

My apologies to the Bible study crew because they have already heard this story, but it is the one that always pops into my head whenever I think of the book of Job. At my first call, we had two services, a contemporary and a traditional. The contemporary service was where all of my kids were, but because it was a condensed service, only about 50 minutes, there was never time for a children's sermon. The kids would go do Sunday school stuff during the sermon, but I never got a chance to talk to them during the service. So I decided that once a month instead of preaching my regular sermon, I would have an extended children's sermon and they would help me build it. I had a shoebox that a different kid got to bring home every month and bring back with whatever they would like to, within reason, and I had to build my sermon off of its contents. You can imagine the odd chaos this created. One of my family's put an Ohio State shirt in it once which at least gave me a clear direction on a Bible story: Jesus tells us to love our enemies. However, there was one Sunday...where the contents of the box were absolutely nothing of what I expected.

All of my kids come up and little Madison hands me the box saying that she put items from her favorite Bible story in it. So I'm thinking, ok, cool, maybe Noah's Ark, the Good Shepherd, some kind of biblical softball. I open the box and start pulling out multiple figurines, people, animals, a

house, and she proudly declares, “It’s Job!” and I just...sat there, slightly stunned, because number one, what kid knows the Job story to begin with? Number two, what kid who knows the Job story decides it’s their favorite story rather than the stuff of nightmares and faith crises? I have no memory at all of what I spun for that children’s sermon, but it always reminds me of one simple fact, Job is just not the book I want to turn to for faith lessons, and yet, here we are...and sometimes the books we want to avoid, in fact, contain the deepest lessons that we need.

Just in case any of us have not done a recent reading of this random book snuck into the middle of the Old Testament, let’s have a quick refresher of Job. Job begins as though Satan and God have sidled up to a card table in Vegas and are trying to figure out which of them will blink first. Satan tells God that he has just come from roaming the ends of the earth and God asks Satan if he came across God’s faithful servant Job? God says there is no one like Job on earth, faithful, devoted, blameless, upright, a perfect example of faith, and to that Satan lays down what he thinks are a pair of aces. “Does Job fear God for nothing?” Satan says that the only reason that Job is so upright and goody two shoes is because he has everything he needs. God has taken care of him so why would Job be anything *but* faithful? Satan pokes the bear, what if Job had everything

taken away from him? If that happened, Satan bets that Job's faith would not only falter, but crumble. Then...in a somewhat stunning turn of events, God says, I'll take that bet, you can do whatever you want to Job short of taking his life and he will not stumble.

What follows is part horror movie, part tear jerker. Job loses *everything*. His house, his land, his animals, his *children*. His body becomes ravaged by sores and ailments and he finds himself sitting in sackcloth and ashes with nothing left of his life, minus his wife and three friends who come by to...help. Everyone's version of help for Job is some variation of, my dude, just confess your sins, admit whatever wrong you did that caused all of this devastation, and everything will go back to how it should be, your blessings will return. Because to them, the only explanation for why something this dramatic and awful had happened to Job was that he had to have committed some sort of next level sin. He had to be being punished for a reason, anything else is unfathomable. And yet, Job is relentless. He will not back down. No matter how many arguments they make, no matter how many times that they try, Job refuses to admit to any wrongdoing, he knows his heart is still pure, so he has nothing to confess. In the midst of all of this pain, suffering, and frankly annoyance from his friends, you would expect that Job's faith would stumble. You might start to

think that Satan is going to win this bet, but it never happens. Job remains ardently steadfast, his faith sure. He may question why this is happening to him, but he will never question God's presence with him, God's everlasting faithfulness to him, and thus we get our first lesson today, a text that has been quoted for centuries, with hymns written about it and theological treatises centered around it. In the face of all this pain Job says, "I know that my Redeemer, (or vindicator as our translation says) lives."

