

“Rescuing Job? Or...Rescuing God?”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for FUMC Grand Junction, Sunday, Sept. 12, 2021

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ

website: <https://www.fumcgj.org/sermons/>

Scripture Text:

Job 1:1, 2:1-10 [NRSV]

OPENING

Connection of this sermon series to what I had called a couple of years back *Beyond My Flannel Board Faith*. This series on Job is aimed not just at rescuing Job from the flannel board, but also rescuing God from the “Despots Hall of Fame”!

As a result of this series, I hope that the book of Job will become a favorite of yours in the Bible, as it has become for me.

TO THE SCRIPTURES

(*Have fun with bringing the opening two chapters of Job to life BEFORE asking the following questions:*)

1. “Do any of you have a problem with God behaving in this way? Or is it just me being overly sensitive?!”
2. “What if this whole episode took place and your name were substituted for Job’s? Would it be OK then?”

SERMON THOUGHTS

Part of rescuing Job from the flannel board and God from the “Despots Hall of Fame” depends upon our

ability to recognize the book’s genre: Is it intended to be received as we might a documentary today?

Is it, like the book of Revelation centuries in the future, so horrific in its ethics, so misunderstood that it is to be ignored or reduced to a simple glib cliché about patience in suffering? If so, good luck rescuing Job *and* God!

- The book of Job and the ancient Hebrew genre of “Wisdom Literature”: Didactic in its purpose, not archival. That is, “Wisdom Literature” is intended *to teach in the present*...NOT preserve historical fact for posterity.

Recognizing this is the life ring that rescues the book *and* God from an approach to Scripture that is fear-based and, therefore idolatrous, rather than one being based in reverence for the text.

“Reverence for the text” sees the Scripture as did the late Marcus Borg: “a sacrament of the sacred”. By that, he meant that the Scripture is a *mediator* of the Living Word, not a substitute for it (or more accurately, for *Him*). And we know that we’re confusing the two if we’re afraid of asking difficult questions of the text for fear of invoking “the wrath of God”. I believe God never intended the Scriptures to shut down theological inquiry but rather *to inspire it*.

And so, the difficult question we ask of the book of Job is based on a blanket rejection of the horrific ethics and ghastly theology that result from seeing it as a documentary, as history. And the question is this:

What could this book possibly have to offer persons who would be faithful followers of Jesus and faithful worshippers of Yahweh? What is the nature of God, of faithfulness, of trust that this book is trying to get across to us?

- To get to a satisfying response to these questions we have to look two things:
 1. The genre of Job as didactic – or teaching – literature. To fill out some of what I said earlier, didactic – or teaching – literature uses enlightened spiritual imagination and sophisticated literary form to convey God’s revelation of truth to the Hebrew sages who understood and conveyed in artistic form that revelation.

It is not limited to cold, indifferent historical reporting. If it were, half of Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels would have to be stripped from the New Testament b/c he taught most often and most effectively in parables, something we might refer to today as “historical fiction” in short story form.
 2. The structure of the book of Job
 - a. “Chiasm” – Bookends: The imaginative, fairytale-like setup and resolution of the book that creates the tension for us as readers who want to scream out what we know about Job through most of the rest of the book. It’s not documentary; it’s the brilliant literary form that enables its deeper truth to be explored.

- b. Through the next 29 chapters come the endless cycles of dialogue between Job and his three friends affirming and critiquing the contemporary wisdom of the day:

The righteous prosper, and the wicked suffer.

(*That’s easy to say when we’re sitting in the comfort of this Sanctuary. It’s not so easy to say at *Ground Zero*, or in a lush field in the Pennsylvania hills, or in the ICU or ER...*)
- c. This is followed by another 6 chapters of the same theology as that of Job’s three friends, this by a mysterious figure named Elihu. For reasons we will see in another sermon, I believe this to be a later addition to the original text of Job by a well-meaning scribe or school of scribes seeking to defend the traditional wisdom of their day.
- d. After all of the long-windedness of Job, his three friends, and Elihu, at last God speaks. And for most of the next four chapters – 38 through 41 – God addresses Job’s complaints of injustice in a most UNpastoral way!
- e. And then in the last chapter of the book, Chapter 42, Job rests his case and God metes out judgment.

CONCLUSION

As for the lessons we take from all of this, one is Job 1:21:

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and

the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

As for others, well...

STAY TUNED...

Prayer Concerns

Our prayer concerns can be found on the second page of the 11 AM Worship Order: Go to the Church's webpage, www.fumcgj.org, click on the “Worship” tab along the menu bar at the top of the homepage and then click on the link labeled “Order of Worship”. Please pray for:

- Tana Foote, recovering from broken ribs and bumps and bruises sustained in a car accident last week.
- Ruth Leever who is undergoing treatment for multiple myeloma.
- For Pam Fults, our Nursery Director, who is recovering from cervical neck surgery done on 8/9.
- For those suffering in the wildfires across the country, but especially here in the western US.
- For the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and now the Afghan refugee crisis that will take multiple organizations and nations around the world to respond to.

And for the “Underground Church” there continuing to witness to the presence of the risen Christ and the hope of the Gospel even at great personal and familial risk.

- For our District Churches (1 every week) – This week: Cedaredge UMC and Pastor Joe Agne.