

## Job: The Angry Counter-Suit

Our readings and hymns have taken us down a dark path this morning; not, perhaps, the path that we would all have picked on this sunny fall Sunday morning. But one of the things that our faith teaches us is that suffering is real in our world and that, with the help of God, we can and must face it unflinchingly, for our own sake and for the sake of those who are suffering. The Book of Job, which is the primary subject of my preaching every Sunday this month, is concerned exactly with the subject of suffering: the suffering of the innocent and the possible faithful responses to that suffering. As I mentioned last week, we will follow Job this month through the stages of his suffering and grief; stages that correspond to the stages of grief explicated by Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in her groundbreaking 1969 book, On Death and Dying: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance.

This morning, I want to focus on the anger of Job. Anger, as you may have noticed, is something I know a little bit about. I'd like to be able to say that last Sunday's outburst was simply careful staging on my part to prepare you for the ideas of this week but, alas, such is not the case. Instead, if you're charitable, you can chalk it up to my "artistic temperament." If you're not feeling so charitable, then you could say, and I would admit, that sometimes I'm just a jerk. So before we go any further, I want to use the same forum in which I transgressed last week to issue two apologies. First, to Darrell: I'm sorry that I blew up at you last week. You didn't deserve that. Secondly, I apologize to the rest of you who came for worship and instead got drama. I hope you will all forgive me.

But back to Job; his anger with God is expressed in the form of a legal complaint, a time-honored metaphor in the Scriptures. I want to look this morning at the tradition of lawsuit or controversy, as the King James Version words it, in the Old Testament. We'll also see how the Book of Job contains both a lawsuit and a counter-suit and how the characters in the book seem to switch their roles in these suits. The framework of suit and counter-suit allows the righteous anger of Job to fully flower and it's a powerful expression of an innocent man's suffering. Finally, we'll see how even in the heights of his righteous indignation, Job holds on to the idea that has guided his life: that God is worthy of worship and allegiance.

Most of the lawsuit imagery in the Old Testament is used to point out the failings of God's Chosen People in keeping the covenants that God establishes with them. One of the most powerful and best-known passages from the prophet Isaiah uses this sort of lawsuit imagery: the story of the vineyard owner in Isaiah 5: "My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!" In this passage, God is presented as the plaintiff and the people of Israel and Judah are both defendants and judge. God is inviting God's people to take a good, hard look at themselves and

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to decide whether or not they are what they should be. The conclusion that the prophet would have them draw seems inescapable but, then, would we, in the same position, acquiesce to our own condemnation or would we attempt to mount a defense?

In the sixth chapter of Micah, Yahweh is again the plaintiff and the people of Israel the defendants but this time, God invites the Earth itself to judge the case: “Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.”” If you don’t remember the story of Balak and Balaam and you want to read it later, it can be found in Numbers 22 & 23.

In response to this suit, however, the prophet supplies the response of the defendants, in a passage that should sound familiar: “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

In the opening section of the Book of Job, God is not the plaintiff. Indeed, God is perfectly happy with the conduct of the title character. But, as I noted last week, there is a character with an axe to grind, apparently. The prologue of the Book of Job introduces us to “ha-satan,” the Accuser. This is not Satan, remember, the Devil of popular imagination who is the embodiment of all evil and the enemy of God, but rather one of God’s servants whose function is to expose the wickedness of folk for God to judge. It is the Accuser in his role as Prosecutor for the Heavenly Court who proposes that Job be tested to determine whether he is sincere in his devotion to God or simply a fair-weather friend enjoying his ride on the gravy train. With the Accuser as Prosecuting Attorney, God is now the Judge, a role that should seem familiar to us.

It is certainly the role that God is expected to play by Job and his friends. Job admits as much in verse one of chapter nine, when he asks, “How can a mortal be just before God?” He asks this question in response to a lecture from his friend Bildad, who, along with his two companions, is no longer content to sit in silent support of Job. Howard Wallace, an Australian professor of Old Testament, puts it this way: “In the chapters between last week’s reading and this week’s, the poetic story of Job has unfolded with the visit of his three friends, whose initial sorrow soon turns to persistent ruminating on the possible causes of Job’s suffering.” I like the summary that another Australian Old Testament scholar, Anna Grant-Henderson, gives of the differing approach of the three friends. “Each of the friends comes with a basic premise,” she writes. “Eliphaz comes with the basic premise that the innocent never suffer permanently. He believes that Job is essentially innocent and consequently his suffering will be over soon. But even the most innocent of humans must expect to suffer deservedly. Bildad is even more convinced about

