

## **VISION**

**JOB 42:1-6, 10-17**

Do you ever wonder how Martin Luther felt as he nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg? Did his hands tremble? Were there tears? Did he have any idea of how the world would change? Did he know that the Reformation that he was setting motion would be one among many? The church would be reformed and always reforming. There would be reformations and counter-reformations in places that Germans did not know existed in 1517, in places like Tuscaloosa, AL, in times like these when the body of Christ is not yet one.

Luther had had enough of a church that seemed self-absorbed, with a church obsessed with a capital campaign on behalf of the Vatican's vision of a renovated St. Peter's Basilica. Who sells indulgences? We would...on game-day...if we thought that the Alabama fans who park here would buy them. God knows they need them...almost as much as you or I. Forgiveness or permission? Luther's answer was, "Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly."

Rejoice in Christ? Wait, we are Presbyterians. Before we rejoice, we must form a committee to study what rejoicing is. Then we have to look at rejoicing in light of what may be said about Christ. Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice. I say it again to discourage analysis. Rejoicing is active and instinctive. To spend too much time analyzing the experience takes away from one's ability to experience it.

Is it possible that Job's suffering is exacerbated by analysis? I suppose it is possible (anything is possible), and yet how is faith that is capable of enduring such suffering fashioned without stories like this that call us to be philosophical and think ethically about that which is just and unjust, fair and unfair? Suffering comes. We know that. The question is, "How is what we do now preparing us for the adversity that we will face?"

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Luther says, "All who call on God in true faith, earnestly from the heart, will certainly be heard, and will receive what they have asked or desired, although not in the hour or in the measure of the very thing which they ask. Yet they will obtain something greater and more glorious than they had dared to ask." All who call on God in true faith, earnestly from the heart, not the mind, will certainly be heard and will receive what they asked or desired on God's terms not theirs. Obtaining something greater and more glorious than that for which they had dared to ask probably applies to Job. The question for us, as we complete this series on Job, is, "Does this statement apply to Job?"

What does Job accomplish, and do his accomplishments exceed that for which he asks? Job suffers, and Scripture has us to believe that he suffers well. I know this congregation well enough to say that some of you think that Job suffers well while others of you are not so sure (and this is one of our strengths as a congregation). I am not sure if it is possible to suffer well. Suffering is suffering, and Job's suffering, as unmerited as it seems, is excruciatingly public.

Now that God's silence has broken and Job has questioned God's motivation, God grants Job vision of a life that exists on the other side of this misery. Here, at the end of the book, God's questions have become Job's. Job confesses, "I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." Job remembers God saying, "Hear and I will speak: I will question you, and you declare to me." Job feels grungy. Guilt consumes him. He cries, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." I repent. I feel myself changing. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.

If the story ended here, I would be just as satisfied as I am with the conclusion that follows, maybe more so. Would you? Or do you find satisfaction, some sense of justice, in Job's friends being

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humiliated and in the bounty that God gives to Job? Do the extra sheep, oxen, donkeys and children compensate for the losses that Job suffers? Or do they serve as reminders that no matter how much one suffers, it is still possible to experience joy on the other side of that suffering? I choose to believe that the possibility of joy is ever-present, even when we are unwilling to look for it, because God's grace is irresistible. God's vision of the church and the world is always clearer than ours.

Remember that the Book of Job is framed by editorial notes. In the beginning, the editor sets the stage by introducing Satan as the Accuser and establishing Job's innocence. In the end, the editor assures us that justice is being served (at least by this person's standards). There will always be a veil of sadness around everything that Job says or does, but God refuses to let Job be reduced to sadness. God insists that Job be surprised by joy.

Your opinion of the editorial work in this story may come down to point of view. Do you prefer a first or third person narrator? If you prefer a third person narrator, would you rather this narrator have an omniscient or limited point of view? Job begins and ends with an omniscient third person narrator, which bothers me, because I believe that omniscience belongs exclusively to God. The advantage of a third person omniscient narrator, however, is that it provides the audience with vision, with a better understanding of how the pieces fit together. The disadvantage is that omniscience takes away mystery, mystery that I would find comforting if I went through this story with Job, or as Job.

Isn't that how vision works? We would like enough to remember the past and to anticipate the future without editing out mystery or the God of grace who thrives on it. Vision is not self-fulfilling prophecy but an exercise in self-awareness and social conscience. Vision recognizes that things change, often for the better and that God calls members of Christ's body, as fractious and dysfunctional as we are, to be agents of change. Vision gives us somewhere to set our faces when we are gripped by pride or despair. Vision helps us to understand and appreciate the God who created us, the world around us

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and our places in it. Vision is intimately related to joy that sustains us when we pass through dark nights of the soul when hands tremble and tears fall all for the sake of the Gospel.

John Calvin, who sparked another Reformation, this one in Geneva, said that knowledge of God is intimately related to knowledge of self. To know one is to know the other more deeply. Calvin also said, "One must submit to supreme suffering in order to discover the completion of joy." Please note that submitting to suffering is not the same as inflicting it on one's self. Suffering and joy are related mysteriously, and this is true not only of Calvin but also of Job. By the end of Job's story, he knows himself better than he ever has, and this knowledge comes only after God speaks, Job listens and then responds humbly and repentantly. Job's statement "I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" disturbs me, because self-hatred is not the same as repentance. In fact, self-hatred is something of which I urge you to repent if you are haunted by self-hatred this morning.

On this Reformation Sunday, I feel obligated to point out the irony of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism (yes, the allusion to Max Weber's classic in sociology is intentional). A tradition that is defined philosophically in terms of justification by grace often is incapable of giving it, especially when it comes to giving one's self grace. A tradition that defines itself in terms of the sovereignty of God often has difficulty admitting that it is not God. A tradition that began in opposition to a capital campaign often defines itself in terms of numbers, as does Job's editor, who feels as if the number of livestock and babies somehow justifies suffering. It doesn't, but I still believe that suffering deepens our capacity to experience joy, and anything that does that is tinged with grace.

I pray that God will use this series on Job to reform a church that is always reforming. We are not God. God is. Our motivation for being faithful, for living the good life, is God's goodness. We will be accused, sometimes falsely, of putting our interests before those of God and neighbor. We will suffer, sometimes in silence, but God will speak, and if we are not too jaded, we will hear. The vision for

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which we pray is God's. God's vision is filled with joy, and this joy assumes suffering. This joy waits with us in our suffering, and it celebrates with us on the other side. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever. Amen.

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