***BLESSED BE THE NAME OF THE LORD!***

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Texts: Job 1:1, 2:1-10 and Romans 8:18, 31-39

“There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job.” So begins the biblical story that bears Job’s name. It is the story of a man and his God and the Satan who would come between them. It is an old, old story of righteousness and temptation, of suffering and redemption, of faithfulness and frustration. It is Job’s story, but it could be your story or my story or the story of any of us who have tasted the bitter fruit of suffering. “If you want a story of your own soul, it is perfectly done in the book of Job…” says D. H. Lawrence. How well do you know that story of your own soul that happens to be Job’s story?

It begins in the divine throne room with heavenly beings parading before God. Among them is the Satan, the adversary, the biblical thorn in God’s side whose role is to challenge God and test humankind. He saunters up before the Lord with a sly look upon his face.

“Where have you been?” asks the Lord.

“Just got back from roaming the earth,” says the Satan. “I was all over the place – here, there, and everywhere. I found a great little spot in…”

“Did you see my servant Job,” interrupts the Lord. “What a great guy! There is none like him in all the earth. He is blameless and upright, trustworthy, loyal, courteous, kind, brave, clean and reverent, a God-fearing man who turns away from all evil. What more could I ask?”

“Big deal!” says the Satan with a scowl. “It’s easy to be righteous when you’ve got everything going for you – when business is good and the stock market is up – when you have a big house, a fancy car, and cash in the bank – when you’ve got all the signs of success like Job has. Even Job’s family, sons and daughters all, are too good to be true! They get along better than the Brady Bunch! It’s not so impressive that Job is so faithful; you’ve bought his faithfulness with a boatload of blessings! Job is faithful because life is good. But stretch out your hand and take away that good life, take away all that he has, and he’ll sing a different tune.”

“Go ahead and try,” replies God. “Do what you will to him; make his life miserable, but don’t touch him.”

So away goes the Satan, back to the earth, back to Job, back to the blameless and upright man who fears God and turns from evil, back to the richest man in the East whose fortunes now rest in satanic hands. Predictably, those fortunes take a sudden turn for the worse. In a moment’s time all of Job’s wealth is swept away – sheep, camels, oxen, donkeys, stocks, mutual funds, and servants – all the measures of success by which the world would judge him – gone! In another moment, all of his children are killed – the pride of his life and hope for his future – taken away by a windstorm. Job is left alone to drown in his tears with no heirs, no estate, and no divine explanation. The man with everything is suddenly the man with nothing! Like the Grinch who stole Christmas, the Satan waits with a sneer and great expectation to hear the anguished cries of this man who has lost it all. From a distance, he cocks his ear, and he listens.

What might he have heard from your lips, you faithful people of God? What words would have risen to the Satan’s ears from the ashes of your successes? If all your possessions were suddenly taken from you and your children were suddenly swept away and the dog died, what would you say to the Lord your God? With a hand to his ear and a grim smile upon his face, the Satan waits to hear your anguished rants at the Lord.

In later chapters when the focus of Job is on why there is innocent suffering, Job’s cries will ring out with pain, frustration, and despair. But in these first chapters, when the focus is on how the righteous respond to adversity and what makes one righteous, the Satan hears the unexpected from the lips of Job. Instead of an anguished cry, Job raises righteous words of praise: “*The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!*” Where is the sense of betrayal? Where is the agony and anger with God? Where is the howl of despair at the loss of all his children and possessions? Where are the four-letter words that the Satan longs to hear? “*Blessed be the name off the Lord*!” says Job. Really?

How can Job bless God after all the losses he has suffered? Why does he not rail at God because of all that has been taken from him? Because righteousness isn’t tied to possessions or people! The blessings of your life are not just a reward for good behavior. Job wasn’t a fair weather follower; he trusted God in the midst of the hurricane that hit his life. God had blessed him in good times; Job trusted that God would sustain him in the hard times. Job’s righteousness was not for sale for the price of his possessions or even his children. In good times and in bad, for better and worse, for richer and poorer, Job was committed to God!

The Satan believed that faithfulness could be bought with a price, as when the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness. “All these kingdoms will be yours, if only you will fall down and worship me,” said the devil to Jesus. He was sure that if the price was right, faithfulness could be bought for a handful of blessings. If the possessions were taken away, if the children died, he thought Job’s faithfulness would surely disappear. That is the temptation the Satan dangles before us – the temptation to give up on God and declare God dead when the bottom drops out and life is miserable, when the stock market crashes, when the pink slip arrives and the pantry is empty, when your friends desert you, when a child or parent or spouse dies, when all you’ve worked for is lost! What then do you say?

