



From the Pulpit: September 4, 2022
Labor Day Weekend

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Job 1:1–5

The Wizard of Uz, I: Job

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. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the East. His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all, for Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." This is what Job always did.

“Why do bad things happen to good people? It's a good question but I don't want to give an answer. I want to tell a story.”

All five victims were inches from safety; if they'd gotten just a little help from the almighty, they all could have made it out alive.

And then it turned out that the fire was caused by a careless mistake: late on Christmas Eve someone swept the fireplace and dumped glowing embers in the trash. Any one of us in this room might have made that mistake ourselves.

Lomer Johnson the grandfather, looked just like Santa Claus; he was 71, with snow-white hair and a long white beard and Scandinavian-blue eyes and wire reading glasses perched on the end of his nose. He spent his last day of life playing Santa Claus at Saks Fifth Avenue in New York; and then Santa Claus died on Christmas morning.

It just all seemed like another of those cruel jokes God is famous for; you know like Beethoven, maestro of musical masterpieces, going deaf; or Lou Gehrig the Iron-Man baseball player who played in 2,130 straight games, wasting away from the disease which will bear his name ever after.

Eleven years ago, Santa Claus died on Christmas Eve in a house fire in Stamford, Connecticut about a mile from my house, as the crow flies.

The fire killed a grandmother, a grandfather, and three children; Lily was nine; her twin sisters were seven; on Christmas morning after all the gifts were wrapped, and everybody went to bed in the still, small hours of the morning.

It is the immemorial problem of all western theology: Why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer? If God is **good** and God is **powerful**, why is there so much evil in the world? If God is **powerful** God **could** stop a house fire on Christmas morning. If God is **good**, God **would want to** but clearly God **didn't**, therefore what's the answer?

To paraphrase Harold Kushner: Why do bad things happen to good people? It's a good question but I don't want to give an **answer**. I want to tell a **story**.

It was written down in its present form around 2500 years ago—perhaps in the fifth century B.C., though the folktale on which our story is based is probably at least a thousand years older than that.

It begins like this: “Once upon a time there was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job.” “Once upon a time” it begins. This tips us off that what follows is a fairy tale. Somebody said that The Book of Job begins like *Star Wars* begins—“a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...”¹

You will not find Uz on any maps. It is a mythic land, akin to its phonetic cousin Oz from our own mythology.

Job says the text was blameless and upright. He feared God and hated evil, a good Presbyterian, a good father, and a good businessman too. Tom Long said “Job not only has sons, daughters, and animals, he has them in symmetrical numbers,”² another clue that the story is legend not history.

Seven sons and three daughters—equal to the round, symbolic number ten. No grandchildren are mentioned; Job's children are probably unmarried young adults. What does that make Job—40-something?

He had 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels—10,000; 500 oxen, 500 donkeys—1,000. Nice, round, symbolic numbers. His 500 yokes of oxen make him an Agri-business wunderkind, the John Deere of the Ancient Near East.

His 7,000 sheep give him a monopoly on the wool market. Job is the Patagonia of the Ancient Near East.

His 3,000 camels make him a transportation magnate. His camels deliver packages like UPS in that familiar brown beast of burden. His camels deliver furniture like United Van Lines. His camels deliver business-people and tourists like American Airlines; You can rent a camel from Job like from U-Haul.

Unbeknownst to Job however, his world is about to come crashing down around his ears. His livelihood is destroyed, all his beautiful sons and daughters are killed, and even Job himself is stricken with a horrible skin disease.

This trouble is the device which sets the plot in motion because we are left to wonder how this pious man will react. What will be the human response to all this misery? There are at least three responses to the problem of evil in the Book of Job.

Job's wife just wants to give up on God. She tells her husband “Curse God and die!” Her solution to the problem of pain is *No Theology*, or *A-theology*.

