

## Persisting In Integrity

### Job 1:1, 2:1-10

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.

One day the heavenly beings came  
to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan  
also came among them to present himself before the LORD.

The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?"  
Satan answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth,  
and from walking up and down on it."

The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job?  
There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man  
who fears God and turns away from evil.

He still persists in his integrity,  
although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason."

Then Satan answered the LORD, "Skin for skin!  
All that people have they will give to save their lives.  
But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh,  
and he will curse you to your face."

The LORD said to Satan,  
"Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life."

So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD,  
and inflicted loathsome sores on Job  
from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.

Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself,  
and sat among the ashes.

Then his wife said to him,  
"Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die."

But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish person would speak.  
Shall we receive the good at the hand of God,  
and not receive the bad?"

In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

## **Persisting In Integrity**

Job 1:1, 2:1-10 October 6, 2024

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### **I.**

It seems a very long ago that I last stood here before you in this pulpit. It is good to be back with *all* of you; those who are here in-person, those who are watching on the stream, as well as those who read the sermons as, together, all of you comprise this congregation and our church. It is a privilege to be able to speak with you each Sunday, and an honor to realize the time and energy you extend so this one small voice of mine might be heard. It is a generous gift you offer each week, certainly to me, but also to yourself, A gift which serves to remind each of us that we are being intentional about how we are living our lives and the people with whom we choose to share it. That you would share yourselves with me, and allow me to share myself with you, is a source of both great humility and great responsibility and so I begin today with a heart filled with thanksgiving.

### **II.**

I am also grateful that you would allow me the opportunity to step away for a few weeks to clear my head, still my heart, restore my soul, and allow my body to heal from my recent Evil Knievel episode. I was able to attend to a number of important tasks around the cottage like replacing the dry-well gray water system, finishing the deck and the grounds outside of Linda's She Shack, and building the first of two cherry book cases which signal the merciful end of this five year long project. Linda and I also enjoyed a great deal of time together, many delicious meals and, thanks to the fabulous weather, many afternoons floating on inner tubes and sitting on the dock to bask in the warm and glorious sunshine. Then, after all of that, this past week you afforded me the opportunity to travel Plum Island on the MA coast, to care for my youngest brother Paul as he undergoes treatment for non-Hodgkins lymphoma. For all of this, I say thank you for your forbearance, patience, and kindness.

### **III.**

Aware of my plans for September, back at the end of August I prepared the worship for my return this first Sunday in October. I knew from the lectionary that I would be preaching on Job today, and would be writing this sermon

during the week I would be staying with Paul. The irony of such a situation was by no means lost on me. If ever there was a person who is “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” it is little brother Paul. As my other brother, Jack, texted me on Tuesday, “You know, this should have happened to you or me...were similar in that people either loved us or hated us and we never really cared...that poor kid never had an enemy in the world.” Hence, there is a painful rawness within me as I preach these words knowing the great molecular battle being waged against the loathsome sores within Paul from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. All the while, Paul persists in his integrity.

#### **IV.**

The story of Job is that of a wealthy person living in a land called Uz with his large family and extensive flocks. He is “blameless” and “upright,” always careful to avoid doing evil. One day, Satan appears before God in heaven. God boasts to Satan about Job’s goodness, but Satan argues that Job is *only* good because God has blessed him abundantly. Satan challenges God that, if given permission to punish the man, Job will turn and curse God.

So, to test this bold claim, God allows Satan to torment Job; though God forbids Satan to take Job’s life in the process. In the course of just *one* day, Job receives four messages, each bearing separate and successive news that his livestock, servants, and ten children have all died due to marauding invaders or natural catastrophes. Job tears his clothes and shaves his head in mourning, but he still blesses God in his prayers.

#### **V.**

Satan appears in heaven yet again, and God grants another chance to test Job, which is where this morning’s scripture reading picks up the story. Only this time, Job is afflicted with horrible skin sores. His wife encourages him to curse God and to give up and die, but Job refuses, and continues the struggle of accepting his circumstances. While the events which unfold on earth in the lives of Job and his family are certainly terrible and pitiable, we must admit they are more the rule than the exception when it comes to the human experience.

What is exceptional, however, is what unfolds in that realm above the earth with the heavenly beings gathered before God, and God almost *baiting* Satan to turn his attention to Job's integrity by bragging on him and, even worse, *allowing* Satan to test Job's faith by destroying his wealth and family, and, then, afflicting his body. All this, seemingly, so God could simply prove a point which did not need to be proven.

## **VI.**

Job's story then continues with three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar coming to visit him, sitting with Job in silence for seven days out of respect for his mourning. On the seventh day, Job speaks, and thus begins a conversation with each of these "friends" sharing their thoughts on Job's afflictions which prove to be as unhelpful as they are irritating. So grief stricken is Job, that eventually he curses the day he was born, comparing life and death to light and darkness. He wishes that his birth had been shrouded in darkness and longs to have never been born; feeling that light, or life, only intensifies his misery.

