

Sunday March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Lent I

Job 20:1-11; 21:17-26

“Does Punishment Fit the Crime”

Three women die together in an accident, and go to heaven: When they get there, St. Peter says, “We only have one rule here in heaven; don't step on the ducks!” So, they enter heaven, and sure enough, there are ducks all over the place. It is almost impossible not to step on a duck, and although they try their best to avoid them, the first woman accidentally steps on one.

Well, along comes St. Peter with the ugliest man she ever saw. St. Peter chains them together and speaks. “Your punishment for stepping on a duck, is to spend eternity chained to this ugly man!” The next day, the second woman steps accidentally on a duck, and along comes St. Peter, who doesn't miss a thing. With him is another extremely ugly man. He chains them together with the same admonishment as for the first woman.

The third woman has observed all this, and not wanting to be chained for all eternity to an ugly man, is very careful where she steps. She manages to go months without stepping on any ducks. And then one day St. Peter comes up to her with the most handsome man she has ever laid eyes on - Very tall, long eyelashes, and muscular. St. Peter chains them together without saying a word. The happy woman says. “I wonder what I did to deserve being chained to you for all of eternity?” The guy says. “I don't know about you, but I stepped on a duck!”

As we wade into Zophar's second speech, there is a secret that I need to reveal to you right off the bat. In these debates, between Job and his friends, the one main point that emerges is that you can never, and I mean never, deduce the spiritual health of anyone by their current situation. It is absolutely impossible for any of us to talk with someone and know the full truth of their inner life. It is arrogance to ever think we know how someone feels or thinks.

The fact that Job's friends have made no effort to really listen to him, or understand him, is down right painful for Job, and maybe for us who are reading this interchange. One begins to wonder why Job listens to them at all. Why doesn't he just beg them to leave him alone? We might wonder at the value of even exploring these speeches, but maybe one of the reasons is to urge us to not speak to those suffering like these three friends.

They are pouring tons of salt into his deep wounds. We read last week, Bildad's spine tingling account of what Hell is like, and now Zophar gives his description. Despite the fact none of these men has ever been there, or experienced anything like what Job is experiencing. We can appreciate and even agree with the description of Hell, or judgment, on the wicked; but the three friends continue to misapply their convictions as it relates to Job.

Like the poetry of some of the Psalms, we begin to understand the dreadful nature of being under God judgment. After Bildad's graphic description of Hell, Job insists that he does not deserve this suffering. The reaction of Zophar is almost violent. He is so angry. Zophar can come to no other conclusion than Job is an unrepentant sinner. His world view, and religion, will not allow anything else. Zophar begins his diatribe, by stating his anger and frustration. Zophar cannot imagine Job will be vindicated, nor does he appreciate Job saying they will be judged.

Sunday March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Lent I

Zophar is taking all of this personally. Does Job not understand that from the very beginning of creation, there is an immutable spiritual law that all religious people understand. Zophar sums up the law in verse 5. “That exalting {the happiness, joy, mirth, laughter} of the wicked is short, and the joy of the godless but for a moment.”

This is the foundation for Zophar’s angry tirade. The wicked, no matter how successful they become or seem (the word Height is used here), it will not last. They will disappear from this age. They will be like a dream that dies when you wake in the morning. The wicked will also leave so little behind. Zophar references Job’s children in verse 10. In a nut shell there will be no lasting memorial for the wicked.

But the assumption that Job is experiencing this torment, because of his sin, is a false assumption. When Jesus died and suffered, the happiness he experienced as a child with Mary, his mother, would likely seem short lived. As Isaiah 53 says, Jesus, “was a man of sorrows... acquainted with grief.” Jesus was cut down in his prime, but for our sin, not for any sin he had. This is redemptive suffering, of which Job is tasting in his life.

Zophar goes on to say that the wicked enjoy food that tastes good, but it will turn out to be poison. Sin is that unnatural poison. Its taste, its lure of indulgence, hides its destructive nature. Evil tastes good, but it makes us very sick. Evil seems so good, that the one indulging in it rolls it around in their mouths savouring every bit. But once we swallow it, our stomach starts to churn and we vomit it up. God will not tolerate us ingesting it.

