

## **Persisting In Integrity**

Job 1:1, 2:1-10 0

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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 3, 2021

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### **I.**

Though we must admit it probably isn't a very good day when one finds oneself flipping to the book of Job, when we need it, we are glad it is there. The book of Job certainly proves to be a great comfort in the midst of suffering, but it does raise some unusual and uncomfortable theological issues about the nature of God, the role of evil, and the relationship between Creator and Creation. Though my mind tells me that preaching on Job is biting off more than I care to chew my first Sunday back from vacation, my heart tells me the time is ripe, or full, to do so as I cannot seem to shake the beleaguered feeling I have these days about continuing to suffer under the weight and the lash of COVID.

### **II.**

On a day-to-day basis, I think most of us are doing fairly well; surprisingly well, actually, all things considered. Make no mistake about it, however, over time and in the sum of that time we are all being worn down and a mighty toll is being exacted. Each of us has learned to adapt and adjust in our own ways but, still, we encounter moments, occasions and contexts where the full impact of what besieges us is readily apparent and relentlessly present; when we find ourselves, like Job, scrapping sores with a potshard and sitting among the ashes. I can only imagine this is absolutely the case for those with school-aged children, for grandparents, for front-line workers, for teachers and educators, those who have suffered economic hardship and, most certainly, for those who have lost loved ones and friends.

### **III.**

Though certainly a lesser hardship, where I most acutely feel the loss in my own life, is on Sunday mornings: the vibe of excitement, the anticipation of who might show up to worship, the new faces that will greet us, what the kids will say and do and even just watching them grow from week to week, the ability to instantaneously connect with people, the mystical movement that happens when we are gathered all together in one space, coffee hour, the choir

singing joyfully, kids running around the place, the kitchen buzzing and, most particularly, the profusion of laughter which has always been the soundtrack of our lives together here on the Park.

Not that those of you who regularly attend these Sundays during COVID, in-person or via the stream, aren't exciting, or funny or are anything less than remarkable. Rather, it is a matter of the accumulative effect, and of building momentum from week to week and year to year; we've been knocked off our stride.

#### **IV.**

Worse, if I give myself over to it, I can easily be overwhelmed by fret, worry and woe. How long can we sustain this? Recognizing that much of attending worship is about forming the habit of doing so, how long will it take to re-habituate ourselves once the storm has past; whenever that may be? What will be the effect on the spiritual formation of the children of our church? How much more isolation can our older members endure? When will I run out of sermon inspiration without the weekly ebb and flow of our lives intimately intertwined together week in and week out as they once were? What is the cost to be paid for the joy unrealized due to our inability to work together, side by side and face to face? And, last but certainly not least, what will the impact of two years apart from one another be on the stewardship drive next month?

#### **V.**

Whereas the initial period of COVID saw us all pulling together and later, with the advent of the vaccines, we were given cause for celebration and the real hope of returning to normalcy, what we now face seems so *utterly* unnecessary and, therefore, all the more frustrating. It is easy to understand, therefore, sitting here on our own ash heap, that we might wish to seek to assign blame, to become angry, scornful or resentful; or, at the very least, exasperated to no end. Because, we can see no end to this, no light at the far side of the tunnel, no dawn about to break on the far-off horizon. And, my sisters and brothers, it is precisely *this* moment which poses the greatest threat to us. Not just a threat to our national welfare and community cohesion but, moreover, an existential threat to our spiritual well-being. We begin to hear the same question that was put to Job now being shouted in *our* direction: "Do you still persist in your integrity?"

## VI.

By way of summary, 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 but he forbids Satan to take Job’s life in the process. In the course of one day, Job receives four messages, each bearing separate 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.

## VII.

Satan appears in heaven yet again, and God grants him 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, struggling to accept 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.

## VIII.

This morning, then, we have the story of *Job’s* unnecessary suffering set against the backdrop of *our* continued and equally unnecessary suffering in this current chapter of the COVID saga. As for Job’s story, it 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.

## **IX.**

Job deplores the injustice that God lets 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.

## **X.**

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 are 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.

I would like to end today, however, not by lifting up Job’s *faith* but, rather, by illuminating 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.”

## **XI.**

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 slants 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.

## **XII.**

*Far* more destructive than any global pandemic, 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, this 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. Amen.