

**1** There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

**2** One day the heavenly beings<sup>[a]</sup> came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan<sup>[b]</sup> also came among them to present himself before the LORD. <sup>2</sup>The LORD said to Satan,<sup>[c]</sup> "Where have you come from?" Satan<sup>[d]</sup> answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." <sup>3</sup>The LORD said to Satan,<sup>[e]</sup> "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason." <sup>4</sup>Then Satan<sup>[f]</sup> answered the LORD, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives.<sup>[g]</sup> <sup>5</sup>But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." <sup>6</sup>The LORD said to Satan,<sup>[h]</sup> "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life."

<sup>7</sup>So Satan<sup>[i]</sup> went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. <sup>8</sup>Job<sup>[j]</sup> took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

<sup>9</sup>Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse<sup>[k]</sup> God, and die." <sup>10</sup>But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

## Job's Three Friends

<sup>11</sup>Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. <sup>12</sup>When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. <sup>13</sup>They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

**Kerra Becker English**

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**Job 1-2 (select verses)**

**“JOBtober-fest”**

October brings news of the 294<sup>th</sup> mass shooting of 2015, the 45<sup>th</sup> if you are counting school shootings alone, this one happening at a community college in Oregon. October brings news of a hurricane swirling around the eastern seaboard promising heavy rains, flooding, and wind damage. October announces its arrival with pink ribbons reminding us that some of our loved ones will get breast cancer, and it ushers in the wearing of purple to show solidarity with the bruises of domestic violence. I’m not sure I can get on board with October this year.

And yet, here we are. Maybe some of us are in the position not to take any of it personally, but probably not. We are all affected by tragedy, natural disaster, disease, and violence – every day – and not only in October. Sometimes, we think we could solve the problems at hand. We could regulate guns, issue weather warnings, get regular mammograms, and be guarded in our personal relationships. We want control over evil, and we crave certainty that the bad things won’t happen to us, or to the people that we love. President Obama’s frustration at having to announce another act of gun violence was palpable as he took to the podium on Thursday. He lamented, “Somehow this has become routine. The reporting is routine. My response here at this podium ends up being routine, the conversation in the aftermath of it. We’ve become numb to this.”

...Which brings us into an October when reflection on the biblical book of Job might be exactly what we need. Job is the stand in for all of us during times of tragedy. The set up for the

story is ridiculous. The Lord and Satan are betting for or against how much hardship Job can handle without turning on God. In chapter one, Job loses everything, his land, his donkeys, his sheep, his servants, his camels, and most notably, his sons and daughters are crushed to death while they are drinking wine at the eldest brother's house and a strong wind comes along and blows the house down. In every instance, one servant alone survives to come tell Job what happened. Now by chapter two, we find out he gets to keep his wife, but she becomes a notable antagonist to the story. Since Job didn't fall apart after losing so much, Satan gets to keep going, now he can make Job sick too, covering him with open sores from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. Itchy, scaly, pus-filled nastiness!

I don't know about you, but Job's wife doesn't seem wrong in her evaluation that death might be preferable to all that's happened. It seems more humane than losing your entire family AND winding up sitting among the ashes scraping at your wounds with a piece of broken pottery. Job's only comment to her anger and frustration is to say, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" Really? That's it! Her initial advice was to curse, and being that I come from a long line of creative cursers myself, I have to admit that my language is far from pastoral when I find myself on that proverbial pile of ashes. I am trying to keep my more colorful vocabulary in check while I'm considering all the madness happening in our world, but it ain't easy.

So maybe she's the one who called his three friends to pack up their stuff and come talk some sense into him. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar don't even recognize their friend when they first see him from a distance. What a mess he's become. They are struck with grief. They throw dust on their heads, and then all they can do is sit in silence with him for seven days and seven nights. There is nothing, not one thing they can say, at least not yet.

We may not get to consider all of the advice that Job gets from his friends over the course of this month's sermons, but if you get a chance to look at it yourself, it covers most of the standard platitudes related to tragedy. It's God's fault. It's your own fault. You are being punished for your sin. It's punishment for the sin of someone in your family. You haven't been faithful enough. Life isn't meant to be pleasant. It's all meaningless. Humans don't really matter to God. God is fickle and vindictive. People are just too whiny.