Evil will never deliver what it promises. If you are enjoying a good life, with lots of material benefits from ill gotten gains, or the oppression of others, you will become eternally sick. Zophar is therefore implying Job has oppressed the poor, which we know he hasn’t. At the beginning of the book, we are told that he is generous and kind to others. Zophar’s final words are even more blunt. We reap what we sow, but more than that, we experience God’s wrath.

A wicked person is never satisfied. No matter how bloated by things his life becomes, he will still want more. A billionaire was asked once how much money is enough. The reply is telling, he said, “A little bit more”. God’s wrath is like iron tipped arrows that go right through a man. Zophar mentions right through the gall bladder. The reference is meant for us to think of bile which speaks of the evil being struck out of us.

Zophar’s point is clear enough, but he misapplies it. Yes, this is what happens to a wicked person ultimately. It’s a graphic picture of judgment. But again, it does not apply to Job. As Jesus suffered without guilt for us, Zophar’s speech lets us gather an even greater appreciation and admiration for what Jesus did on the cross. As Acts 14:22 reads, “Through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God.”

When we experience short lived joy, cut off by grief, we are following in the footsteps of Jesus. When believers feel their life is poisoned by the fruit of the wickedness of others, we are walking in the footsteps of Jesus. So, when we walk in a world under judgment, we remember Job walked there before us, and we should not be surprised.

Sunday March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Lent I

Job is tired of all this nonsense, but he is really angry at God. Job agrees with his friends that bad things happen to bad people, but even a casual exploration of people around them will also show that wicked people sometimes do quite well for themselves. Sometimes the wicked do not get what they deserve, and if that is so, is it also not possible that a good person could receive what they do not deserve?

Job wishes his friends would return to their silence which they kept at the beginning. Job believes he has discerned the flaw in their religious system, and he pleads for them to be silent and stop mocking him. But Job is not really complaining about his friends, he is complaining about God. If this was a simple theological debate, we could expect civility and measured words, but this is personal for Job. He is in great pain.

His is a life and death struggle for justification before God. Job's friends do not seem to grasp the seriousness or significance of his suffering. They are actually observing right in front of them what Hell is like. Job is horrified, and dismayed by all this, and it makes him shudder. It makes no sense given what he observes in the lives of wicked people. Job observes that wicked people live long lives and have enormous power.

If the religious system that the three friends are promoting is true, then why do wicked people prosper? Their own observations of wicked people, invalidates their neatly order system. Zophar has said that the exulting of the wicked is short lived, but that is not always true. It seems like a long moment to Job. We find a similar observation in Malachi 3:14,15. The Jews of Malachi's day asked it in unbelief.

“What is the profit of keeping our charge...? Because evil does not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.” Job demonstrates his faith to us by holding onto his beliefs, namely in the righteousness of God, even when there seems to be evidence that refutes it. Job's implied answer to his own question is, that the wicked prosper because there is no moral order to the universe, no principle, and no justice.”

Job goes on to describe how the wicked show no sign of judgement upon them. He first notices that they have children, and their children grow up to do great things. Their houses are safe from fear. Their family life is filled with music and happiness. Today we might describe someone like this as morally bankrupt, but having the best of the world. This is despite all the evidence that they are truly wicked people.

They want nothing to do with God. “Leave us alone” they say. They do not want God meddling in their lives. They want to make their own laws, and do things their way, without interference. This is the polar opposite of true piety. Psalm 24:4 reads, “Make me know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.” The wicked echo the Satan's question at the beginning. What is it about God that makes him worthy of our devotion? What's in it for me?

The wicked are only attracted to the “prosperity gospel”, because their comfort and success is all that matters to them. And anything that threatens that, including God, cannot be a part of their lives. The wicked do not believe they need God to make them rich. They can do it by their own effort. They see themselves as a self-made man or woman.

Sunday March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Lent I

The wicked condemn themselves by their own words, but they are so rarely punished, and certainly not like Job. Bildad said the light of the wicked is put out, but how often does that really happen? The comforters do claim they are worthless creatures before God's holiness, but still they prosper. Ultimately, Job does believe that one day, all people, wicked or not, will be judged. The wrath of God hangs over them whether they know it or not.