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¹Thomas Long, “Job: Second Thoughts from the Land of Uz,” *Theology Today*, April, 1988, p. 7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Job's friends come to help but all they can give Job are the hackneyed bromides of traditional theology—the theology of the academy. All they can give him are Calvin's *Institutes* and Luther's *Catechism* and Barth's *Dogmatics*, but the theology of the academy doesn't work when you're standing next to an open grave and what you really need is Valium to kill the grief and morphine to kill the pain. The friends' response is *Book Theology*.

The third response to evil is that of Job himself. He refuses to curse God and die. He knows there's a God. He has always believed in God and he's not going to stop now. "Naked came I from my mother's womb" he says "and naked shall I return. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

Job comes up with—what shall I call it?—a *Lived Theology* perhaps, or a *Protest Theology*. Job decides to hang onto God for dear life even if it means he will hang, period.

"Though he slay me, yet shall I trust him," says the King James version of Job 13:15. A *Lived Theology* or a *Protest Theology*.

When children die, Death doesn't just abduct the ones we love; it also plunders the future; it also makes off with all that's happy and good. In early August they held a sentencing hearing for that creep who killed 17 people in Parkland, Florida on Valentine's Day 2018. Relative after relative, parent after parent, friend after friend, stood up to tell the court what their lives have been like since that hateful day. You know what's gone or twisted after something like that? Christmas is gone or twisted, almost unbearable. Family reunions are gone or twisted. You can't watch the Florida Gators anymore because that was your daughter's favorite team and she had so much fun watching them.

You will never walk her down the aisle. You will never witness his high school graduation. You will never hold her children in your arms. One sister said "She never got her braces off. She will never have her first kiss." People keep asking one mother, "How many children do you have?" and she doesn't know what to answer. Another mother sprays herself with her daughter's perfume just so she can smell her gone daughter.

Their homes are intolerably quiet. Even the night is gone. "The night no longer brings intimacy and comfort" said one survivor "just the loudness of the silence."³ The deafening silence.

What then shall we say, in times like these? Not Job's wife—No *Theology*, or *A-Theology*. Not Job's friends—*Book Theology*. But a *Lived Theology*, a *Protest Theology*. "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him." Or "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

“Job comes up with—what shall I call it?—a *Lived Theology* perhaps, or a *Protest Theology*. Job decides to hang onto God for dear life even if it means he will hang, period.”

³Patricia Mazzei, "This Broke Me': Parkland Trial Reveals Depths of Families' Sorrow," *The New York Times*, August 5, 2022.

—The Great Prayer—
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Clouded, cloudy, ungraspable God,
make manifest your presence today.
Your spirit woven through life and relationship.
Your ineffability unfolding at family gatherings,
meals shared, laughter rising to the rafters.
Your wisdom interlaced in every conversation,
every decision, every creative endeavor,
when our own spirit is open to you.

Be alive within us.
Give us joy.
Open our eyes to see
the simple relationship between spirit and flesh,
between that which lifts our hearts,
and that which feeds our very bodies:
help us to see that “bread crumbs scattered
for the birds become song” (Laura Grace Weldon).

Perch, too, in parched places,
spirit of the living God,
in our most impenetrable sorrow,
when tears become our daily bread.

Be with those whose bodies have become struggle,
whose lives have been turned upside down.
Be with those who watch on,
caregivers, spouses, parents, siblings,
friends, doctors, nurses,
who let every fiber of their being
become part of that lived struggle
for breath and heartbeat.

And in the halls of power,
where history is written and rewritten
before our very eyes,
let your spirit of transformation

nurture a still more generous,
still more just,
still more gentle way.
We trust you, O God.
We need you, O Christ.
We long for you, Holy Spirit.

Turn us now to this table.
Accompany us, O Christ.
Today, transform us and these familiar things
—bread and cup—
in the same way you continually
transform the world around us.

Bless bread and cup,
wheat and grape,
farmer and harvest,
seed and sower.

So that in sharing these simple elements,
we might taste and see your goodness,
and glimpse what it is to be
in communion with you and with one another.
Through Christ,
in Christ,
with Christ,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
all glory and honor is yours,
most holy God, now and forever.

And hear us as we pray together the prayer Jesus teaches
us...Our Father...Amen.

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