

St. Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B' (proper 27)
3 October 2021
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Some of you are familiar with Archibald MacLeish's play *J.B.*, which is a re-telling of the story of Job. In it, Job's avatar is J. B., a millionaire banker who is convinced that he is lucky to have been blessed by God. His wife, Sarah, is less certain; she is convinced that their luxurious lifestyle is part of a contract with God. If they failed in that contract, they would lose everything. And indeed J.B. *does* lose both his wealth and family—but not his faith. Just like Job.

We just heard the opening part of the book of Job, who, we are told, “feared God and turned away from evil.” Satan goads God into putting Job to the test by making him so miserable that his faith will be stretched to the breaking point. And so God takes away everything Job cherishes—everything: his children; his health; his property. Over the course of the book, Job struggles to find out why these many disasters have befallen him, yet he remains faithful, convinced that God has a purpose that he cannot understand. The book ends with God reversing all of Job's adversities: he is restored to health; he is given seven new sons and three new daughters; and he becomes twice as wealthy as he originally was.

Now all of these reversals present problems for thoughtful Christians who struggle with the issue of the operation of divine justice. But it's the last reversal—Job's becoming twice as wealthy simply because he was faithful—that I want to focus on this morning.

Most of you, I suspect, have heard some variation of the so-called “prosperity gospel” which asserts that the good things in life, including health and material success, are signs of God's favour and blessing. In many ways, it's become the most visible expression of Christianity thanks to prominent televangelists. It's easy to see why, since a message that says God wants you to be happy and prosperous *is* undeniably attractive—perhaps most especially to those who assume that Christianity is all about guilt and shame.

Leaving aside its obvious theological flaws, the most serious flaw of the prosperity gospel is that it can lead its adherents to see things such as poverty, illness, and misfortune, as being a person's fault. Believing that God has blessed them because of their strong faith, they become numb to—and maybe even contemptuous of—the very real problems of other, less fortunate people. They believe that if you're poor and needy and in a mess, it's your fault. If only you had faith, they say, faith like Job's, then God would take care of you.

Now before you get to feeling too superior, let me remind you that the mainstream Churches have a version of this “prosperity gospel” too—a subtler version to be sure, but one that still views prosperity as a sign of God’s blessing. We know it best as the Protestant Work Ethic, which essentially proposes that hard work and frugality, as well as social success and wealth, are signs not only of God’s favour, but also that one is among the elect. Therefore, it follows that a good Protestant is one who works hard, is diligent, prudent, responsible—and successful. We can find this concept lurking in the background of all rags-to-riches stories. And just as in the prosperity gospel, this ethic can be pernicious insofar as those who identify with it can lose their ability to empathize with those who don’t possess the flinty character necessary to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, so much so that more often than not, they are labelled with a terrible, four-letter name: lazy.

Yet you may still ask: aren’t the good things in my life a blessing from God? If the answer is yes, then what do we say about the less good things in life? And what are we to make of the people of deep faith who are dying of COVID-19 in the prime of their lives? Or the man of impeccable moral rectitude whose accountant embezzles all of his money leaving him and his family penniless? Or the woman who actually *has* pulled herself up by the bootstraps and has worked tirelessly and diligently only to be given a pink slip and told to be out of the office by the end of the day?

So I think it’s more appropriate, and more theologically sound, to say that *life*, with all of its promise and pain, all of its risk and reward, all of its highs and hindrances, is a gift from God. No one knows why bad things happen to good people (or, indeed, why good things happen to bad people), and why life can seem so capricious and cruel. But what we *do* know is that God is in the midst of every life—your life, my life—working to bring each of us to the perfection of Christ.

This is the radical message of the book of Job. Everything belongs to God, and we can never hope to understand his ways. At the end of the book, Job is at the end of his rope and becomes defiant, demanding an explanation as to why all of these things have happened. And God answers majestically: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” He goes on to say that he is at work throughout the universe, even bringing rain on a land where no one lives, and in the desert, which is empty of human life. He speaks of the sea monsters Behemoth and Leviathan, which suggests that he is not blind to the presence of evil in the world. And yet, God cares for Job so much that he reveals himself to Job personally, and he actually shares with Job the vision of his cosmic responsibility.

God’s personal revelation continues still in the person of Jesus who makes himself known to us in the lives of all people, but, perhaps most fully, in the lives of those who are in need, who are confused, who are hurting, who are despairing and mournful, and who long for at least a share in the peace which passes understanding. Christ’s life was no picnic, that’s for sure. By any earthly measure of success, he was a complete failure. But he wasn’t called to be successful—at least not in the crass and

material sense of the word—and neither are we. What we are called to be is faithful, even unto death.

At the end of the play, J. B.'s wife turns to him and says, "You wanted justice, didn't you? There isn't any ... there is only love." Well, there *is* justice, but it's justice that is meted out through the love of Christ, love which spent itself as it spilled out over the whole world from Calvary. So it follows that the most faithful response is to dare to let go of all of it, if only because we know that the only thing worth possessing is love, just as the only thing worth holding onto is him—and for dear life, too.