



From the Pulpit: September 11, 2022

The Anniversary of an American Loss

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Job 1:13–22; 2:9–10

The Wizard of Uz, II: Sidites

One day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the eldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were feeding beside them, and the Sabeans fell on them and carried them off and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them; I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another came and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house, and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you."

Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing.

Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die." But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive good from God and not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

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Augustine called her *adiutrix diaboli*, Satan's Secretary, or Assistant to the Diabolical One. Calvin used pretty much the same words when he called her the *organum Satanae*, the instrument of Satan.

And I suppose Augustine and Calvin were pretty much on target with their remarks, because after all she was trying to get her husband to do exactly what Satan *wanted* him to do—curse God and die. In one sense, she really was Satan's assistant, or Satan's instrument.

But let's not be too quick to judgment. Over the centuries we've always felt pity for Job, but we have forgotten that if anything this mother's pain is even greater than his. First she watches her husband's entire livelihood vanish like smoke, and then her seven handsome sons and three beautiful daughters, the fruit of her body and the companions of her breast, crushed under the rubble of a house brought down in a hurricane.

I went to the internet to find some images of Job's wife. Do you know what comes up first when you Google "Job's Wife"? This fetching 58-year-old blond shows up. Her name is Laurene Powell, and in 1991, she married Steve Jobs. When you Google "Job's Wife," Mrs. **Jobs** comes up, not Mrs. **Job**.

The Bible does not name Job's wife. Presumably it wasn't Laurene. The Bible doesn't name Job's wife, but down the centuries the rabbis have speculated about her name. In one Greek version of the tale, her name is Sidites; that's very Greek; it's Greek to me.

Tradition has it that with her husband on the verge of bankruptcy, too ill to work, she went to work to support herself and her husband, and when even *that* wasn't sufficient, she sold her long, beautiful hair to fend off poverty,¹ a kind of ancient counterpart to Fantine, who sells her hair to buy medicine for her daughter in Hugo's *Les Misérables*.

Maybe she was a beautiful, 58-year-old woman with long, luxurious locks, just like Laurene Powell Jobs. She sold it to feed what remained of her family.

Finally it is all too much—the poverty, the grief, the strain of nursing her sick husband. Holed up there in a one-room, cold-water flat which is all they can any longer afford, watching her husband scratching his sores with a piece of broken china, she just snaps.

Job is still stoic, respectful, worshipful, and humble—"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord." But the integrity which she has so much admired in her husband suddenly becomes a phony sham. It rings false to her, a sign no longer of Job's strength and goodness but of weakness and resignation.

She says to Job, "Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Job don't become a whimpering little pipsqueak. Stand up on your own two feet and tell this bully what you think of him. Don't be a sissy. Curse God! I know it'll get you killed. Nobody curses God and lives. But a noble, fighting death is better than this feeble, passive resignation. Curse God! Damn him and die! Tell him to go to the hell he's building for all the bruised, beaten, battered, bloodied children of the earth."

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Do you see what is happening to her? For Sidites, Job's unshakeable **reverence** for God is equivalent to an **irreverence** for the sacred lives of her children. She says to herself, "If Job can still love God after what God did to my children, he couldn't possibly have loved my children."

I like her. I don't know about you, but I like her. She has a kind of Promethean rebellion against the gods who assault humanity with cruelty. We will see, I think, that her response to evil is inadequate, and that Job's refusal to let go of God is more commendable and, in the end, more helpful than his wife's atheism. Sid-

ites' response to evil might be inadequate, but it is understandable, and common. And our task, I think, is not to **rebuke** her, but to **understand** her.

Because we meet her at every turn throughout the annals of history, the pages of literature, and the days of our lives. Can we grant them then permission to despair?

We meet her everywhere, Mrs. Job. We meet her in the woman whose husband beats her up with his words if not with his hands. We meet her in the mother who watches next the bed of despair through long sessions of chemotherapy. Mrs. Job is even a little like Mrs. Jobs, who lost her husband to cancer when he was 56 years old. Their task is not to **praise God** but to **curse death**.

¹ Robert Gordis, *The Book of God and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 10ff, 71ff., 223ff.

You know the thing about Mrs. Job? God never *rebukes* her *insolence*, perhaps because God *knows* her *pain*. We will see in coming weeks that when it comes to Job's friends, those of empty platitude and shallow religion, to them God says, "You are just foolish. You did not speak of me what is right. Therefore, ask Job to pray for you, and perchance I shall hear his prayer, and not strike you dead."

