

UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Here is a condensed version of the story of Job, perhaps the oldest stage play ever written. I'll include a few explanatory comments along the way.

Prologue.

Once upon a time in the land of Uz—no, not Oz, Uz—there was a man named Job. I know it looks like *job* but it's pronounced *jobe*. Job was blameless and upright. He worshiped God and turned away from evil. He had seven sons, three daughters, seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred oxen, five hundred donkeys, and many servants. Job was the greatest of all the people of the east.

Did you hear that? Job was the greatest, the most virtuous, the most prosperous, the most good of all people. Certainly nothing bad would ever befall such a man.

Act 1. Scene 1.

One day the heavenly beings—not angels exactly but something like that—came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them.

At that time “Satan” was not the sinister, demonic, red-tail, pitch-fork character he would later become in art and literature. In this story he is something like a prosecuting attorney. The name “Satan” means adversary or accuser. I'm not sure what to make of this but apparently Satan got his start as a *lawyer*. But remember: it's just a story. Anyway, I digress.

The Lord said to Satan, ‘Where have you come from?’ Satan answered, ‘From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.’ The Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you noticed my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man.’ Then Satan answered the Lord, ‘*Does Job serve (or, fear) God for nothing?*’

Now there's a question we can ask of ourselves over and over. Is our religion, our flattering of God with endless superlatives, only about getting something for me—like, I'm only in it for the blessings and ultimately for the reward of eternal life? *Does Job serve God for nothing?* As someone said, the notion in some forms of Christianity of *what must I do to be saved* really perverts the whole teaching of Jesus about what *we must do to save others from misery even if it kills us*.

Satan said, ‘Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.’

The Lord said to Satan, ‘Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not touch his body!’ God and Satan shook hands on the wager. And then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

Warning: Bad things are about to happen to a good person and not just a good person but the greatest of persons. Keep in mind what we've seen so far in this stage production. Entities unknown to Job have conspired to wreck havoc and ruin on his life. Of course, God and Satan are props in this play, not meant to be taken literally. So think of other things those props might represent in real life.

For example, isn't it true that people are often victims of decisions made out of their sight in corporate boardrooms, or in palaces, or legislative chamber—decisions in which they had no say so or knowledge? Or if it isn't humans conspiring against people what about multiple forces of nature converging without our consent to wreck havoc and ruination on innocent bystanders? Think tsunami.

Notice that what befalls Job is a condensation of what happens to people over and over again in different times and places—natural disasters and humanly organized violent deaths. Much of what happens to Job in the next few minutes has happened to peoples and nations in just the past few years. You will recall many of them.

Scene 2.

So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord. Soon after, on a day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking 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, 'Fire 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.'

You can see why this is such a great theatrical production. One after another witnesses appears on stage with grim news for the greatest man on earth.

That was on stage but on the ground in real life armies, militias, gangs, insurgents, and terrorists like the "Sabeans" and the "Chaldeans" in the play, attack and kill people by the hundreds. Bombs fall from the sky and explode from parked cars slaughtering thousands. And then there are the natural disasters, wind and earthquakes killing by the thousands.

Some losses in life are sudden just like that. Some losses are slow. Many of us lose what is precious by the wear and tear of life, by misfortune, by bad genes or bad timing. All too soon joy is diminished or depleted and we slip into darkness.

Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground. He said, 'Naked I came from the earth, 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.

WOW! Who can believe that? In the wake of incomparable loss and grief Job maintained his confidence in God. How could he? Well, remember, this is a story, a theatrical production and so far God is winning the bet.

Scene 3.

One day the heavenly beings again came to present themselves before the Lord. The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you noticed my servant Job? He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for *no reason*.'

No reason?! Isn't that interesting? It could mean "for no *good* reason." But what if it's just for "no reason whatever." Could it be there are no reasons, no purpose for the bad things that befall us? If so, what then?

Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their skins. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.'

Scene 4.

So Satan inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a shard to scrape himself and sat among the ashes.

Then his wife said to him, 'Do you still persist in your faith? Curse God, and die.'

But he said to her, 'Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Act 2. Scene 1.

Now when Job's three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—heard of all the troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home. They met together to go and console and comfort him. When they saw Job from a distance, they barely recognized him. They raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with Job on the ground for seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

The greatest man on earth had been reduced to rubble.

Scene 2.

After seven days and nights of silence, Job's friends spoke up, each offering an explanation of Job's predicament with the conventional wisdom of the day. In so many words they said: God doesn't punish the innocent. Job, you can't be innocent. You or your children must have done something wrong. Confess and repent. God rewards those who do good and punishes those who do evil. No exceptions.

In the book of Job itself these speeches are about hundreds of words long. I've greatly abbreviated them and I'm pretty sure you're glad for that!?

Job, as it turns out, refuses to accept this "conventional wisdom." You're wrong, he replied. Something doesn't add up here. Your explanations do not fit my reality.

And there you have it. In this ancient play we catch a glimpse of the evolution of human consciousness. The conventional wisdom that "might makes right" is questioned. The conventional wisdom that justice trumps love and mercy is questioned. Job protests: that is no way to govern the universe, a nation, a society, a tribe or a household.

Job challenged conventional wisdom. He wasn't the last.

When the bubonic plague swept across Europe killing tens of millions in the 14th century, conventional wisdom said it was an act of God. A few dissented and began to look for another explanation, a material explanation of cause and effect which led eventually to what we call "science," which would be an unconventional form of wisdom in its time.

Does God intervene to save some but not others? Most of us have moved beyond that conventional theology. But there are other forms of conventional wisdom.

For instance, are the poor poor because they are lazy? Are we blessed as a nation because we are morally better than others? Does God help those who help themselves or help those who can't help themselves? If there is no future heaven to compensate for injustices on earth, might we not want to do God's will on earth as we imagine it might be done in heaven? Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Prayer changes things, some say. But maybe prayer changes people who change things.

Why are you miserable these days? What does conventional wisdom say? Might there be another way of seeing your plight?

Job refused to accept conventional wisdom. He knew deep in his heart the universe was not so neat and tidy. There is a randomness, no reason, to events that defy explanation. How, then, shall we live if there is no purpose, no neat answers for everything?

And now to today's lesson (Job 23:1-9, 16-17)

Then Job answered: "Today my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me. There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge. "If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him. God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!

The God Job expected is not there. He is in the dark. And in the darkness where knowledge fails, where all bets are off, Job awaits new understanding, new light, unconventional wisdom.

We don't know why bad things happen to good people or to anyone. But we know this: we know how to stand with those who suffer bad things, to stand by them with love and compassion.

Jesus once felt what Job felt. According to tradition, the words of Psalm 22 were in Jesus' heart and on his lips as he hung dying on a cross.

O my God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far, abandoning me as I groan in misery? O my Beloved, I cry by day, but You do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

Yet, You are the One who took me from the womb; You kept me safe upon my mother's breasts. Upon You I was cast from my birth, and ever since my mother bore me, You have been my strength. Come close to me, for trouble is near and there is none to help.

We don't know why bad things happen to good people or to anyone. But when trouble is near we can be there. It may not be everything. But often it's enough.