In the New Testament, Jesus talks about this in his parables. The wheat and the chaff, the wheat and the tares and the sheep and the goats etc. Job agrees with Ezekiel 18 that it would be unjust if the wicked were not to receive their just desserts when they meet God. Job contrasts two deaths here that may sound familiar to us. He talks about the wicked man who lives a life of ease and a man who lives a bitter but faithful life like Job.

They both die and lay side by side in the cemetery. So, who had the better life? We might conclude it was the former man even though he was wicked and godless. To me this section reminds me of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. They both die and the rich man goes to eternal torment while Lazarus goes to the "bosom of Abraham". Job simply cannot see what Jesus lays out yet, because of his own pain.

His three friends say wicked people come to ruin, but it is Job who came to ruin. Bildad insisted that their home, their tent, would be brushed away from the earth. There will be no trace of them. But is that at all true. Where is the proof of your well-ordered religious conviction? People do not even confront them of their wickedness, because they fear them, and so they continue to prosper.

Sure, they ultimately die but they do so in their sleep. They have grand funerals, and people create monuments to honour them, and even guard them so they will not be desecrated. And they rest peacefully, in the "valley", meaning the burial grounds. These evil men and woman live what clearly is an evil life, and there are lots of them, and yet they do not suffer as I do, Job is saying.

Job concludes as he began, by asking them to "shut up", as this is the only way they can give him comfort. Their system, that they love so much and rely on so heavily, is garbage, and just a casual observation of people proves that. It is hurtful, even stupid to try and deduce someone's spiritual health by a person's situation. Philip Yancy tried to make sense of the unfairness in life in his book "Disappointment with God". (Pg 179-181)

*At some point, every human being confronts the mysteries that caused Job to tremble in terror. Is God unfair? One option seemed obvious to Job's wife: "Curse God and die!" she advised. Why hold on to a sentimental belief in a loving God when so much in life conspires against it? And in this Job-like century, more people than ever before have come to agree with her.*

*Some Jewish writers, such as Jerzy Kosinski and Elie Wiesel, began with a strong faith in God, but saw it vaporize in the gas furnaces of the Holocaust. Face to face with history's grossest unfairness, they concluded that God must not exist. (Still, the human instinct asserts itself. Kosinski and Wiesel overlook the underlying issue of where our primal sense of fairness comes from. Why ought we even expect the world to be fair?)*

Sunday March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Lent I

*Others, equally mindful of the world's unfairness, cannot bring themselves to deny God's existence. Instead, they propose another possibility: perhaps God agrees that life is unfair, but cannot do anything about it. Rabbi Harold Kushner took this approach in his best-selling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. After watching his son die of the disease progeria, Kushner concluded that "even God has a hard time keeping chaos in check," and that God is "a God of justice and not of power."*

*According to Rabbi Kushner, God is as frustrated, even outraged, by the unfairness on this planet as anyone else, but he lacks the power to change it. Millions of readers found comfort in Kushner's portrayal of a God who seemed compassionate, albeit weak. I wonder, however, what those people make of the last five chapters of Job, which contain God's "self-defense." No other part of the Bible conveys God's power so impressively. If God is less-than-powerful, why did he choose the worst possible situation, when his power was most called into question, to insist on his omnipotence? (Elie Wiesel said of the God described by Kushner, "If that's who God is, why doesn't he resign and let someone more competent take his place?")*

*A third group of people evade the problem (of God's unfairness) by looking to the future, when an exacting justice will work itself out in the universe. Unfairness is a temporary condition, they say. The Hindu doctrine of Karma, which applies a mathematical precision to this belief, calculates it may take a soul 6,800,000 incarnations to realize perfect justice. At the end of all those incarnations, a person will have experienced exactly the amount of pain and pleasure that he or she deserves.*

*A fourth approach is to flatly deny the problem and insist the world is fair. Echoing Job's friends, these people insist the world does run according to fixed, regular laws: good people will prosper and evil ones will fail. I encountered this point of view at the faith-healing church in Indiana, and I hear it virtually every time I watch religious television, where some evangelist promises perfect health and financial prosperity to anyone who asks for it in true faith.*

And finally, there is one more way to explain the world's unfairness. After hearing all the alternatives, Job was driven to the conclusion I have suggested as the one-sentence summary of the entire book: Life is unfair! And the only way to cope with this unfairness is to lean on the rock of our salvation; Jesus.