

BLOWING ON THE COALS OF THE HEART - THE BOOK OF JOB:  
Sermon by Reverend Barbara Fast 10 2 11

*“...I have been blessed to have known you all. Thank you for your friendships and your acts of kindness, great and small. You made it all worthwhile.”* Those are not my words. Those are Sam’s words. They were the closing blessing I offered at his, Sam’s, not his real name, memorial service.

2 years earlier I had picked up my phone and heard, “Hello, my name is Sam.... I have cancer. Would you do my memorial service?” So it began.

Sam wrestled with the big questions, about the nature of reality, even before the cancer. His wrestling was powerful, tangible, redemptive and real. He loved his life. In the face of this cancer he was heroic. Compassionate. He wanted to get to 50.

One day he came in and asked me: *Why me? I love my children. I love my wife. My work. My kids. Why me?*

I told him that this was Job’s question to God .

He asked: Did God answer him?

“Yes”

What did God say to Job?

*God said:*

*Where were you when I made the heavens...*

*Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations?*

*Have you ever commanded the day to break,  
assigned the dawn its place?*

He wept. I waited.

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The biblical books of Wisdom, are about living. They chronicle the human experience, invite us to understand ourselves, endure this world with integrity and embrace our lives. Their form is poetic and dramatic.

JOB pushes us out of lazy theology, challenges religious complacencies, and arrogance. As Huston Smith says: “Religion Alive invites Human Beings on THE great adventure: to confront reality and master the self.”

In this Book, God is a symbol, a metaphor. God is reality personified to allow for the dramatic narrative.

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**This is some of my takeaway on JOB.**

Scene 1- We meet God and the Adversary:

The Hebrew translates as “adversary” not as “devil”. “Satan”. This character is the tester...like a cosmic scientist- testing assumptions- you can see why he disturbs religious orthodoxies.

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God says “Have you seen my servant Job; He is all about me. He loves me, praises me, makes sacrifices to me and lives an upright life.”

Satan says: What’s not to love? !

JOB has everything a human could want. Don’t you go bragging on Job. I will bet you that if you take away his good fortune, he will stop loving you. Job will curse you. I’ll make you a wager. I bet you that he will complain. Whaddyya say God?”

“OK” God says. “Do what you will but don’t touch him.”

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God bets on JOB: God bets the adversary that there is a human being who will not forsake “him.” Will keep loving God even in the face of great loss... Satan wagers that when JOB loses his success - what will come out of his mouth will be complaint.

JOB loses his property Loses sheep, cattle, camels, 7 sons and 3 daughters. The text reads: “For all that JOB did not sin nor cast reproach on God.”

**Round one to God:**

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**Round 2:** God proudly says to Satan: “Do you see JOB?”

The Adversary is undeterred. “Let me lay a hand on his bones and flesh...Wanna bet again? “

So God agrees: “He is in your power, only spare his life.”

The text says that JOB now suffers “a severe inflammation from sole of foot to crown of his head. He took a potsherd to scratch himself as he sat in ashes”

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**To review: What we have here is a cosmic wager, a bet.**

Is that a good reason for a person to suffer? **No.**

**Are we clear! God has JOB suffer for no good reason!**

**And he says so to adversary “you have incited me against him for no good reason”.**

Now come JOB’s three friends: They come and they sit with him for a week. They sit Shiva. Shiva is the Jewish mourning custom. They are shocked when they see him. For a week they sit in silence. Then they start to talk. They got tired of waiting for him to shape up! So they give him their shape up lectures.

What the story gives us now is a dramatized intellectual debate about the nature of suffering, evil and God. It is a round-up of the old theologies as a new theology is being birthed.

The friends subscribe to the theology of reward and punishment. Do good, be rewarded. Do evil. Be punished. They say accusingly.

“ So! What did you do wrong? You must have sinned somehow! Suffering is a punishment for sin: Admit it already! God is just, you must deserve this.”

This idea is alive in our world today. Inside of people hearts and minds. It goes on now. It is not just 3000 years ago! This persists! People justify terrorizing children, telling them there is a hell. Some Human Beings like to imagine the other person they are angry at will, she will, or they will get theirs in hell! People are comforted by this on one hand, and terrified on the other. That is the justice of a very small God.