Job and his friends will go round and round – just like we do. There's no theology that will help. There's no solution that will help. There's no casserole that will fill the void. There's no Hallmark card to send in a situation like this. The uncertainty we face in the midst of tragic circumstances feels just awful. But I do find it interesting that before the long conversation of Job gets underway with multiple chapters pontificating on the whys and the wherefores – at first Job, his wife, and his friends spend seven days not knowing what to say at all.

After Job makes his pronouncement that we receive the good, and we receive the bad, and it's all from God – Silence. For seven days and seven nights - silence. Our world has so very little silence in it. The news breaks almost instantaneously. We get texts and emails that bear bad news in the moment. There's no sighing in the silent spaces, no allowing the emotion to wash over us first. Maybe that's why we're so quick to rush to the worst possible answers, the ones that are less than comforting, and seek blame and punishment as our only answers.

It takes time and investment to find meaning, or to grasp life's mysteries when uncertainty is our only option. The testimony of the book of Job is telling to how much we really do want answers, even when they aren't good answers. We're quick to say that God won't give anyone more than they can handle, or to link up someone's behavior and punishment as

somehow meriting whatever bad news they have received. As Job can testify – these aren't fair judgments. His first sentiment is the astute observation, "Shall we receive the good from God, but not the bad?" If it's all from God, and that's what I know to be true, we are left with that difficult truth to process. Satan only gets permission in this story – not full agency. If anyone is to blame... well, you get where that ends up.

Back to our October... what if we sit for awhile with our own uncertainty, and truly take the time to feel the discomfort together? It's not much comfort, and yet when we discover that it's the one true comfort that we have, oddly it can be enough. I learned much from Meg, who served as the parish nurse with me in Tennessee. She was the one who taught me how to sit in silence in the ICU. Sometimes our words get in the way.

I've also learned how to be patient with the anger and cursing stage, and gentle with folks as acceptance comes – because there are some things that simply can't be accepted at face value – they are only accepted in so much as they happened to us, and we are different because of it.

I've struggled with this sermon, because I'm not sure if any of it really helps. We yearn for the action that will change the murder rate in our country, or that will cure cancer, or that will prevent the most flood damage to the beaches where we spend our summer days. And we cannot give up on working on those things, of making progress, and improving the quality of people's lives. And yet, for every issue solved, others will come forward. Suffering cannot be obliterated. We will turn back to Job, honestly, forever. Take time for the silence, for the compassion. Yes, when your friend is hurting, it's still a good idea to bring food, and show your face even if there are no words. Job's wife was angry, and that's OK. Job's friends wanted to share advice, and that's OK. Job will go through all sorts of highs and lows in this book. It's worth the read. It's

one of the most humanizing parts of the Bible, and it doesn't always make God look so good.

That's OK too. The best advice I ever got from my mother, and she gave plenty, was that it's OK to get angry at God, God can take it. It helped my faith to grow to know that.

The journey with Job reminds me that our problems may be different because of our own time and place but they are not unique. Suffering remains a big part of the human equation, and it is practically a guarantee that death, and disease, and disaster, and violence will always be a part of this world where we live, and learn, and become who we are. There's no escaping it, just getting through it – together. Amen.

# Communion

## Psalm 85

### Prayer for the Restoration of God's Favor

***To the leader. Of the Korahites. A Psalm.***

- <sup>1</sup> LORD, you were favorable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
- <sup>2</sup> You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you pardoned all their sin. *Selah*
- <sup>3</sup> You withdrew all your wrath;  
you turned from your hot anger.
- <sup>4</sup> Restore us again, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation toward us.
- <sup>5</sup> Will you be angry with us forever?  
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?
- <sup>6</sup> Will you not revive us again,  
so that your people may rejoice in you?
- <sup>7</sup> Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,  
and grant us your salvation.
- <sup>8</sup> Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people,  
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.<sup>[a]</sup>
- <sup>9</sup> Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.
- <sup>10</sup> Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
- <sup>11</sup> Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.
- <sup>12</sup> The LORD will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.
- <sup>13</sup> Righteousness will go before him,  
and will make a path for his steps.

