

## Remember Job's Wife

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This may come as somewhat of a surprise, but a good sermon is not necessarily timeless. I suspect this is because a good sermon often must speak to people where they are right now and right here. And circumstances change. And my sermons, whether good or not, are no exception to that rule. After the 2008 election, I was almost giddy about the prospects ahead. A few years later, I was celebrating what I perceived as the victory of progressive ideals in the so-called culture wars. My only worry was that too much success might spoil us Unitarian Universalists. Nostradamus I am not.

Times change; this past summer I was wringing my hands about the hatred being spewed in the political arena; so worried that one of our more seasoned and respected members suggested that maybe I needed to just calm down. And now? Well, things have gotten to the point where I am reading poetry written on September the first, 1939. For I too wonder about a culture gone mad. And, given my interest in all things Biblical, I have returned to the book of Job.

I like Job, both the book and the man. In a nutshell, Job is about suffering. How is it possible that a good person can suffer? For many of us today, this is not the problem it once was. We don't necessarily assume that the universe is simple and just. But the writer of Job was steeped in a faith tradition where the good are rewarded, the evil are smited, and God, the dispenser of this justice, knows who is who.

As an antidote to this very simplistic notion of the universe, there is the Book of Job, for Job is very different. Job begins his story as a wealthy man, with large and prosperous flocks and a large and prosperous family. But then, God makes a deal with Satan who, in this story anyway, would seem to be one of God's assistants. The deal is designed as a test of Job's piety. Will he stay devoted to God, will he retain his piety, when stripped of his wealth, of his family, and even of his health? So God allows Satan to steal Job's wealth and to kill Job's children. Job himself ends up covered with sores and scraping himself with broken shards of pottery, sitting on an ash heap. Will his worldview be shaken? Will he stay devoted to God? God predicts he will. Satan predicts he will not.

This is when Job's wife makes her one and only appearance. She is not even given a name. Here is what she said to her husband, as he was sitting on that ash heap, "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!" Can you imagine? "Curse God and die!" Job's wife has been vilified by the faithful ever since. It is the impiety of her words that was shocking, particularly given the times in which she lived. It shocks many even today; I had thought about using "Curse God and Die" as the title for my sermon today, if only to bring a few more people in. Sadly, Job quickly rejects his wife's advice, "You are talking like a foolish woman." And he continues to praise God; at least for a little while.

But her words are not so foolish after all. Let's have a little compassion for her; her children are dead, her home is lost, and her husband is just not listening to reason. "Curse God and die" is the one thing he could and perhaps should do! By cursing God and dying, at least he can still have his integrity. An honest appraisal of his situation demands that he question God's goodness and curse the day he was born. Job's wife was telling him, the only thing in your control is your integrity! That alone demands that you curse God and die.

That is what I think we Unitarian Universalists do best. No, not cursing God and dying. But looking at the world objectively and if, as Thoreau writes, we find it to be mean, publishing that sad fact to the world. Job's wife is saying to her husband, the world is mean, accept that, proclaim it to the world, and die proud.

In a way, her words must have hit Job hard, for he himself then takes up the task of questioning God, with the help of his so-called friends. In a series of long dialogues which, frankly, can get pretty tedious, Job asserts his innocence and, in turn, his friends respond with probing questions such as, 'think hard, you must have done something wrong?' If only Job could identify that failing and confess it, all would be well. But Job would have none of it, demanding a trial at which God himself is brought to the bar of justice and tried for his unjust acts. But Job recognizes that such a trial is just not going to happen when facing the creator of the universe.

All of this finally comes to a head when God appears out of a whirlwind, ending all discussion, demanding that Job acknowledge his, God's, preeminence. How, God asks, can a mere mortal question God's imperial sovereignty? How dare he? How dare Job not be mindful of his place? Humbled by the onslaught of divine revelation, Job acknowledges that God is beyond human understanding and beyond human control. And he takes back his challenge of God, for "my ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

This is not the first time I have preached on Job. That other time, I remember being disgusted with both God and Job in this scene. For God seems to be a bully and Job his willing victim. But, I don't know, maybe times have changed and maybe I have changed. I can now see

some wisdom in Job's words. And that wisdom is at the core of much of religion. You and I are finite and small; certainly so when compared to that which is beyond us, whether this something greater is perceived as a personal God or as a universe without a God. It is the beginning of wisdom to recognize this, accept it, and move on. Maybe that is the insight Job came to when he repented in the presence of the whirlwind.

