

How to Live a Life of Faith by Holly C. W. Aastuen  
October 25, 2009 Job 42:1-6, 10-17

This week's Job reading is the toughest one we have discussed so far, though looking back over the past 4 weeks it's not as though we haven't been through a lot of tough passages with Job. We've been through the loss of all 10 of his children, the affliction that resulted in horrible sores all over his body and the affliction of his so-called friends' advice as they blamed Job for all he was going through. We've talked about why bad things happen to good people, where God is in all this mix and why God bothers with us at all.

And then we get to this passage, this happily ever after passage, and it all seems unreal, too sweet and orderly—Job repents of his harsh words to God, God restores Job to twice the financial riches he had before, and even, over time, restores Job with a new family and ten new children—seven sons and three daughters—the same distribution of children that he had in his previous family.

And to add to all this, the daughters are beautiful—there are no women more beautiful than Job's daughters—and they all lived happily ever after. The End.

Seems a bit too tidy, doesn't it?

This sort of ending to a tragic and difficult life seems to say that all you need to do is follow God and you will live happily ever after.

But what about those who have had terrible afflictions like Job and don't live happily ever after? What about those people who are stricken with the loss of a child that no one could ever replace? What about those people who lost their fortunes and never had them returned? What about those people who got sick from disease and never recovered, leaving behind a family that is devastated? What does God have to say about all that? What does this passage have to say about all the tragedies that people endure that have no happy ending?

People who deal with these kinds of tragedies every day, who experience death and grief and loss know what it's like to go through the deepest valley. Just ask anyone who works in a hospital wing where death is a common occurrence. Health Care professionals who work in places like an Intensive Care Unit will tell you that there are often two types of reactions to tragedy.

One reaction is that many terminally ill patients and their families, negotiate the passage from life to death with grace, confidence, poise and a strong faith in God their redeemer. They work together as a family to face the difficult decisions of life. They rely upon God to help see them through.

The other reaction to tragedy is to become unglued. Some people have no support to rely upon, no God they feel they can turn to in difficult times. For them the prospect of death provokes feelings of bitterness, fear, denial and hopelessness.<sup>i</sup>

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For Job, though he was not always poised, the extreme trials he went through showed that for him, faith was a non-negotiable. He could be shocked at all that he had to go through, he could wonder why God was absent, he could get angry with God, but through it all, he kept his faith. There was no question throughout the entire book that he would remain faithful.

And in today's passage is the reward for that faith, though not the reward you might think. The primary reward Job experienced for his faith was a face-to-face encounter with God.

There is nothing to compare with such a face-to-face encounter. It was a rare privilege given to only the few. And those few in the Bible who were given the opportunity to meet God were never the same again. Elijah, Moses and Job each had their lives forever changed because they had met God. Hearing and understanding about someone is very different from meeting that person face to face.

The book of Job doesn't offer an answer about why bad things happen to good people, but it does offer the chance for those who are willing to enter into a relationship with God to have a sense of God's awesome power and amazing compassion and mysterious ways.

In confirmation last Wednesday we were talking about the difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus. Somebody, I think it was Winter, said that the difference between knowing about someone and knowing someone is that knowing someone implies a relationship. I know about the President of the United States, but I know my family who loves me and cares for me and supports me in times of struggle.

Knowing someone means that there is a two way relationship rather than just one way, that there is some give and take, some dependence upon one another, some expectation that each of us would work on the relationship.

In the final passage of Job, it is clear that Job moves from one understanding of God to another. It's not that in moving from knowing about God to knowing God there is this sudden intimacy and loving relationship, but that Job finally realizes that God cares about Job and isn't some distant, punishing, force.

God is clearly on Job's side. The missing verses in today's reading include an angry lecture to the so called friends of Job who told Job that he must have done something to deserve his punishment. God commands the three friends to offer a sacrifice and ask Job to pray for them so that they will be forgiven from their bad counsel. The three friends did as God commanded and God accepted Job's prayer on their behalf.

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After all that Job has been through, the ‘happy ending’ to this story looks more like an act of faith. For Job to resume his life as it was before is to risk losing it all again. To have twice as much as before is to double the risk. To embrace his family is to embrace life in spite of potential suffering and unanswered questions. In short, to have all this bounty is to once again live on faith—to live on the faith that God will be with him through all the ups and downs of life.

After all, this is the God who will soon walk with Jesus every step of the way to the cross. This is the God who knows our afflictions, and experiences those afflictions with us. It is in love and compassion that God redeems us.

In our suffering we have a choice. We can become embittered by the trials we’ve faced, railing against the injustice of our affliction and finding strength and energy in our resentment towards all that has befallen us.

But there is a second choice. Those who allow their suffering to form the way they think about the world will surely become more sensitive to the truth of the human situation. Those who have been through trials can become more compassionate toward those who are going through similar trials. Our painful experiences don’t necessarily make us more mature, but our maturing doesn’t take place apart from physical and mental pain.

It is through the cross of Christ that we learn who God is. It is the cross that finally breaks down our image of God as a distant and punishing God. It is the cross that provides us with a new image of a vulnerable God, an image of a crucified God, an image of God who redeems us not by coercive power but by suffering with us in our suffering.

Our goal in faith is to know God through Christ, to know this powerful one who risked the vulnerability of becoming human so that we might fully know the God who chose to be one of us.

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<sup>1</sup> From “The Story of Job: Personal Disaster Reveals Genuine Faith” by Dan Clendenin.