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the doctrine of retribution after seeing the demise of Job's family- they must have been very wicked. However, Job is still alive and there must be some hope for him. Zophar has no intention of trying to lessen the sin for Job. He is guilty because he is suffering and even worse, Job refuses to acknowledge it, therefore he is a far worse sinner than anyone could have imagined. Zophar offers little hope.” But Job cries out against the “doctrine of retribution,” as Grant-Henderson calls it, which is espoused by his friends. He knows that he is innocent and we as readers know it too, since both God and the narrator tell us in the first two chapters that Job is blameless and does not sin even in his grief. God even condemns the three friends in the last chapter of the book, “for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” The idea that human beings face troubles in proportion to the evil they have done may be as popular now as it was with the friends of Job but in the Scripture neither Job nor God uphold this position. Job’s God may be a judge but the character of God’s judgment is not by a simple human measure.

None of this, however, is of any immediate comfort to Job. In his duress, he accuses God of unfair judgment, moving God from the judge’s bench to the defendant’s seat. The problem, says Job, is that there is no one who can call this defendant to account, no judge for the Judge. “He snatches away; who can stop him? Who will say to him, ‘What are you doing?’ ...If I summoned him and he answered me, I do not believe that he would listen to my voice... he destroys both the blameless and the wicked. When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent. The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the eyes of its judges— if it is not he, who then is it? For he is not a mortal, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together. There is no umpire between us, who might lay his hand on us both.” Gerald Wilson writes, “Job’s frustration is grounded in the realization that in any setting in which God could be brought to the dock, God stands not only as the accused, but also as Judge. The tables would soon turn so that it would be Job who would be forced to defend his innocence and throw himself on the mercy of the court. Although God is too powerful to be captured and brought forcibly into court, Job contemplates the futility of hope even should such a confrontation ever take place. Even if brought face to face with God in a legal proceeding, Job despairs of securing a just hearing.”

Indeed, even in the final argument of Job against his erstwhile friends, we find that Job is still angrily bewildered about why God has seemingly abandoned justice and become an unjust judge. He wishes again for someone who could arbitrate between him and God. “Oh, that I had one to hear me! (Here is my signature! let the Almighty answer me!)” It is the final statement of a long defense summation in which Job compares his well-known record as a benefactor to the poor and helpless with the ways of the wicked who deserve punishment. The friends have insinuated that Job belongs among this latter category but he knows that he does not. The friends receive the lash of Job’s anger at several points in the book. In one of the most well-known verses of the book, Job responds to Zophar after the latter has made his first speech about the doctrine of retribution, that the guilty are punished and the innocent rewarded, therefore Job must be guilty. For those who appreciate the sarcastic putdown, Job’s response in 12:2-3 is delicious: “No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you. But I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you. Who does not know such things as these?”

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Despite his anger and frustration, Job has been called “an optimist” by no less an authority than G.K. Chesterton. Chesterton, a defender of Christian orthodoxy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was called by his “friendly enemy,” George Bernard Shaw, “a man of colossal genius,” not a compliment the curmudgeonly Shaw paid lightly. Chesterton wrote about Job, “Job is an optimist. He is a perplexed optimist; he is an exasperated optimist; he is an outraged and insulted optimist. He wishes the universe to justify itself, not because he wishes it to be caught out, but because he really wishes it to be justified. He demands an explanation from God, but... he does it in the spirit in which a wife might demand an explanation from her husband whom she really respected. He remonstrates with his Maker because he is proud of his maker. He even speaks of the Almighty as his enemy, but he never doubts, at the back of his mind, that his enemy has some kind of case which he does not understand... He is anxious to be convinced, that is, he thinks God should convince him... He shakes the pillars of the world and strikes insanely at the heavens; he lashes the stars, but it is not to silence them; it is to make them speak.”

A rather more contemporary treatment of the positive aspect of Job’s anger may be found in the 1974 Neil Simon comedy, “God’s Favorite.” Simon’s Job character, Joe Benjamin, finally hears from God and receives relief from his suffering when he lets loose his anger on God: “Is this Your work? ... Is this Your test of faith and love? ... Where is Your love? Your compassion? Your justice? ... I AM ANGRY AT YOU, GOD! REALLY, REALLY ANGRY! And *STILL* I don’t renounce you! How do you like *that*, God?”

