



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker

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## For the Integrity of Job: An Answer that Answers—Somewhat Mysteriously

Scripture Lessons: Job 16:7-14, Job 19:23-27

Once upon a time, in the land of Uz, there was a man whose name was Job . . . Have you considered my servant Job?—Job: 1:1, 1:8, 2:3

It [the Book of Job] is the greatest thing ever written with pen. There is nothing, I think, written in the Bible or out of it of equal merit—Thomas Carlyle, Scottish essayist and historian (1795-1881)

The Book of Job is “the struggle for the last truth about God.”—Johannes Hempel, as quoted in *Job* by Samuel E. Ballentine

In the end—as with many a book of dialogues—the author of Job is playing both sides with his whole heart. His answer is neither Job’s nor the comforters’ nor, for that matter, even God’s, but all three together—which is to say, his answer is the back-and-forth of the book itself.—James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now*

### **Preface to First Scripture Lesson**

“Once upon a time, in the land of Uz, there lived a man whose name was Job . . .”

Stop there. You know the story. Even if you don’t know the Bible, you **know** the story. Along with the stories of Adam and Eve, and Noah and his ark, it has made its way—it has rifted its way—into our popular culture, our art and literature, our plays and movies, our classrooms (even our secular ones), our imaginations, and deep into our collective consciousness. It’s even made its way into our language: we speak of “the suffering of Job,” “the patience of Job,” “the comforters of Job,” and “the integrity of Job.”

“Once upon a time” the story begins. And like all good stories, especially like all good fairy tales, if you get inside it, if you allow it to get inside you, you know it’s your story, too, our story, our human story. Job—a good and righteous man his whole life, a prosperous and generous man, a pious and God-fearing man, a family man, a man loved by God and all who knew him, Job is struck by a series of disasters, both natural—fire, wind, and water—and man-made—the attacking Chaldean army, the counter-attacking Sabeen army, marauders from both sides—and so loses everything: all his adult children, dead; all his property and wealth, gone.

And then he’s afflicted with loathsome sores, from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head. To find relief, he sits on an ash heap, takes a scrap of pottery and scrapes himself all over—and he finds no relief. His wife, who suffers all the calamities with him, offers no relief either. “Do you still persist in your integrity?” she demands of him. “Curse God and die.”

He doesn’t. But at times—several times, in fact, throughout most of the Book, in fact—Job demands an answer from God: “Why me, Lord? Why me?” “What have I ever done to deserve this?” And for a long time, receiving no satisfactory answer, he answers his own question—he blames God; God is his adversary, his enemy.

And this, too, is part of our story. Listen now for God’s word . . .

### **Preface to Second Scripture Lesson**

It’s not just that Job suffers; and it’s not just that he suffers undeservedly; it’s that his suffering never seems to end; it’s just one unthinkable horror after another after another—both natural and man-made, each more unthinkable than the last.

And in this way, too, Job’s story is our story: we all feel like that at times—both individually and collectively—for example, now, in the city of Dayton.

And yet in the midst of such seemingly ceaseless suffering, Job also at times shows a resilience, a strength, he gives evidence of a faith in both word and deed that is . . . well . . . beautiful. At times like these, he's "#JOB STRONG." Most famously he says: "I know that my redeemer lives," And at these moments, he is sure that God is not his adversary, but his friend, sure that despite everything, God is on his side.

And this, too, is part of our story. Our second Scripture Lesson, Job 19:23-27, offers an example of that strength. Listen now for God's Word . . .

### Sermon

"The integrity of Job." The phrase occurs six times in the Book of Job; where even God recognizes, praises, and ultimately rewards, the integrity of Job. But what does it mean? "WE CALL BS."—that's what it means; and that's how the integrity of Job manifests itself in the Book of Job: "WE CALL BS."

You may remember *that* phrase from February 2018, when Emma Gonzalez, a senior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida, addressed a gun control rally a few days after a gunman entered her school, killing 17 people and wounding 17 others.

"We call BS": that's what Gonzalez said at the rally, that's what she said to all the equivocations and prevarications, to all the evasions and rationalizations, to all the misrepresentations and dissimulations, to all the pseudo-reasons as to why nothing could be done to prevent such shootings, that's what she said to all the politicians sending out their thoughts and prayers while doing nothing else. "We call BS." And that's what Job says to his so-called comforters, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar.

