

*Toeholds for Troubling Times*  
Job 1:1-10

In the church that I pastored just before I came here, in Campbell, about twenty percent of the congregation was African. Not African-American; African. The adults had been born in West Africa—mostly Sierra Leone and Liberia—and they'd immigrated to the U.S. in the last fifteen years or so, to escape long, brutal civil wars that had wrecked their countries. You've met some of these people; they came to sing with our choirs on Africa Sunday at the end of January.

Both Liberia and Sierra Leone were founded as places of freedom for people who had once been slaves. Sierra Leone was established at the end of the 18th century, when slavery was abolished in Britain. In fact, its capital is called Freetown. Liberia (from *liberate*) was established as a homeland for freed American slaves. West Africans are Methodists because they were educated by Methodist missionaries. They learned from those missionaries a conservative, solid, life-saving faith.

When I went to our United Methodist General Conference in 2016, I saw what you may also have seen if you watched any of the Special General Conference a couple of weeks ago. There was a dramatic, and sometimes even angry divide between the African delegates and more progressive United Methodists. At that 2016 Conference there was a complete stalemate in the Church's business because the delegates couldn't get past their un-bridgeable disagreement about inclusion of gay and lesbian people. Literally, the General Conference did no business in that session—and that's why the Special General Conference was set for 2019.

As I watched that Conference three years ago—from about the same spot where Sam found nachos last week—it occurred to me that the demographic landscape of the whole United Methodist Church looked like a bigger version of my church in Campbell. Campbell is a reconciling church. The mostly white congregation made a decision in 1998 to be a fully inclusive church. And then the Africans came, from a culture and religious education that had taught them something entirely different about what God thinks about human sexuality. In fact, many of them came from families where polygamy had been the norm.

So why were we not fighting about inclusion in our local church? I wondered. Should we be? Had we just ignored this great big elephant in the room, pasted a thin blanket of politeness over our irreconcilable differences? I asked a few people, including my African associate pastor, what they thought. And here's the gist of what they said: We don't fight about this difference among us because we're a community. We worship together every week. We eat together. We have a church we're responsible for, a community to care for. We take care of each other. We may not always understand each other, or feel exactly the same way—about lots of things—but that doesn't really matter very much, because there's plenty that holds us together.

What wisdom had settled into that place. What a difference there is between a community that acknowledges differences as part of its daily life together, and a convention of people who meet only once every four years, mostly to talk about those differences.

But I'll tell you what difference did divide that congregation—not in a way that created argument, but that a way that sometimes kept us from understanding each other's lives. The experience of suffering. The people in that congregation who had seen their homes burned to the ground and family members killed by their neighbors—they were different, changed. They were marked in some invisible way by that experience of terror. You'd have to be. Because suffering transforms people. It just does.

I know this from my own life. I wonder if you do too. It doesn't take a civil war in your backyard to wake you up to how the world is different after you've been hit on the side of the head with a rock you weren't prepared for. The loss of someone you loved dearly. A diagnosis you hoped you'd never hear. A major disappointment, a refusal to welcome you, a betrayal by someone you thought would never turn their back on you. Once you've been through an experience that feels like that, you live knowing something you didn't know before. The truth about life changes. Life—your life—now includes the possibility that terrible things will happen. The broken feeling that you know because it's taken up residence inside of you—that's what we call suffering.

The Book of Job, that we are going to sink into in our worship over these weeks of Lent, is an ancient story about a man who suffered. Job is one of those Bible stories that has slipped into our cultural idiom. We use Job's name in regular conversations. "I feel like Job," we say when the hits just keep coming. We describe long-suffering people as having "the patience of Job." Who was this guy? And why is his story in the Bible?