That is almost an exact translation of God's words to Job's friends: "Shut up! You are making me mad as hell!" God tells God's staunch defenders to shut up, but as for Job's wife, God's fiercest critic? God has no rebuke for her. God lets her angry, blasphemous words stand as they are. Is it because her anger is truer than the empty platitudes of the friends' shallow religion?

Today we mark a solemn anniversary. After the Twin Towers fell 21 years ago, Elizabeth II sent a kind message to the City of New York. "Grief is the price we pay for love," she said. "Atrocities such as these simply reinforce our sense of community, our humanity, and our trust in the rule of law."²

Sean Rooney lived in Stamford, Connecticut. He wasn't a member of my church, but some of us knew him. On September 11, Sean worked as a vice-president in risk management for the Aon Corporation on the 98th floor of the South Tower. When the second plane hit the South Tower, he started walking down the stairs and when it turned out that every exit was blocked, he just stopped and called his wife Beverly Eckert.

Beverly says, "Sean had warm brown eyes and dark curly hair and he was a good hugger. We met when we were only 16, at a dance, when we were students at our Catholic High School in Buffalo. When he died, we were 50.

² Quoted by Alan Cowell, "Queen Elizabeth II Dies at 96; Was Britain's Longest-Reigning Monarch," *The New York Times*, September 8, 2022.

"It was about 9:30 a.m. when he called, and he told me the stairway was full of smoke. I asked if it hurt for him to breathe and he paused for a moment, and finally said, No. He loved me enough to lie.

"We stopped talking about escape routes and then we just began talking about all the happiness we shared during our lives together. I told him that I wanted to be there with him, to die with him, but he said, no, no, he wanted me to live a full life.

"As the smoke got thicker, he just kept whispering I love you, over and over. I just wanted to crawl through the phone lines to him, to hold him, one last time.

"Then I heard a sharp crack, followed by the sound of an avalanche. It was the building beginning to collapse. I called his name into the phone over and over, then I just sat there, pressing the phone to my heart.

"I think about that last half hour with Sean all the time. I remember how I didn't want that day to end, terrible as it was, I didn't want to go to sleep because as long as I was awake, it was still a day that I'd shared with Sean.

"You know, he kissed me goodbye just before going to work—I could still say that was just a little while ago, that was only this morning.

And, looking back on all that has happened since he died and the causes I fought for and the things I've done, I just think of myself as living life for both of us now. And I like to think that Sean would be proud of me.

I love the way she puts it: "I just think of myself as living life for the both of us now." Perhaps you know that after her husband died on 9/11, Beverly Eckert became a prominent spokeswoman for the families of 9/11 victims.³

³ Beverly Eckert shared her story on the website Storycorps.org.

"You know the thing about Mrs. Job? God never rebukes her insolence, perhaps because God knows her pain."

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

In another of God's funny jokes, Beverly herself died in a plane crash in 2009, at the age of 57. She was flying to Buffalo to award a scholarship in her husband's name at her Catholic High School.

When we meet people like Sitides, or Beverly, or even Laurene Powell, if we could just listen to their haunting laments, if we can just hold them close until God comes back with God's lavish benedictions, maybe, just maybe, we will hear them say, in the end, like Job himself, "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Draw near, O Lord. By day, preside over the busy-ness, the day's tasks, the responsibilities and endeavors that fill our lives. By night, govern our dreams, hold our worries, give peace to our unrest, entrust us to your safe keeping, and permit the gift of sleep to guide us.

As we sense the turning of the year, smudges of yellow and orange emerging on the tips of tree branches, we ask your blessing: bless the school year, bless the still unfolding return to in-person-work, bless the sports seasons that spread before us, bless friendships new and old, bless our families that grow and shift and change in ways expected and unexplained. Be in the mystery of life and death, and hold us in the intermingling of joy and sorrow, no matter the season. In prayer, we seek all in this life that is good and right and faithful. On our knees, we long for healing, thriving, trust, repair and a way through.

Because the world is never fully at peace, we pray for unrest across the globe: where power or water is scarce, where illness overwhelms, where women and children flee for their lives, where the young and old alike remain and take to battle...make way, O God. When violence is daily bread, turn the tides, change hearts, mend and repair: Lord hear our prayer.

Be with our British allies as they grieve their Queen and host their King's coronation. Be with our Chinese friends and colleagues who find themselves in lockdown again. Be with the Ukrainians in the shifting sand of war. Give us hearts to love our neighbors, bold ways to respond, generous acts of compassion.

Lord, hear our prayer, and hear us as we join our voices praying the prayer Jesus teaches us saying...Our Father....Amen.

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