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The other day,  
in anticipation of the 1.6 billion dollar lottery,  
a friend was telling me what he would do, should he win.

In fact, this was a well conceived plan,  
long thought of,  
not something new for this particularly enormous windfall.

His plan consisted of discerning an amount to be invested,  
the proceeds of which he could comfortably live off of,  
and to give the rest away.

He concluded by saying,  
“Of course,  
up to this point,  
the Lord has not seen fit to bless my plans  
with a winning ticket.”

We both laughed,  
because neither one of us really believe that’s the way things work.  
As far as I know,  
he has still not been blessed with a winning ticket.  
Unless he visited South Carolina sometime last weekend,  
unknown to me.

Either way,  
his righteous plan for the money would not earn him a winning ticket.  
At least not according to the story we just read.  
I mean it should.  
That’s the way things OUGHT to work.  
But when I look around me,  
that just doesn’t seem to be the case.

The righteous suffer,  
the wicked prosper,  
and the world keeps turning on its axis  
...day after day,  
year after year.

But why?  
Why aren't things fair?  
Why don't things work out the way they should?  
Why can't God make things work a little better than they do?

These are the questions laid before us these past weeks  
in the book of Job.

The parameters of the argument are clear,  
no chance we can sneak out on a technicality.  
“There was once a man in the land of Uz  
whose name was Job.  
That man was blameless and upright,  
one who feared God  
and turned away from evil.”

We know the truth,  
right from the start:  
Job is blameless and upright.  
And then all hell breaks loose.

It's a story.  
I'm not saying that any person was actually blameless and upright.  
Lord knows that's hard to find.

It's a story.  
It might as well start out,  
“Once upon a time, in the land of Oz  
there was a girl named Dorothy.”

It's not history;  
it's a story,  
    but more than history,  
    sometimes more than obvious facts,  
    stories often tell the truth.

And this is the truth:  
    the righteous suffer,  
    the wicked prosper,  
    and the world keeps turning.

So why put this in the Bible?  
    Why spend 42 chapters  
    walking us through the miserable story of Job?

It doesn't even fit in the Bible.  
    Robert Alter, preeminent scholar of the Hebrew Bible  
    says that Job "represents a bold dissenting thinker  
    and a poet of such genius  
    who produced a book of such power  
    that Hebrew readers soon came to feel  
    that they couldn't do without it  
    however vehement it's swerve  
    from the views of the biblical majority."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alter, Robert. *The Wisdom Books*. p. 4

Much of the Bible points to an idea that  
 if you do right  
 you get good.

So much points to the idea that  
 if you do wrong,  
 you get evil.

And sometimes that's true.  
 Especially on a case by case basis.  
 You work hard,  
 you deal square,  
 you get recognized and rewarded.  
 Or...you lie and cheat and steal,  
 until you get caught  
 and you get your just desserts.

There's some of that that goes around.  
 And we love it when things work out that way.  
 It makes sense to us;  
 it seems fair;  
 if we were in charge of the world, that's the way we would run  
 things.

That's definitely the way that Job's friends were trying to run things.  
 Presumably they know what a stand up guy Job is.  
 Perhaps being blameless and upright  
 is part of the reason they got to be friends with him in the first place!

But they don't focus on the good that Job has done;  
 they don't comfort him in the midst of his sorrow.  
 Instead, his friends,  
 and here I use the word "friends" loosely,  
 his friends spend endless breath  
 trying to explain to him  
 why the calamity swirling around him  
 MUST be Job's own fault,  
 why he's only getting what's coming to him.

In a word,  
his friends do their best  
to explain away Job's suffering and grief.

Some friends.

I saw an apron or a dish towel, or something recently  
with words printed on it.  
It said,  
"They tell me God won't give you more than you can handle;  
apparently God thinks I'm amazing!"

Job's friends aren't worth much,  
not the way they treated him.  
Not the way they tried to make themselves feel better  
by explaining away Job's sorrow.

It takes a lot of fortitude to just sit there with somebody  
in the middle of their grief.  
And Job's friends seem to lack that kind of strength.

The way they treated him,  
it would be as if I walked into a hospital room  
and instead of saying  
"I'm sorry this is happening to you;  
I love you;  
God loves you";  
and then offering prayers for strength and patience and peace  
- what if instead I just walked in and said,  
"you'll be ok;  
God won't give you any more than you can handle."

Well that doesn't do any good.  
What if you can't handle it?  
What if it's more than you can possibly handle?

God does give people more than they can handle.  
Just look at Jesus.  
He died.  
It was more than he could handle.  
He died.  
God raised him from the dead.  
But Jesus died  
- God gave him more than he could handle.

Our job isn't to make our own suffering disappear  
by minimizing the suffering of others.  
No, our job is to ameliorate the suffering of others,  
by bearing their burdens,  
by sitting and witnessing that the love of God is present,  
even in the midst of great suffering.

We aren't trying to make the suffering stop so that God can show up.  
We are trying to point to the presence of God,  
no matter how bad things get.  
And that isn't easy.

Then again,  
it isn't always easy when God does show up.

Last week we heard that "The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind."  
And God's answer was pure poetry.  
God did not make sense of Job's suffering.  
God knows,  
there's often no sense to be made.

But God shows up.

Perhaps God's answer to Job's suffering  
is less than satisfactory for us,  
but God's answer to Job's friends,  
is quite satisfying.

"My wrath is kindled against you  
...for you have not spoken of me what is right,  
as my servant Job has."

In other words God says,

"don't explain me;  
don't pretend to have me all figured out.  
Stop pretending to have things all figured out."

What if that's why this is in the Bible?

It's got nothing to do with patience.  
Job is bemoaning his state from about chapter 3  
on till near the end.

But Job does endure.

He endures to witness the presence of God,  
roaring through like a storm.

What if this is in the Bible

because this is who we are supposed to be?  
Enduring like Job,  
instead of explaining like his friends?

We can't explain the unexplainable;  
we shouldn't give in to the temptation,  
    alive in all of us,  
        to make it better for ourselves  
            by offering easy answers in the face of grief and loss.

But we can sit,  
    in the dust and in the ashes.

We can sit,  
    not until we figure out how to explain the absence of God,  
    but when instead  
        we can point to the presence of God,  
    until God is swirling from the dirt on up to heaven,  
        making known the presence of the Almighty,  
            the Lord,  
            the maker of heaven and earth.

It doesn't make sense,  
    but that's life.