What those so-called comforters do is blame Job for his suffering: "You must have done *something* wrong to deserve this," they say to him so many ways. "If not openly, than secretly; if not you, than someone in your family." But Job will not yield on this point: he knows it's not true:

"How long will you torment me," he asks them, "and break me in pieces with your words? These ten times you have cast reproach upon me; are you not ashamed to wrong me?" Ten times, these so-called comforters have reproached him—and we're only halfway through the Book. It gets worse: his "friends'" condemnations of him grow more heated and heartless, and Job's outrage, his sense of being wronged both by God and by them, more angry and adamant.

If ever there was a case of adding insult to injury . . . Bad enough that Job has suffered—and continues to suffer—all that he has. But now: to be broken into pieces by words of reproach, by his supposed friends, no less . . . The problem is that their answers just don't answer. That is, the conventional, stock-in-trade, all-ancient-near-east-sages-in-the-wisdom-tradition-say-this-or-something-like-this: "God rewards-the-righteous-and-punishes-the-wicked" answers that they offer Job—they don't acknowledge, they don't address, they don't do justice to, the truth of Job's situation. They don't answer. And Job knows it. He knows this truth in his heart: he doesn't deserve this; this is wrong.

And so Job calls BS. He says:

*Far be it from me to say that you are right; until I die, I will not put away my integrity from me.  
I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days.*

Job will not accept lies as truth, even when lies are dressed up as wisdom, especially when lies as dressed up as wisdom and *the* truth—therein, his integrity.

And as Job's frustration with his friends mounts, he becomes even more convinced of one thing: there is only one whose answer can answer, and that one is God. Job wants an audience with God; he wants to make his case before God; he wants an answer from God; in fact, he demands it. He says:

*But I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God.*

And then to make the contrast even sharper, Job turns to his friends and says:

*As for you, you whitewash with lies; all of you are worthless physicians.  
If you would only keep silent, that would be your wisdom!  
Your maxims are proverbs of ashes, your defenses are defenses of clay.*

And then he tells his friends to *be* silent, so that he can speak to God, come what may:

*Let me have silence, and I will speak [to God], and let come on me what may.  
See, he will kill me; I have no hope; but I will defend my ways to his face.*

To see God face-to-face, to get an answer direct from God, even if it kills him (“See God and die” is the old Biblical proverb)—that’s all Job wants now. And he gets it.

There is a moment of silence, as there often is before such things. Then, Job and his friends begin to hear the whirlwind, faintly, far away at first, but soon enough they can’t even hear themselves think, much less talk to each other. The whirlwind simply blows Job’s friends out of the conversation. God is in that whirlwind. And that whirlwind envelopes Job. And once Job is in the whirlwind . . . another moment of silence. And then God speaks:

*Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?  
Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall answer me.  
Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.  
Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?  
On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone  
when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?*

And believe me, God is just warming up here; he’s got four more chapters to go. But even this early, the question arises: Do we need to call BS on God? I mean does God’s answer answer? Or is God simply intimidating Job, bullying him into submission? After all, *all* Job wants to know is why he suffers so much, and so undeservedly. And *all* God wants to do is point out just how impressive his creation is, and just how little Job understands of it. Isn’t that a non-answer to Job’s question, an answer that also does not answer? I don’t think so. But to see that, you have to pay attention to what God is saying, and you have to remember that it is God who is saying it. And then, if you do, like Job, you will see the glory of it all and the glory of the Lord.

What’s remarkable in what God says are the examples that God gives: the countless examples—the striking, singular, unique, idiosyncratic, particularistic examples from all over creation: the mountain goats giving birth every year, the ostrich’s wings flapping wildly even though its pinions lack plumage, the stiffness of the whale’s tale, the muscles in the belly of an ox, the hawk soaring, the eagle making its nest on high... the constellations Orion and Pleiades shining above, the whales’s sneezing flashing forth light in the sea, its eyes being like the eyelids of the dawn, the lion crouching in its den, the rain falling, the dew dropping and the frost covering the hills.

