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The Book of Job begins with a most extraordinary statement:

“There was once a man whose name was Job.
That man was blameless and upright,
one who feared God
and turned away from evil.”

Blameless was our man Job,
and upright too,
before the weight of heaven and earth
came crashing down on him.

In the space of two days Job lost everything that he had:
seven sons and three daughters
and a multitude of grandchildren,
slaves and servants
and beasts beyond counting.
Wealth and health,
pouring out of him
like water on the sand.

Is this what happens to good people,
blameless and upright?

The Book of Job is about answering questions,
the only questions that matter:
why do good people hurt?
Why do the wicked prosper?

But these questions are answered through the back door.

The question that God and Satan seemed most concerned with
is to ask, “Why is Job pious?”
God believes that Job simply is.
Satan believes that Job is pious only because he is so blessed.

And so, before we lose track of this truth,
it must be said,
Job was not blessed because he was pious.

The poor theology of the prosperity gospel
does not long survive in the Book of Job.

Blessing belongs to Job,
and he is thankful for all that he has.
And before long, curses come his way
and he manages to remain thankful for all that he has,
while mourning deeply all that he has lost.

His wife encourages him to curse God and die.
Just be done with the whole thing.
But he won't.
He isn't happy.
He cries out to God,
but he cannot yet bring himself to curse his maker.
Even if he is ready to curse the fact that he was made.

After a while, Job's three friends come to see him,
because they hear about the terrible tragedy that has befallen him.

Job is so disfigured by his condition of illness and loss
that at first his friends do not recognize him.

At last they do
and they walk upon Job as he sits among the ashes,
idly scratching his shoulder with a piece of broken pottery.

For seven whole days, no one says anything.
For seven days Job and his three friends sit in silence,
surrounded only by the grief that they feel.

At last, Job's silence gives way to expression.
He can contain himself no longer.

“Curse the day I was born,
and cursed be the night that forced me from the womb.
I am ready to die.

Would that none had ever cared for me,
that none had ever comforted me,
for then I would be dead.
I would be asleep.
Then I would be at rest.”

Job is tired of his suffering.

Sitting there in silence,
his friends have now heard Job speak.
And here is another profound lesson from the Book of Job:
his friends should have never started talking

Sitting with him, in silence,
sitting in dust and ashes,
sharing his grief.
That was the only thing they could do.

And for seven days they did just that.

But now, now that Job has broken that silence,
his three friends have much to say.

They each take it in turn to explain his suffering.
He must have done some wrong,
 passed by some beggar on the street,
 spoken falsely,
 cheated someone in business.
 Job must have done SOMETHING
 to deserve what he got.

God doesn't make mistakes,
 and according to Job's friends,
 only the wicked are treated as Job has been treated,
 not the blameless and the upright.

Job agrees;
 except that he knows he has done no wrong,
 and so it is God who must explain himself to Job.

The longer Job argues,
 the more his friends start to judge him.

The sins that Job must have committed begin to grow ever larger,
 trying to make Job's supposed crime
 fit his drastic and all too obvious punishment.

Job grows tired of their words
 long before they run out of words to say.

 "Worthless physicians are you all.
 If you would only keep silent,
 that would be your wisdom."

In other words,
 Job says to his friends:
 "You are terrible friends,
 could you please just shut up and sit here with me?!"

But they couldn't.

They couldn't just sit there with Job;
they needed answers for the suffering they saw before them,
and bad answers were better than no answers at all.

Job, for his part,
just looked up,
with the smile of memory stretching his haggard face,
for a brief moment,
into something almost beautiful,

talking about a time
when he could remember being in the presence of the Lord.
A time when he had known God's beside him,
and his darkest night had been clear and short.

A time when Job could see God no matter which direction he turned.

But that was over now,
the long days become deepest shadow,
and his whole life caught up
in the tempest of chance and misfortune.

Job looked to east and west,
north and south,
he looked within his heart
and now into the hearts of his friends.

Job looked everywhere,
and God was nowhere to be found.

Even with Job's heart laid bare before them,
Job's friends cannot summon the courage
to face his sufferings
with anything like the dignity that they deserve.

There is one final speech,
 in which the worst of Job's friends
 adds the idea
 that maybe the "destruction of all Job's property
 and the death of his children
 and his disease ridden body
 were perhaps just God's way
 of helping him to improve his character
 and sharpen his sensitivities.
 "He delivers the afflicted by their afflictions."¹

Job never has the chance to respond to this drivel.
 because now a new speaker has entered the palaver,
 and this new speaker is God Almighty.

This is the portion of scripture that we read today.
 "The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind."

The source of all life,
 the Lord,
 the God who made heaven and earth
 answers Job
 in what may be the most beautiful speech
 that God makes in the Hebrew Bible.

In a series of preposterous and gorgeous questions,
 God answers Job.

¹ Buechner, Frederick. "Job." Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who. p. 74.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
or walked the recesses of the deep?

Where is the way to the dwelling of light,
and where is the place of darkness?”

Job now knows not only the beauty,
but also the pain that lies at the heart of things,

but,

God wonders,
can he know the mystery of their redemption?

For all of their beauty in height and depth,
I would summarize God’s questions to Job this way:
“There are no answers to your suffering,
no reasons,
no comforting aphorisms.

There is nothing you can know about why you suffer
and certainly nothing that will make you feel any better about it;

you can only believe that I am powerful enough to redeem your suffering;
you can only remember that I AM.

You cannot know what I am,
or how I am;
you can only know that I AM
and that will be enough.”

For Job, it was enough.

It was enough that God showed up
and answered him out of the whirlwind.

After God answers Job,
he turns on Job’s friends
and answers them not with questions but with reprimand.

“You have not spoken of me what is right,
as my servant Job has.”

Job’s sufferings were no more the result of his wickedness
than his blessings had been a result of his piety.

I have preached on this text a few times now.
Sometimes in the midst of my own suffering,
and other times when everything seemed just fine.

It always strikes me how the book ends.

Job's fortunes are restored and he is doubly blessed.

He dies old and full of days.

But he never gets back what he lost.

He has seven *new* sons
and three *new* daughters.

What Job realized

was that explanations would never bring back what he'd lost.

A beautiful explanation
that made perfect sense
would still leave him grieving.

What Job realized

was that he didn't need explanations.

He needed God.

When Job was blessed,
he gave thanks for all that he had.

When Job lost it all,
he gave thanks for what was left to him.

Job knew that he had done nothing to earn his blessings
and had done nothing to deserve his calamity.

Barbara Brown Taylor offers this as a summary of Job:

“If there is an answer to the problem of unjustified suffering in Job,
then it is only this:

that for most of us,
the worst thing that can happen
is not to suffer without reason,
but to suffer without God.”²

To suffer without any hope for resurrection and new life.

“What Job wants us to know
is that God does not finally abandon us.

When there is nothing left
when all the flocks have been stolen
and all the children have been buried
when there is nothing left but a piece of broken pottery
with which to scratch our sores,

what is still left
is the God of all creation,

who laid the foundation of the earth,
who has walked in the recesses of the deep,
who knows the way to the dwelling of light
from the places of darkness.

This is the Lord of all life,
who never runs out of life,
and whom we may always ask for more.”³

² Taylor, Barbara Brown. “Out of the Whirlwind.” *Home By Another Way*. p. 166.

³ *ibid.*