

Susan Gascho-Cooke
October 28, 2018
Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster
Job 42:10-17
“Whose Happily Ever After Is It, Anyway?”
link to audio of sermon:

This morning we continue our deep dive into the book of Job. Three weeks ago I gave an overview of the book—it’s two stories, and it’s two Jobs.

The first story, and the first Job, come from a fairy-tale style prose story that comprises chapters 1, 2 and 42 of the book of Job. Here we hear that Job was a righteous man, and therefore a prosperous one. But a member of God’s court questions Job’s integrity, thinking that Job is only righteous because he is wealthy. This accuser, or *ha satan*, convinces God to let him test Job. So, Job’s servants, livestock, children and health are taken away. It is this Job who inspires the phrase, “the patience of Job,” because he simply accepts his suffering and God’s answer for it. This Patient Job is rewarded with a “restoration” of fortune –new flocks, new servants, new wealth and new kids.

But there’s a second story and a second Job, spliced in the middle of the story of Patient Job. This is a 39 chapter detour into the land of Impatience – in which Job laments his suffering, laments his very birth, and demands that God give an accounting for his own suffering and that of the world. Impatient Job would not be “silenced by the darkness in which he found himself, nor by the deep gloom that covered his face” (Job 23:17). In response, Louise Ranck led us in singing new verses to *Come bring your burdens to God ...* In the spirit of this second Job, we sang: *Come, bring your anger to God, Come, bring your loud voices to God ... Come, bring your suffering to God, for Jesus will never say no.*

Last week, Naomi Washington Leapheart invited us into a deeper conversation with Job, putting Job in conversation with Dr. John Gottman of the Relationship Research Institute. Gottman’s work looks at how couples give bids for one another’s attention and care, and tracks how couples respond to one another’s bids. Certain negative responses (contempt, criticism, stonewalling and defensiveness), they found, are high predictors of future divorce, and high indicators of current toxicity.¹

The lectionary text from Job for that week was God’s first response to Job – a slamming rebuttal to Job, spoken out of a storm. *Is the God we’re presented with in Job a gaslighter and toxic relationship partner? If so, how must we respond?* Leapheart asked us to consider.

It’s a question that may feel shocking for a Christian pulpit, but those questions are actually very much in the vein of Jewish teaching and midrash on the book of Job.

As I was working on this sermon yesterday, my husband said to me – “have you seen today’s news?” Well, no, I hadn’t. *What now??* I wondered. You’ll know that what he was referring to was the incoming news of the shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. We now know that eleven are dead.

Within a 72-hour window this week there were three hate crimes:

1. the killing of of the eleven Jewish Americans in worship in Pittsburgh, by a man who’d posted online anti-Semitic words
2. the killing of 2 African-Americans in a grocery store in Kentucky, since the shooter’s intended target, a Black church, had its doors locked at the time. The white

perpetrator told another white man who eventually confronted him: “Don’t worry, I won’t shoot you. Whites don’t kill whites.”

3. the explosive devices mailed to Democratic politicians and high-profile Democratic supporters

In light of the most recent hate crime *du jour* happening to a Jewish worshipping community, I found myself wanting to know more about Jewish readings of the book of Job. Surely they have much to say about undeserved suffering.

I found an inspiring virtual conversation partner in contemporary Jewish poet and scholar Alicia Ostriker, in her essay “Job: The Open Book.” In it she writes:

“From the wellspring of the Book of Job there flows a river of living waters of opposition to authority within Judaism that has affected all of Western history. The saying ‘two Jews, three opinions’ marks Jewish culture as a culture that values argument. Is there another major religion in which human beings habitually argue with their God? Is there another major religion so preoccupied with dissent & with issues of social justice? The idea of interrogating God has streamed through Jewish literature for centuries. In the post-Holocaust world it assumes major proportions....