If you saw the movie *Secretariat* a few years back, you may remember another example. God says to Job:

*Do you give the horse its might? Do you clothe its neck with mane?  
Do you make it leap like the locust? Its majestic snorting is terrible.  
It paws violently, exults mightily; It laughs at fear, and is not dismayed;  
With fierceness and rage it swallows the ground; it cannot stand still at the sound of the trumpet.  
When the trumpet sounds, it says ‘Aha!’*

The snorting of the horse—one of the countless, striking, singular, unique, idiosyncratic, particularistic examples from all over creation that God gives—the terrible, majestic snorting of the horse.

There’s no logical pattern here: no movement from macrocosm to microcosm here; no orderly progression from animal to vegetable to mineral, or from one kind of animal to another, or from one part of an animal to another. Instead, what we get is countless examples, one example piled on another, piled on another, piled on another—from the the dwelling place of light, to the gates of death, to the doors of the sea, to the egg of the ostrich—all designed not so much to speak to Job’s reason as to evoke his awe and wonder. It’s as if God is saying, “Choose anything, anywhere, in all creation—or choose any part of anything in any part of anywhere in all creation—and whatever, wherever you choose, you will see that the universe is far, far greater than what you can understand or control—and you will see my glory.”

The glory of the Lord: that is the answer the answers Job’s question. The glory of the Lord. Next to the glory of the Lord, nothing else matters; there is nothing else. It is the beginning and the end, the fulfillment of all things. And what’s even more remarkable is that Job sees the glory of the Lord not just in the things God has created, but in the Lord himself. He sees God. When God has finished speaking—and it takes a while—Job says: “Before, I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.”

Job sees the glory of God. Just like the shepherds in the field that night—"and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.' And suddenly, with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host: Glory to God, Glory to God in the highest"—just like the shepherds in the field that night, Job sees the glory of God.

Job has seen God—and lived, lived not only to *tell* the tale, but but to *be* the tale. He not only lives, he prospers: In the end God rewards him with all the good things of life twice over. And they all live happily ever after. It's a fairy tale ending of course, because . . . well, because it's a fairy tale. And like all good stories, especially like all good fairy tales, if you get inside it, if you allow it to get inside you, you know it's your story, too, our story, our human story.

So where do we, today, here in Dayton, see the glory of the Lord? *Not* in the whirlwind, most decidedly *not* in the whirlwind. If I might address a word to God: "No more whirlwinds, for a while—a long while—OK?" But maybe we see the glory of the Lord in the acts of love and kindness of human beings in response to the suffering that has beset us.

Last Monday, one Dayton police officer wrote the following on Facebook:

*One person managed to kill 9 people in Dayton yesterday. The media coverage made sure the nation and the world knew about it within minutes. Please give me a just a little bit of your time to tell you something that wasn't extensively covered. I'd like to share some real experiences with you:*

*Some people managed to give a hug to a cop who really needed it. This happened multiple times throughout the day yesterday. Some people managed to travel from Cincinnati, Indianapolis, and other places to Dayton to show their support for our city.*

*Some people managed to hand out flowers to every first responder they saw. One person managed to put up a sign on the front of their business in the Oregon district showing their gratitude for First Responders.*

*Some people shook the hand of a cop, looked him in the eye, and said "thank you for what you do."*

*Some people opened up their businesses to help support the ongoing investigation and cleanup efforts, so that the workers could eat and stay hydrated without leaving the scene.*

*There are undoubtedly more examples that I don't know about: countless others who showed unconditional love; countless others still who did so many good deeds for people who needed it. The good deeds, the hugs, the kind words, the love, and the caring all outweigh the evil of what one person did in Dayton yesterday.*

*The love continues today, and it will undoubtedly flow forth in the weeks to come.*

*One person managed to kill 9 people in Dayton yesterday. But I am not going to look to that person to define the nature of the world for me. I will instead look to the many who set the example and lead the way through with a comforting word or gesture. They give us—they give everyone—hope.*

So wrote one Dayton police officer on Facebook.

We have seen God's glory. We have seen God's glory in the the examples, the countless examples—the striking, singular, unique, idiosyncratic, particularistic examples from all over Dayton and from all over creation—examples of God's unconditional love. We have seen the glory of it all, and the glory of the Lord.

*I know that my redeemer lives and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;  
then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.*

And in the meantime, what can we say to those who say that there's nothing we can do to prevent—nothing we can do in response—to such suffering? We can say this: "We call BS." That is our integrity.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.