I think it is safe to say that most of us will never have Job's experience, of encountering God from a whirlwind; so let me come at this same idea from a non-Biblical tradition. Perhaps you are old enough to remember the election of 1992? That was the year that Bill Clinton ran against both George H. W. Bush and, yes, Ross Perot. Remember how he seemed so different at the time? Perot's running mate was James Stockdale. Yes, the James Stockdale that I quoted from earlier in the service. His fifteen minutes of fame were earned by his immortal lines at the Vice Presidential debate, "Who am I? Why am I here?" He seemed like a shuffling and confused little man, perhaps a bit demented.

But, you know, that was not true in the least. James Stockdale was a decorated war hero, a Medal of Honor recipient, actually, the survivor of eight years of incarceration as a prisoner of war in a North Vietnamese prison. A man who had been to hell and back. What kept him alive, what kept him sane during those many years? Better yet, who kept him sane? The ancient Roman Stoic philosopher Epictetus. What did Epictetus offer? A simple philosophy, really:

"We are responsible for some things, while there are others for which we cannot be held responsible. The former include our judgement, our impulse, our desire, aversion, and our mental faculties in general; the latter include the body, material possessions, our reputation, status- in a word, anything not in your power to control." "Remove (desire) from

anything not in your control....because if you desire something outside your control, you are bound to be disappointed.”

Powerful words that got Stockdale through a living hell. And it sounds a lot like the Buddha, doesn't it? Or Job's response to the awesome sight from the whirlwind. Or the Serenity prayer:

“Oh God, give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;  
Courage to accept the things that I can;  
And the wisdom to know the difference.”

Yes, words of great wisdom. But how well do they work in practice? Is it possible to ‘know the difference’? I don't think so. Think back to the Double Pendulum that I showed the children earlier. No matter how carefully two double pendulums are held at the start, it is not humanly possible to release them in such a way so as to make them follow the exact same path over time. Yes, they do follow the laws of the universe; Newton has seen to that. But, in practice, the behavior of each of the two pendulums is so sensitive to the initial conditions that it would take a computer the size of the universe to predict exactly where each will go over time! And because of that sensitivity, they quickly diverge; their swings end up wildly different!

That is the nub of chaos theory. You might know it as the ‘Butterfly Effect’; the tiny change in wind caused by the flapping of a butterfly's wings in some distant rain forest may be the very action that leads to a devastating hurricane, killing hundreds in the Caribbean, or in New Orleans. Or, that very same flapping butterfly may be the very thing that was needed to stop that very same hurricane.

Chaos theory basically says that we cannot possibly predict every detail of the future, even in such a simple system as the double pendulum. The smallest nudge can bring about a huge change. How much more hopeless is it to predict something more complicated, like the weather? Or the politics of a large nation?

So, what does that mean? Does this mean we should throw our hands up in hopelessness? Should we just give it up now, letting the forces contrary to our desires, the forces making our culture seemingly go mad, should we let them have their way? Is there hope in a perplexing and chaotic world? And for our own peace of mind, do we need then to just accept that hopelessness?

For those of you who know me well, did you notice that I am without my cane today? For you who don't know me, I have used a cane for the last few years, due to debilitating vertigo. In a quest to diagnose the cause of the dizziness and to find a cure, I have gone through a succession of doctors, who have poked and prodded me in ways that I did not know existed. But to no avail. Let's face it, 2016 was a bad year, maybe for the nation. And definitely for me; as my vertigo worsened, I underwent a series of surgeries and, to top it off, a nasty case of shingles that affected my ear and my jaw.

The depths of my despair hit me when, in church one Sunday during Advent, we were singing the Hymn, "In the Bleak Midwinter".

"In the Bleak Midwinter

Frosty winds made moan.

Earth stood hard as iron

Water like a stone.

Snow had fallen

Snow on snow.

Snow on snow.”

My voice cracked. I could sing no longer. Hopelessness had taken hold; all was bleak.

As I said, though, did you notice that I don't have my cane? Recently, the vertigo has abated. I am not sure whether the shingles disrupted the nerves causing the vertigo or, what seems more likely, the medication for the shingles pain has also acted to reduce the dizziness. I may never know. But I really don't care. Though not perfectly well on every day, it is nice to walk upright again. The butterfly effect has worked in my favor. Hope had replaced hopelessness.

The greater lesson is, in a world of complexity, of things beyond our control, of things even beyond our understanding, we need not give up hope. What is important is that we do what we can. Not by obsessing about or by tying our inner serenity to external outcomes; but by doing what we can, by acting in the direction that we want the world to go. We are, ultimately, only responsible for that which is inside us.

And what is inside us? Most importantly, our integrity. Remember Job's wife! Are we being honest to what we truly believe? And are we doing our best to live out those beliefs? In the end, that is what truly matters.

And, in a world seemingly gone mad, we need hope. And who knows, maybe the flap of our little wings will prove to be just the nudge we need to stop the storm.

Amen