... we may remember that historical Judaism originates in a slave rebellion and an advocacy of freedom which continue to resound in the aspirations and rhetoric of oppressed people throughout the world. The role of the prophets includes a steady attack on the corruptions of Israelite ruling classes—kings and priests alike. Notwithstanding the centrality of ritual in the Israelite community, Isaiah for example is the mouthpiece of a God who two and a half millennia ago says ‘I hate, I despise your offerings,’ and demands that his people feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and help the oppressed. Social justice as opposed to whatever authority resists it, including the authority of God himself, is a core motivation in Jewish history...

“As a marginal population Jewish writers have been social critics; and as a people whose survival depended on a Book and not a territory they developed intellectual institutions whereby continual study and constant reinterpretation of that Book was the highest vocation to which a [person] could aspire.”²

So, a voice such as Job’s, even a voice that dares to curse God, is given a place *within* the stream of tradition, not outside it, in Judaism. And I wonder, what does this tradition do with the “happily ever after” happy ending of Job? For that’s where the lectionary takes us today—back to the little prose fairy tale, with its spoonful of sugared happy ending to wash down the bitter words of the previous 41 chapters.

I’m reminded of the way my Kurdish friends from northern Iraq taught me to drink hot tea. Instead of sweetening their tea by pouring granulated sugar in and stirring it up until it dissolves, they would put a lump of sugar on their tongue and keep it there as they sipped their tea black. I found it to be a fascinating, but rather jarring, experience. Each sip was a clash of bitter and sweet simultaneously, for the tea wasn’t in your mouth long enough to dissolve the sugar.

For me, reading the book of Job and then coming to this “happily ever after” ending is like drinking a whole cup of tea unsweetened, only to be given a lump of sugar for your

tongue when there's one swig of tea left. It's a valiant attempt to sweeten the last swig of the book, but even a whole lump of sugar can't cancel the bitterness. After the confusing clash of too-bitter and too-sweet in your mouth, you're left with a lump of sugar on your tongue which is just too much of a good thing far too late.

What, you may ask, is wrong with "happily ever after"? Doesn't that sound pretty good right about now—and isn't that what Job deserves after all his suffering?

Well, yes, of course Job "deserves" resolution and restoration. But what does restoration look like in the face of the loss of your whole family?

Here, again, are Alicia Ostriker's powerful words:

"But when I think of the supposedly happy ending, in which Job has ten nice new sons and daughters to replace the ones God killed off on a bet, I feel I am hearing a scream thousands of years old, or as if that scream inhabits my own throat. For I too am a mother. To me, the reparation offered in the epilogue is obscene. I imagine that one day Job's wife (that is to say, collective womankind) will gather the chutzpah to question God the way Abraham did, the way Jeremiah did, the way her husband did. I try to imagine her confrontation with God, and what she demands as reparation. That day is not yet, and may not be for centuries. Yet the Book of Job asks me to imagine it. Perhaps the Book of Job asks me to imagine all those who have been silenced, all who have been consigned to nonentity, at last finding their voices, at last demanding response. The poor, the illiterate, the sexual [minority], the victims of war and violence, the animals, the earth itself..."³

I think she's right. I think these are the things that the book of Job asks us to imagine. But unlike her, I think that the day is here, the time is *now*, to do so.

One of the issues that came up in the first week of John Rudy's Adult Christian Education series, which continues this morning, was a discussion on the hypothetical situation of an intruder coming into your home and threatening violence against your family. *What do you do?* Someone replied to the effect of: *You cannot expect yourself to suddenly, and for the first time do a tremendously difficult, counter-cultural act, in a moment of acute stress.*

If a creative act of non-violent resistance is what you hope you'll do, you cannot leave it to adrenaline and epiphany. In order to improvise in the moment, you must have practiced the melody 1,000 times, and know your instrument and your scales as intimately as a lover. If you want to be able to use a muscle, you must exercise it.

One of the things we are seeing in our culture in this moment is the realization that our muscles of questioning authority, of demanding accountability in any significant way, are critically de-conditioned.

We see this in the facts of the rampant *isms* in our country. We see this in clergy abuse and domestic violence. We are better practiced at obedience and deference to authority than we are at saying, "No" to injustice, no matter whose hands it comes at.

