffering was, her faith became deeper still.

One thinks of the Venerable Matt Talbott. Not quite a saint in the official annals of the Church, but a saintly man nevertheless. An alcoholic on the streets of Dublin from the age of 12, he spent the next 14 years in a drunken stupor, desiring nothing but the next drink. At the age of 28, penniless and thirsty, he stood outside a pub, hoping that someone would invite him in for a pint; or perhaps something stronger. When 3 friends passed him by, offering him nothing, he stormed off in disgust, as if he was somehow entitled to their charity. In fact, he was *so* disgusted with his whole situation that he confessed his sins to a priest. And that’s when his life turned around. He spent his remaining 41 years sober: working hard, frequently in prayer, engaged in acts of charity, seeking justice for downtrodden laborers like himself.

Who among us has not known someone who has passed through the firey trials of suffering and emerged as a more saintly soul on the other side? Not that we would wish such suffering on anyone. Some would say that this suffering comes directly from the hands of God so that we might become better people, but I’m not at all convinced about that. As we said last week, even in Job’s case God was only ***in***directly responsible for Job’s suffering. But I *am* convinced that God is with us in the *midst* of our suffering, seeking to bring something good out of it. “Behold, in all things God works for good,” St. Paul says (Romans 8:28). Suffering, however unjustified, is often the cauldron out of which sainthood emerges.

So Job suffers, and through his suffering he becomes an even more faithful and humble soul. Suffering and humility are often the starting points for wisdom and sainthood. Suffering and humility are often the starting points for a life of faithful service.

As some of you know, we’re gearing up to launch the Men’s Warming Center in about a month: “we” being the churches of Bedford; and the Warming Center being a safe, warm place for our homeless neighbors to eat and sleep on cold winter nights. *And*, a place for them to start down the road to recovery. I’m hoping that among the staff that we hire and the volunteers whom we recruit, there will be some folks who’ve known the anguish of addiction or the pain of living on the streets. Because folks who have recovered from those situations – folks whom God has raised-up to a new life – these folks are the ones most likely to help the men who are still trapped by homelessness and alcohol or drugs. Our own suffering makes us deeply sensitive to the suffering of others. And in our empathy, we reach out to them in Christian love, and meet them on their own turf.

Sometimes stories of suffering have relatively happy endings. I know some folks whose stories have ended that way. And I know other folks who’ve suffered all the way to the grave. But generally speaking, our lives are lived somewhere between these extremes. I think the Book of Job’s “happily ever after” ending is a bit over the top. It’s almost a Hallmark Channel ending, which is great for tv but may not have a whole lot to do with reality. Perhaps the ending is another piece of hyperbole that makes it a good story. It gets our attention – as it’s gotten the attention of the faithful for several millennia – so we listen to the story and pass it on; and with it we pass on the wisdom that most of the story contains. But yes, the ending is a bit much. Everything that Job lost is given back to him; indeed, he receives *twice* as much as he had before.

Real life stories don’t have such utopian endings; not in this world, anyway. With all of the obvious edits to the book, this ending may well have been the final edit; a gloss laid down by an embarrassed rabbi who couldn’t stomach the book’s challenge to the conventional wisdom that the virtuous are rewarded and the evil are punished. So in the final version, Job *is* rewarded in the end, even though such an ending contradicts the theme that runs through the rest of the book: the notion that often there’s no correlation between virtue and reward, and between evil and suffering.

It’s *so* over the top that maybe it’s *designed* to be so; maybe the whole point is to make us laugh at the illusion that life can become wonderful and perfect if only we behave the right way or win the lottery or adhere to the right political philosophy or elect the right officials. A Job-like world is not easily transformed into a utopian, happily-ever-after fantasyland. Folks have been trying to pull it off for at least 2,000 years, and sometimes I think we’re as far away as we’ve ever been.

Yet utopianism is contributing to our great political divide. On the right, you’ve got politicians holding out the dream of a nation full of people who look just like you. On the left, you’ve got politicians holding out the dream a nation where the state takes care of everyone and no one ever suffers. And we keep duking it out, as if one or the other of these dreams can actually be realized.

Some folks envision either the one extreme or the other as an ideal, yet realizable, state. But a world where we can associate only with people who look like us, or a world where everyone is cared for and no one suffers, these worlds are no more real than one where virtue is perfectly rewarded and vice is proportionately punished. And I’m not sure which is worse: the deceit or the arrogance with which these and other utopian visions are offered by politicians with competing visions who dupe us into supporting one utopia and despising those who support the other.

The reality is that no one always lives happily ever after. If perfection is possible, it awaits us in the life beyond. In the meantime, we live our lives in the real world, where joy and pain are inevitably intermingled. Here we can dream of perfection, but we have to settle for compromise. Here we are wise to ignore the utopian outcries of both left and right, and settle for what’s possible in the middle. In the end we’re all jerks – or, to put that in more biblical language, we’re all sinners – and we have to muddle through as best we can with less than perfect solutions to very challenging problems. That’s something to remember as we go to the polls this Tuesday. And I do hope that you will all vote, if you haven’t already, whatever your political persuasion may be. Because Christian citizens, who at least have the *concept* of suffering and sharing for the sake of others, have a special responsibility to try to *approximate* that concept in practical programs and policies; and to support candidates who will try to do the same. We can’t *fully* realize *any* utopian ideal, but we can try to *approximate* some of them. That’s what compromise is all about.

But even as we muddle through all of the trials and tribulations of this present age, we give thanks for humble saints like Job: who understand that things will not always work out the way that they would like them to, that our dreams often work at cross purposes with the agenda of the Almighty, and that in this life, faith remains the assurance of things *hoped* for, the conviction of things *not* seen (Hebrews 11:1). By faith we know that there will come a day beyond history when we *will* see clearly, when we will be reunited with the saints from *every* age and place; when justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. Even now we pray, “Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and make it so.” Amen.