Job is a story for people who know that bowing our heads compliantly for prayer and expecting the best of people isn't always enough to assure the quality of our lives. It's a story about what happens when life doesn't work the way it's supposed to. One of the things suffering does is to expose what we have unconsciously put our trust in. When that cosmic insurance you thought you'd purchased by living a good life fails you, what do you do then? When the old answers don't work any more, what beliefs do you hold onto? What precautions did you live by, that just don't make sense any more? Does the God you have always believed in fit in this new description of the world, or does your image of God require some adjustment? These are the questions asked by this story. What we get to watch is how Job changed as he asked and answered those questions for himself. How his faith broke apart and was re-made. Job's story is the anatomy of a conversion.

What we read this morning is the very beginning of the story, Job's first appearance. Job is a man of 'perfect integrity', we're told. He has lots of everything: sheep, camels, oxen, slaves, children—all things that in his culture looked like rewards for good living. But in just the second paragraph of the story, Job's goodness begins to look a little like anxiety. Maybe Job is good not because he loves God, but because he's afraid of God. He avoids evil because he knows there will be consequences if he doesn't. He plays by the rules, and that's why he has wealth, family, success. His goodness is like money in the bank. He worries a little about making a mistake, accidentally draining that account.

How do we know this? Because Job makes his children go through purification rites when they've done nothing wrong, just in case they've had bad thoughts—been *tempted* to sin. Job's

life, his sense of well-being, his whole family's security, seems like it's precariously balanced on maintaining his goodness, and Job knows it. And so just under the surface we can see Job's worry that one day, everything might topple over. Job is obedient to God's laws because he's too afraid to do anything else. Centuries later, Jewish scholars (Maimonides) began to say about him: Job was a good man, but he was not yet a wise one.

Satan too makes his first appearance in this section of the story we read this morning. The ancient Hebrews believed that Satan, evil as he was, was one of the beings—the angels—who surrounded God. His name means the 'Adversary', or the 'Accuser.' We see early on that evil is not a surprise to God. An adversary is simply part of creation, what is.

'What have you been doing?' God asks Satan on this day.

'Oh, walking around the earth, here and there,' is the response. Evil has the same full access that God does.

'Did you see my guy Job?' God asks. 'He's good, isn't he?'

'Well, of course he's good,' Satan answers. 'Who wouldn't be good if they had that kind of life? Let's test him. I guarantee you, when he starts to lose the stuff he loves, he won't be your guy any more. He'll curse you to your face.'

'OK,' God says. You can test him. 'Let's see.'

And so begins the story of Job. For the next forty chapters (this is not a short book!), Job is plagued with one disaster after another. God does not make Job suffer; God isn't even the one who was testing Job. But neither does God protect Job from the suffering that is coming his way. That's just the truth of it. It's as if keeping Job and his family from dealing with how hard life can be is simply not in God's job description.

We have no idea who wrote this book. The story is in the Hebrew Bible, but Job himself is not Jewish; he's a Gentile. But we know this story appeared and became widely read by the Jewish people who had always believed that when bad things happened to them, it was their own fault. That everything that happened to them—from good crops to attack by a foreign army—could be seen as a reward for good behavior or God's punishment for their lack of faithfulness.

Here, then, in the middle of this puzzle that had helped them make sense of a dangerous world, comes a piece that doesn't fit at all. The story of a righteous man who, for no apparent reason, suffers. Job is a man who *is* faithful *and* his faithfulness does not protect him from harm. If safety and good health and financial security are what you're supposed to get in exchange for good living, this story throws a wrench into the whole system. Job is a good man, and still somehow he cannot hold onto the rewards of his righteousness.

There are no clichés or platitudes that cover Job's experience. God never offers a one-size-fits-all explanation for what happens to Job, or why him. And maybe that's the most important thing we can learn from this story. What we will see is that God stays, with Job, from the beginning to

the end of the story. God never leaves Job's side, no matter how broken Job feels, or how angry he gets, or how impertinent his questions sound. 'I can take it,' God seems to be assuring him, us. Tell the truth, this story says. Speak the truth of your life, even if all you can say is, 'I am suffering. This is terrible.' Because that's how you clear out all those clichéd beliefs that sounded good, and that just don't make sense in real life. Tell the truth, because then you can hear God saying to you the thing that is *always* true: 'I am on your side. No matter what happens, I'll be there with you.'