Perhaps the greater threat to faith and faithfulness is not the loss of possessions, but their accumulation. How easy it is to become complacent toward God in the pursuit of a bigger house or nicer car or more powerful position or more valuable portfolio! How easy it is to take the blessings of God for granted when your life is overflowing with good things! Perhaps the remarkable thing about Job is not that he blessed God in the midst of bad times, but that he was faithful in the midst of his success, that he regarded his vast estate as a gift from God, that he was thankful and faithful in plenty! Unlike the rich man who could not give up his possessions to follow Jesus, Job remains faithful for better and for worse, singing a constant refrain: “*Blessed be the name of the Lord!*”

“Oh sure,” says the Satan to God. “Job remained faithful, but it isn’t much of a test. Job still had his health. If you have your health, you have everything. It is easy to be faithful when you are feeling good, even if you have a few losses in your life. But take away his health, and Job will turn his back on you. Take away his health, and Job will curse you. Take away his health, and Job will have nothing and you will no longer have Job!”

“Go ahead and try,” replies God. “Do as you please; but spare his life.”

So off goes the Satan to torment Job a little longer, to make life a little more miserable in the hopes that Job will forswear his faithful ways. The Satan afflicts Job with terrible sores from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, sores so awful that Job tears at his own skin with a broken piece of pottery to try to relieve the discomfort. Imagine a blistering sunburn on top of a terrible case of poison ivy on top of shingles all over your body – and then you get a paper cut! That was Job’s condition! Seated in a pile of ashes, symbolic of his shattered life and dreams, Job can find no relief from his pain. Sores cover his body and his heart.

Once again the Satan cocks his ear to listen for Job’s groans, for his cries of “Why me, Lord?” With his health in tatters, the Satan is certain that Job’s faith in God will be in tatters as well. How delighted the Satan must have been to hear Job’s wife suggest: “Why don’t you just curse God and die!” as if death offered the only relief from his suffering.

But once again the words which reached the Satan’s ears were not curses or cries of despair, but words of integrity and confident faith. “*Shall we receive good at the hand of God and not receive evil?*” *Shall we be different from everyone else and receive only blessings in life?* Job understood that into every life a little rain must fall and sometimes the rain falls in buckets. He trusted God to be present in the joys of his life, and he trusted God to be present in the sorrows. His righteousness grew out of trust in the One from whom all blessings flowed. For better and worse, in sickness and in health, the Lord was Job’s God. *Blessed be the name of the Lord!*

Could ***you*** bless God in those circumstances? ***Have*** you blessed God in such circumstances, in the midst of any adversity? Or has your attitude been more akin to that of Job’s wife – just curse God and die? As children of God and disciples of Jesus we are called to be faithful in all times, in good and bad, for richer and poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as we live – for that is God’s promise to us – to be faithful always. The Satan is always lurking there to tempt us, to try to buy us for whatever price we might ask, if only we will turn our backs on God. But the God who created us and calls us children and sent Jesus to save us is the God from whom nothing can separate us – not hardship, or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or suffering or prosperity, as Paul writes to the church in Rome. Our God knows what it is to suffer unjustly, for that is what Jesus did for us, and God promises to be with us in our suffering, to comfort and strengthen us, to give us a divine shoulder to cry on, and to assure us that we are not alone. Our God is a faithful God, and nothing can separate us from God’s love – nothing in life, nothing in death, nothing that the Satan can give or take away or do to us!

Here at this table that is what we affirm as we break bread and share a cup in remembrance of the crucified and risen Christ. We remember with Christians around the world and across the ages that God understands our suffering, our temptations, our anguish, our pain, and God loves us through it all! If we are to live with any integrity as disciples of Jesus, then we must never take for granted the great sacrifice Jesus made for us, a sacrifice we remember at this table as we break this bread and pour this cup. For God understands our pain and stands with us as the Satan listens for our angry and anguished cries when we suffer. Let him hear your voice! Let him hear loud and clear from your lips – not “Why me?” or “Woe is me!” – but these words shouted with defiant faith: “Blessed be the name of the Lord!” Amen