Job has been enduring the first few rounds of his friends speeches and admonitions. They have talked and talked and talked, trying to convince him over and over again that the only explanation for what has happened to him is sin. Eventually, they take a break to breathe and Job gets a chance to get a word in edgewise. He tells them that even after the end of the world, if everything has been destroyed, he will see God face to face. He believes that the one who will rescue him, save him, redeem him is real, alive, active. His pain and suffering is temporary, God is forever. His losses do not mean a loss of faith or a loss of God's presence in his life. He knows, he believes, he trusts that God remains steadfast, present in his life, even in the midst of grief, hardship, and pain. It is a strikingly radical statement, one that his friends cannot comprehend because they continue on for multiple more chapters, but Job does not cease in his belief. Eventually he absolutely yells

at God about what has happened to him, but his faith never wavers. The world might end, his pain may be great, but his Redeemer lives, and that is what is permanent, everything else is temporary, and thus survivable.

In so many ways, this response from Job pulls us in opposing directions, on the one hand, this is the faith that we not only aspire to, but most of the time profess, and on the other hand, we kind of, though we are sometimes loathe to admit, want Job's friends to be right. We know that it flies in the face of our Lutheran convictions and faith, but sometimes we just want this to be how the world works, right? That those who do bad things have bad things happen to them, and the upright go untouched. If something bad happens to us, it must be in response to something that we have done. We want things to function that way because it feels fair, it seems like a just way for the world to work, and yet...when looked at through the lens of faith, it puts far too much control in our hands. If what happens to us depends on what we do, well then, where exactly does God fit into the equation? Just kind of a backseat driver, who hangs around and doles out gold stars based on our actions? That ends up not being much of a relationship, but a supply and demand. We supply good things to God and then demand an equal response.

The Job response though...the Job situation...well, it isn't fair and it isn't always just and it isn't based on some elementary school gold star system. Job's faith is one that is healthy, mature, and unbelievably hard to walk with. Job's faith forces us to admit that bad things are going to happen, and happen most of the time with zero explanation or cause. The pain that we experience, the hurt that assails us is most of the time random and without reason, and has nothing to do with God. God does not dole out punishments and rewards like a its trick or treat. What God does is exactly what Job professes, God remains steadfast, God remains ever present, even in the midst of the hard, the awful, and the unthinkable.

The call that we face every day is to figure out which side of this equation we fall on. Do we let the slings and arrows of the world dictate our faith, believing like Job's friends that everyone gets what they deserve and telling others that we think just that? Or do we find the strength and courage of Job to admit the hard, that things happen beyond our comprehension, beyond our sense of reason and fairness, and that is not because God *caused* them or because we did anything to deserve them, and they certainly do not mean that God is not there. And that's what we can learn and hopefully hold on to from Job and all his messiness. In the face of a world gone mad, in a life that can be completely chaotic and unknowable, God remains steadfast.

In the face of hurricanes and violence and uncertainty and angst amongst God's children, God remains. When everything around us feels hard and impossible, God remains. When we do not understand what is going on around us, God remains. God remains the one who sent Jesus to be our Redeemer, the one to stand in and say these sins are forgiven, and only love remains. The faith of Job is not one that lets us off the hook of the difficulty of the world, it solidly and entirely owns that the hard is going to happen, the unthinkable is going to happen, BUT it assures us over and over again that we will not go through the hard and unthinkable alone.

It takes an immense amount of strength and courage to hold onto that kind of faith in this the year of our Lord 2025, but when we walk together, not as Job's friends, trying to point fingers and pick and choose what should and shouldn't happen, but as loving, grace-filled children of God committed to remaining steadfast in our faith and living it out as best as we can, it is possible. The world will continue to spin, but God will continue to remain, and when one of us stumbles may the rest of us be there to pick them up. May we be the voice that reminds each other that our Redeemer lives, that we are not alone, and that no matter what assails us, no matter what the world brings, God will continue on and on and on, steadfast and steadily by our side, for now and on into forever. **AMEN!!!**