But JOB won't confess because he did nothing to deserve this. He is "blameless/ righteous" in his own eyes.

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Another belief is that if you are "blessed" you will be protected from tragedy. (JOB's children and their families were killed in their tents by a big wind) Another friend tells JOB "your children must have offended God" because they died. The wind that brought down their tent was an act of God and if they were blameless God would protect them!

The debates in Job illustrate the worst in religions biases and human nature. Modern religionists said that about the Hurricanes. About the earthquake in Haiti. Those ideas are abominations of thought and speech!

Even new age spiritualities succumb to this idea: I know a woman who was asked by a friend ... "Why did you ask for cancer?"

JOB's's friends are so attached to this belief system, that they turn their back on JOB rather than change their beliefs. Those beliefs, they think, keep them "safe". To change their minds would risk everything they have staked their lives and fortunes on.

Who among us is not attached to, invested in our belief system?

WHAT JOB realizes and what we realize is that the friends formulae are at best useless and at worse hurtful and alienating. Disconnecting us from our relationships: to self, each other, reality.

*We Human Beings can use religion as a lifeline or a noose.*

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**So JOB is abandoned in his hour of need- if not physically – psychologically .** He sees the futility of his reliance on old beliefs and is overcome by the scope of the injustice of his unwarranted suffering and his loneliness.

He grows angry & cynical. *"...what is this talk of God's justice: robbers live long lives in their tents. Those who provoke God are secure, he pours disgrace on great men, exalts nations, then destroys them, deranges the leaders of the people and makes them wander in a traceless waste."*

He knows himself as a person of integrity.

*He says about his “friends” – you are the voice of the people but I also have a mind and am not less than you.*

His inherent worth and dignity rise up to defend him!

**There is a new reality within his soul, and he is demanding truth! JOB is calling on his highest power- his CONSCIENCE.**

**Why? Is his question? Within his heart. To the cosmos. To God. He wants to know! “Tell me why!! Why do the wicked live on?”**

*He asks, “Why does one man die in robust health, his pails are full of milk, another dies embittered, never having tasted happiness.”*

He cries out: *“I had expectations!”*

Well- Don't we? Didn't we? Have expectations? *Have you lost ....some of your expectations?*

If he were here today he might be saying, *I expected that I would end my days with my family, with a comfortable retirement, mortgage paid off, reliable weather, a little extra money to travel with, grandchildren...secure financially, with affordable health insurance in case ..I get a rash from head to toe..!”*

**JOB demands answers!** He is not less. He will not accept less.

**JOB** is making and taking his case to the highest court in the cosmos. He will have answers!

*I insist on arguing with God! See... I have prepared my case!*

He knows the stakes are his very life!

*“I will argue my case before him, in this too is my salvation.”*

Job wants his day in cosmic court. Even if he loses!

The argument is his salvation, his self worth, his dignity.

We see JOB now: misunderstood, lonely, abandoned, bereft, and covered in sores... his question is his lifeline- he will not let go until he is satisfied that he has learned what his life has to teach him. He is ready to listen!

**The text reads: *the words of JOB are at an end.***

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JOB has nothing left to lose.... Or does he?

**For me- this is the question this book asks:**

Can you still love life? Should we love, life, when the reality is that life is not just amazing, wonderful, sometimes transcendent, but also unjust, unfair, brutal, criminal and even cruel?

Is there a human response that acknowledges life's deep injustices and unfairness, and offers hope, dignity, honest comfort and strength in the face of cataclysm and tragedy? **That is worthy to be called religious?**

What we get in JOB is an insight into deep reality that emerges out of the tempest of human experience!

We get a dramatization of a revelation.

**We get what Job asks for!**

**God speaks:**

*Who do you think you are? To talk to me that way! You have questions you want answered? First, you answer my questions.*

Now ... listen. Hear not just the scale, but the poetry, the beauty, the music!

*Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?*

*Do you know who fixed its dimensions, who measured it,*

*Who set its cornerstone. When the morning stars sang together?*

*Have you ever commanded the day to break, assigned the dawn its place?*

*Does the rain have a father?*

*Who begot the dewdrops?*

*Can you tie cords to Pleiades?*

*Undo the reins of Orion?*

*Do you know the laws of heaven?*

*Can you send an order to the clouds? Can you dispatch lightning on a mission?*

*Do you know the season when the mountain goats give birth?  
Do you give the horse his strength?  
Do you make him quiver like locusts?  
Does the eagle soar at your command?*

***He who arraigns God must respond.  
Would you condemn me that you may be right? “***

**Then God goes quiet. Imagine the silence.**

Job silent.

Theologians silent.

The tempest stilled.

The very force of nature, silent!

All argument is over!

The silence is shocking. More frightening than the tempest.  
Awe full!

The truth about reality sinks in.

**There is no answer to Job’s question “Why” because it is the wrong question. Why, Why me? is the wrong question.**

**JOB speaks out of this revelation:**

*I spoke without understanding of things beyond me, which I did not know.  
( Past tense)*

*I will ask and you will inform me  
( future tense)*

*I had heard you with my ears but now I see you with my eyes*

*Therefore I recant and relent. (Present tense)*

*Being but dust and ashes. ( Extremely humbled but alive)*

**So- JOB lives- he lived through this experience.**

**He is still breathing.**

**What Job had *left to lose*, in the sense of let go, was his argument with life. His need to be right!**

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We get to see and experience with JOB what I call a cosmic time out.

In the drama it is an instant, in our real life, such insight and change of heart, probably takes longer. Maybe even lifetime.

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We also witness the most intimate of conversations within one human being.

When friends no longer know what you are going through.

When your argument, the words, rationales and “if onlys” are finished.

When you are no longer pounding on the door behind you, trying to hold onto what was and is no longer.

Just Being...Attentive. Present. Prepared *now* to listen to what your life is offering *now*.

It is just between you and your conscience.

Between you and your life.

You and your god.

*This is not an* intellectual knowledge. It is a **realizing** of life!

That life has happened, what is “is”.

This revelation, realization, requires that we ask the right question which is:

**What now?**

There is no answer to the question of “WHY” OR “WHY ME” b/c it is the wrong question. The question is: **What now?**

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**BUT let us take a moment to look around at what we have witnessed.**

**This is a cosmic play ABOUT EVOLUTION and revelation.**

**JOB dramatizes an evolution of Human consciousness about reality.**

A deep reading of the text leads us to a big new idea about the reciprocal relationship of HB to Universe/reality/god.

Of course experience changes us, how we think about life and our relationship to it. **Here** the nature of God/reality and the nature of our connection with God/reality evolves in the hands of the writers.

A-The writers seem to suggest that what we think about reality/(God) matters to reality/(God).

B- That reality/(personified as God) somehow cares what we think and feel about life.

C- That reality(as God) is in a reciprocal relationship to HB ( Symbolized by JOB)

Some scientists wonder – if we are the universe evolved

If we are aspects of the Universe that have achieved consciousness and thus we are the universe self-conscious.

We are the cosmos seeing itself finally after billions of years! That in some way, the Universe longs to know itself through our eyes and go WOW!

Looking good! Thank you!”

4- The writers wonder what **in this world does this God want from us?**

They imagine a god who just really really – wants to be loved by us. Even if he does things for no good reason! Even when “he” is not perfect. When he makes a stupid bet on us.

Who wonders - Will we keep the faith:

When we awaken will we have a sense of gratitude for the great gift of life; for that infinite creative impulse that gave us such a gift.

no matter finite events, no matter if we feel forsaken.

Do we have the kind of faith? To never forget that we are beloved, blessed, even if we are facing emergency surgery in a hospital, the terrible loss of a beloved.

When we are born into this world, we are always interdependent,

What do we do with our awe full dependencies?

The play asks: “What if “? What if “God” “wants” us to love life no matter what. To love this gifts we have been given, for no good reason, other than that God gave it to us b/c God can breathe life into dust and that dust, for now, is you and me!

At its basest – is life good enough for us?