## **VII.**

Job deploras the injustice that God allows evil people thrive while honest people suffer. Job wants to face God and protest, but cannot physically find God. He assumes that wisdom is concealed from humans but, nevertheless, Job decides to persevere in seeking wisdom by fearing God and evading evil. The story ends with God eventually intervening and commanding Job to be brave. However, God also chastises Job with a reminder about the big picture, saying, "*Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?*" Overcome by the appearance of God, Job recognizes God's infinite power and accepts the constraints of human understanding of the Divine. Though not necessarily a Hallmark movie ending, God goes on to restore Job's health, granting him twice the property as before, new children, and a remarkably long life.

## **VIII.**

There are several "take aways" from the story of Job: the acknowledgement that however difficult to reconcile theologically, God's plan for the world includes the suffering of innocent people; that questioning God, even vehemently, is sometimes warranted and unavoidable; that the opinions of friends, family and the world around us often prove to be limited in their

helpfulness; that God eventually did restore Job, but *only* after a great deal of pain and loss (which I, personally, find troubling); and, finally, in spite of all that God allowed to befall him, Job kept his faith in that God. While it might seem obvious homiletically to lift up Job's *faith*, given current circumstances I would, instead, choose to illuminate Job's *integrity*. The Hebrew word used here is תָּמַח, *tōm*, תְּמִיחַ, *tummāh* meaning "simplicity," "soundness," "completeness," but is also rendered as "uprightness" or "perfection."

## **IX.**

One of the reasons Presbyterian ministers are required to study both biblical languages, Greek and Hebrew, is for an occasion such as this. At some point, a decision was made to translate this Hebrew word as "upright" which skews the story of Job toward morality rather than giving a fuller sense of Job's soundness and completeness as a human being. Certainly, being a person of integrity implies a high ethical and moral standard, but this is merely the effect of a much deeper cause which springs forth from a sense of one's *own* completeness and soundness. A simple, but not easily achieved, understanding of who one is in-and-of-themselves, in their relationships to those around them, in the grand scheme of the universe, and, ultimately, in our rootedness in God.

## **X.**

Unfortunately, it seems to many of us that we now live in a world where integrity is not only unvalued, it is under attack. Rather than doing the hard work of heeding and following the mandates of science, democratic principles, civic duty, personal character, moral responsibility, honesty, decency, and fairness, many find it easier and more expedient to yield to the temptation of sloth and the allure of the Golden Calf of personal gain and, so, simply ignore or undercut the fundamental importance of the integrity of all these things. Sacrificing their own integrity in the process.

Make no mistake about it, having integrity about one's life is the hardest work we will ever do. While our faith in *God's* integrity may inspire us to persist in our *own* integrity, we must go further and aspire, like Job, to a soundness and completeness in both thought and action; doing so because of, and in spite of, the vicissitudes of our lives. *That* is what make the story of Job so remarkable and valuable.

Yes, Job's is a story about the limits of human understanding as it regards the Divine, but, it is also a story about the absolute clarity and importance of understanding that no limits must be accepted on our own integrity in which we must persist each day and always.

## **XI.**

This concludes the sermon, which I wrote the first morning of my week with Paul. However, in the days which followed my mind kept returning to the story of Job, and I would share these thoughts with you as a means to end today's sermon.

Job's friends were spot on; at first, anyway. The most important thing *we* can do when *others* are suffering, which very often is the *only* thing we can do, is to simply sit with them, abide them, and listen...if only to their silence.

Don't allow the limit others around you place on *their* faith to put a cap on your own faith.

Each person's Job-like experience is uniquely their own, and can never be fully understood or appreciated; not really.

When we suffer loss, grief, and misfortune, future blessings and bounty *never* replaces the pain we experience. Such pain must be carried forward *by* us into the rest of our days; forever altering how we view, understand, and meet the world.

While my week with Paul had me fully focused on *his* own challenging journey, our trip into Boston Thursday morning to the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute for bloodwork and a check-up was a vivid reminder that the world is *full* of Jobs.

*Everyone* takes their *own* turn at playing Job; it is inevitable and unavoidable. The *only* question is how many times will we be made to fill the role.

While cursing God only belies one's own lack of understanding of the creation and our own small place in it, there may come a point when dying, or allowing oneself to die, is *the* most faith-filled action we can take and the ultimate display of one's integrity.

It is imperative that we work hard to find the joy in our lives. Let us be grateful for what we *have* had and *do* have, even in the process of seeing it slip away.

Finally, all these things reminded me that persisting in one's integrity really comes down to the realization, in the words of the Gord Downie of The Tragically Hip, that this is no dress rehearsal, this *is* our life. Let us live it together, with

joy, for however long God extends us the privilege. Because, this is our privilege; and our responsibility as well. Amen.