I believe it is one of the reasons that much of American Christianity seems to have rolled over, belly-up, in front of a President who doesn't even claim to be a Christian, and doesn't even pay lip service to Gospel ethics. We have deferred to and worshiped, far too easily, anything with a "Hello, my name is God" sticker attached, with far too little

questioning of where the label came from, and whether it is in fact the living God wearing it.

Many of the stories in the Bible were simply not written to be taken literally. Readers/listeners were *assumed* to be grappling with the stories, questioning whether the “God” in this story or that was really Yahweh or, in fact, a golden calf

The Bible was written with the expectation that we would argue with it. That we would seek to expose what was not godly and refuse to bow down before anything or anyone that turned out to be an idol. But these, again, are muscles that require exercise, and American Christianity is not a very athletic endeavor

We often parent our own children in 2018 in such a way that we expect obedience “just because.” Because I am older. Because I am “wiser.” Because I have responsibilities you can’t fathom. Because I know what’s best for you (better than you do). A parenting model pretty much exactly in the mold of the God in the whirlwind responding to Job. And then we wonder why we have no idea how to stand up to authority when we know in our heart, our mind and our guts that what’s happening is wrong.

I see in the New Testament many responses to the God of Job: the way Jesus refuses to play a game of temptation, the way God refuses to be put to tests, the way Jesus gets called on his mistakes. I think of the story in Matthew 15 of the Syrophoenician woman. Jesus refused to help her until she insisted on her worth and value. But he didn’t respond with defensiveness. He *changed his mind*, acknowledged that she was right, and made corrective action. Fragility, thy name is *not* Jesus. Which is something those of us who struggle with white fragility or male fragility or straight fragility, etc, might do well to take a look at, we who follow Jesus as exemplar.

I see that we are a culture who will easily sacrifice justice for a chance at a Job-like happy ending. We will voluntarily pay billions into the lottery system and not find it problematic for one person to get the whole jackpot. Because it could be us. And oh, can we ever imagine it. Job won a jackpot. Yes, he suffered, and it was unjust. But all Job’s children, all Job’s servants, all of the creaturely life that was dependent on him, not only suffered but died. None of them received restoration for their unjust suffering or death. They all paid in to that jackpot, though the payout went to one.

I think it’s one of the reasons that white America has such widespread depression and unhappiness. I think we know, at a level we cannot face in the light of day, that whatever happy ending, or “American dream” we are living, is one in which too many people are missing.

Job’s family and servants and livestock got red-shirted, Star Trek style. They were the dispensables. It could still be considered a happy and just ending, even if they died. Who are the dispensables in the “happy ending” of the American dream? Who are the dispensables in our church institutions? The dispensables in our schools? Who are the dispensables within ourselves? What parts of our identity or experiences do we render dispensable?

Nothing shuts up dissent more than being told you’re the recipient of the jackpot, the happy ending. Job stopped complaining to God about the injustices of the world once his fortunes were “restored.” It’s the deal with the devil. You accept the happy ending, so you can’t complain anymore.

“We are in the world, and its problems are in our lap,” Ostriker writes, again.

“Justice, justice shalt thou pursue’ (Deut 13.20). Someone must choose justice. Someone must define it. If not we, who? In the Book of Job, God is unable to choose justice until Job challenges him—and even then we may remain skeptical. Is the restoration of one man’s fortunes and the provision of ten new children to replace ten murdered ones a sufficient answer to the evil and suffering in the world? Does it take care of human poverty, war, violence, and greed? It may be that the Holy One waits for us to issue our challenge. Perhaps God does not know how to be just until human beings demand it.”⁴

¹ John Gottman, “The 6 Things that Predict Divorce.” October 10, 2014. <https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-6-things-that-predict-divorce/>

² Alicia Ostriker, “Job: The Open Book.” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol. XLVI, Issue 2, Spring 2007. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-index?cc=mqr;c=mqr;c=mqrarchive;idno=act2080.0046.209;g=mqrg;rgn=main;view=text;xc=1>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.