Do you ever wonder? If you are loved , somewhere, no matter what?  
Is your riskiest secret hope that you are even when imperfect.  
Even when you make terrible mistakes.

This book gives us, and it could only have been intuitive then, some spiritual intuition of the interconnectedness of life, which is a way to love that which is, (ourselves, our friends, our enemies, life, earth, cosmos),  
**imperfect - as it all is! Incomplete as it is!**

I need not debate poetic language and scientific language – all the particles of creation are in us – make us up and into who we are... Call it a divine spark or our hard drive. That which sustains the cosmos is also within us, and sustains us. Is us.

I wonder if we love and seek love because we are part and particle of this vast cosmos that wants to be valued, appreciated, loved & praised. We learn from one another! We grow & learn as we live. If we are lucky.

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**Our Unitarian Universalist Principle- the inherent worth and dignity has power – like Job’s - to know injustice** when we meet it and face it down: We have the power to prevent disease, moderate global climate change. We Human Beings are wired for fairness and equity and justice. We have the power to rebuild and repair, reduce poverty: We do have some power to moderate, help, atone, amend, forgive, prevent, cure, build.

**This drama tells us that even with earth quakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, cancer, accidents, war, we are no less loved, No less blessed.**

And when we stop arguing our righteousness, we can get onto love which is larger than justice.

**You don’t have to say you love God, life, the web of existence,  
Just live what you love.**

That is our greatest power. To love. And we love, not because folks deserve our love, or because we are perfect creatures, we love b/c we can! Just because we can...

**We are called, commanded to live and love this world: Not despite it imperfections, but because it is imperfect.**

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**“What now”?** is answered many times every day. It is the daily bread of invitation- ready or not.

And sometimes we need to cast off outdated ideas, beliefs, theologies, ideologies, expectations, like Tashlich, to be able to see the answer.

God tells JOB to pray for his friends - to repair their relationship. They are each other's companions. They knew each other back in the day.

JOB goes home. He stands at the threshold of his tent. His partner wife comes to him, there they are – just the two – at the door of a silent – empty home – only the two of them.

She says to him: (This is from a play by Archibald Macleish)

*The candles ... are out  
The Stars have gone out in the sky  
Let us blow on the coals of the heart...  
And we'll see by and by...*

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By and by ... day by day...

That is how it is done.  
How we live into spiritual restoration,  
As we ask “what now” of every day  
Listen, live and discover our way into the answers

Maybe once when you were lost, had lost someone, even a part of your self, someone offered you a smile, a nod, a gesture of kindness, a song to sing, a candle, a welcome, some help, a visit, a listen, maybe even a prayer or space to be still.

Maybe ....that caring one was you...is you.

That is what we do- what is done – in the day by day, and the by and by of congregational life. At our imperfect best.

**We blow on the coals of the heart.**

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**There is a coda to the story**

**We are told JOB's fortunes are restored to twice as much as before.**

14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, 1000 oxen, those she asses!

Also 7 sons, 3 daughters, and here in this cosmic text we learn the names of his daughters.. Which is extraordinary!

The story goes from satellite altitudes of cloud conferences with divine messengers at its start ..and like Google Earth it telescopes down to village, house and hearth of a human being birth and baby naming ceremony.

From the transcendent to the intimate humane miracle moment: birth of child and its reception into the faith community.

We learn the names and oh such names for his daughters! Names given to celebrate the gift: life . Just for the love of the gift!

Jemimah- dove

Keziah- spice tree

Keren-happuch- child of beauty, ( cosmetic case of antimony)

Then we read that JOB gave them their own estates equal to their brothers!" He knows the joyful, immeasurable worth of every child.

**JOB, has a new understanding of his life and his faith.**

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*End:*

*It may be less about what others say about us after we die, and more about the blessings we can give those we love...before we die.. as our legacy.*

Sam qualified for a new chemo, got a reprieve, and celebrated his birthday. And much more. His life and words were a legacy of blessing.

May we be able to say as Sam did, to partners, family, friends, even to the congregations we serve, **Thank you for your friendship and acts of kindness great and small. You made it all worthwhile."**

*It is ended. So may it be. Thank you. Amen*