For all his righteous indignation, for all his holy anger, Job still believes in God. Although he rails at God for God’s apparent failure to be fair to him, ultimately, he will not solve the moral dilemma of his suffering by denying the goodness of God, by renouncing his faith or by cursing God. That is why we hear the astounding break in chapter nineteen, when Job stops abruptly in his railing against God’s injustice to give voice to the deepest hope of his heart. Listen again: “...know then that God has put me in the wrong, and closed his net around me. Even when I cry out, ‘Violence!’ I am not answered; I call aloud, but there is no justice. He has walled up my way so that I cannot pass, and he has set darkness upon my paths. He has stripped my glory from me, and taken the crown from my head. He breaks me down on every side, and I am gone, he has uprooted my hope like a tree. He has kindled his wrath against me, and counts me as his adversary... O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another...”

It is yet another twist on the lawsuit metaphor. Now, Job goes from putting God on the dock as the accused to claiming God’s help as his defense attorney. Job appeals to God against God. In this extraordinary gambit, the writer of Job is reaching both into the most time-honored legal traditions of Torah and into the conventional wisdom to which his main character is most often seen in opposition. In Torah, the Redeemer or *gō-ēl* is the family member responsible for rescuing an impoverished relative from poverty or slavery, or keeping a piece of property in the family. You may remember the story of Boaz negotiating with Naomi’s next-of-kin and rightful redeemer to take on responsibility for Naomi and Ruth, or the piece of property that the prophet

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Jeremiah redeemed for a nephew to signify that God would return control of the land to the Children of Israel in the future. Later, however, the term took on broader meaning in terms of one who would defend the helpless. Proverbs 23:10-11 says, “Do not remove an ancient landmark or encroach on the fields of orphans, for their redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you.” Despite everything, Job still believes that God will function in this way for him. A little earlier, in chapter 14, Job has appealed to God against God: “Oh that you would hide me in Sheol, that you would conceal me until your wrath is past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!” Now, he expresses his deepest conviction that God will finally rescue him.

Gustavo Gutiérrez writes, “It might almost be said that Job, as it were, splits God in two and produces a God who is a judge and a God who will defend him at that supreme moment; a god whom he experiences as almost an enemy but whom he knows at the same time to be truly a friend. He has just now accused God of persecuting him, but at the same time he knows that God is just and does not want human beings to suffer. These are two sides of the one God. This painful, dialectical approach to God is one of the most profound messages of the Book of Job.”

In some ways, this complex approach of Job to God seems like one of the most familiar parts of the book to me and perhaps it does to you as well. For two millennia now, we Christians have been wrestling with just how the theory of the atonement works. How did the death of Jesus the Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, set us free? Was it to appease the wrath of God the Father, the First Person of the Trinity? While I do not claim to have an ultimate answer to this problem and certainly not one I can explicate in the very short time remaining this morning, I do want to point us to just a few of the New Testament passages that use the terminology or imagery of the Redeemer in a Heavenly court. The writer of Hebrews points to the role of Jesus as Redeemer at a couple of points. In chapter 7, he writes of Jesus, “he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” Two chapters later, the Court Defender imagery is even stronger: “For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.” In the First Letter of John, we find the strongest image yet: “if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” If we do not yet feel well enough represented in God’s court, it appears that both the Second and the Third Persons of the Trinity function as our defenders. Remember what Paul wrote to the Romans about the Holy Spirit: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” We may appeal to God not against God, as Job thought, but in harmony with the will of God Godself.

In the story of Job, we find the tale of a man who reaches occasional, fleeting epiphanies about the faithfulness of God in the midst of his overwhelming grief and loss. We have heard him speak out of a place of denial that may also be an expression of the simplicity of faith that Jesus commended to us in children. We have heard him spend a furious and righteous anger against God, only to be left again with his bedrock faith that God will finally prove to be on his side. We will consider Job’s depression and examine whether he ever enters into a bargaining phase of

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grief. And at the last, we will wrestle with what consolation, if any, the presence of God brings in the face of tragedy. These are not easy subjects; Job is not an easy book. But life, as we have all experienced, is all too rarely easy and I am enormously comforted that our Holy Scriptures do not offer us easy answers in the face of complicated problems but rather that, through the providence of God, we have these blessed words to guide us as we travel through this often-dark world, reaching for the light of God that lies just beyond our grasp. And even more, I am comforted because I know that my Redeemer liveth, and on the earth again shall stand; that His promise never faileth, not in the face of my grief, not in the face of my anger, in spite of death or life or angels or rulers or things present or things to come or powers or height or depth or anything else in all creation. For the promises of God and God's love and the grace of Christ Jesus and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, thanks be to God.