

Date: October 4, 2015  
 Scriptures: Psalm 26, Job 1:1, 2:1-10  
 Title: Hard Questions and Difficult Truths

WE ALL KNOW JOB'S STORY.  
 WHILE WE MAY NOT HAVE READ  
     ALL OF THE BOOK,  
     WE KNOW HIS STORY.  
 WE KNOW IT,  
     BECAUSE WE'VE LIVED IT.  
 KNOW IT,  
     BECAUSE WE'VE ALL LOST  
     JOBS, POSSESSIONS, HOMES, LOVED ONES, HEALTH.  
 KNOW IT,  
     BECAUSE WE'VE ALL SAT  
     ON A TRASH HEAP AMONG THE ASHES OF OUR LIVES.

"JOB'S STORY IS OUR WORST NIGHTMARE."<sup>1</sup>  
 HE IS A GOOD MAN,  
     WHO DOES GOOD THINGS.  
 HE PLACES HIS FAITH IN GOD,  
     WORSHIPS REGULARLY,  
     SUPPORTS THE MINISTRY OF HIS CHURCH,  
     HELPS THE NEEDY,  
     LOVES HIS FAMILY AND FRIENDS,  
     NEVER KICKS THE DOG.

JOB IS A GOOD MAN,  
     AND THIS VERY GOOD MAN ENDS UP LOSING EVERYTHING.  
 "HIS IS THE QUINTESSENTIAL RICHES TO RAGS STORY."<sup>2</sup>

RABBI HAROLD KUSHNER'S STORY IS SIMILAR  
     TO JOB'S IN ONE TERRIFYING AND HORRIBLE WAY.  
 HIS BELOVED SON, AARON,  
     WAS BORN WITH PROGERIA,  
     A PREMATURE AGING DISEASE.  
 THE DOCTOR'S DIAGNOSED AARON'S DISEASE  
     WHEN HE WAS THREE YEARS OLD  
     ON THE VERY SAME DAY HIS WIFE SUZETTE  
     GAVE BIRTH TO THEIR DAUGHTER, ARIEL.

AARON LIVED  
     FOURTEEN LONG, HARD, BRILLIANT, ACCOMPLISHED YEARS.  
 TOWARD THE END OF HIS LIFE,  
     HE HAD TO LEAN AGAINST THE BED  
     ALL NIGHT LONG SIMPLY TO BREATHE.

IN THE MIDDLE EAST,  
 THE WORST CURSE THAT CAN BE LAID ON SOMEONE  
 IS TO TELL THEM  
 "MAY YOU OUTLIVE YOUR CHILDREN."  
 THIS SAYING RECOGNIZES  
 THERE IS NO PAIN LIKE THE PAIN OF LOSING A CHILD.  
 AFTER HIS SON'S DEATH,  
 RABBI KUSHNER'S ONCE UNSHAKEABLE FAITH  
 IN AN OMNIPOTENT GOD  
 WAS SHAKEN TO ITS CORE.  
 HE SPENT FOUR YEARS GRIEVING,  
 QUESTIONING GOD,  
 TRYING TO FIGURE IT ALL OUT.  
 HIS DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL YIELDED THE BOOK,  
WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE.

WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN,  
 WE WONDER WHAT PART, IF ANY,  
 GOD PLAYED IN THE TRAGEDY  
 AND WE ASK QUESTIONS,  
 LOTS OF THEM,  
 ESPECIALLY THE QUESTION, "*Why.*"  
 THE QUESTION, "WHY," PERMEATES EVERY PAGE OF JOB  
 AND IS ULTIMATELY THE REASON THE BOOK WAS WRITTEN.  
 DURING THE TIME OF ITS WRITING,  
 JEWISH THEOLOGY SUGGESTED  
 THAT BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO BAD PEOPLE  
 AND CONVERSELY GOOD THINGS  
 HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE.  
 IN OTHER WORDS SUFFERING IS GOD'S PUNISHMENT  
 FOR THE BAD THINGS WE DO.

IF YOU THINK THIS THEOLOGY IS DEAD TODAY,  
 YOU ARE DEAD WRONG.  
 IT IS VERY MUCH ALIVE AND WELL  
 AND WEARS SEVERAL DIFFERENT GUISES.  
 ONE IS,  
 "WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND."  
 WE REAP WHAT WE SOW.  
 ANOTHER IS,  
 "IF SHE HADN'T BEEN WHERE SHE WAS,  
 DOING WHAT WAS DOING,  
 WHEN SHE WAS DOING IT,  
 IT WOULD NOT HAVE HAPPENED TO HER."  
 WE BRING IT ON OURSELVES.  
 STILL ANOTHER IS THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL.  
 IT'S THE BELIEF THAT FAITH IN GOD  
 GUARANTEES SECURITY AND PROSPERITY,  
 AND IS VERY POPULAR TODAY.

ALL OF THESE BELIEFS RESULT FROM THE SIMPLISTIC IDEA  
 THAT GOOD IS REWARDED AND SIN IS PUNISHED.  
 EXCEPT WE ALL KNOW  
 THAT GOOD IS NOT ALWAYS REWARDED  
 AND SIN IS NOT ALWAYS PUNISHED.  
 BAD PEOPLE DO WIN.  
 IT HAPPENS.

ACCORDING TO THE STORY,  
 JOB'S SUFFERING COMES FROM GOD'S OWN HAND.  
 AT A MEETING OF THE HEAVENLY COUNCIL,  
 GOD ASKS SATAN WHAT HE HAS BEEN DOING.  
 HERE SATAN IS GOD'S EARS AND EYES ON EARTH,  
 NOT THE SOURCE OF EVIL HE LATER BECOMES.  
 AS GOD'S EARS AND EYES,  
 SATAN ROAMS THE EARTH TO TEST PEOPLE  
 AND THEN REPORTS BACK TO GOD  
 AT THE COUNCIL MEETINGS.  
 ONE DAY, WHEN IT'S SATAN'S TIME TO SPEAK,  
 GOD ASKS HIM WHAT HE'S BEEN UP TO.  
 SATAN TELLS GOD HE'S BEEN WALKING ABOUT THE EARTH.  
 GOD ASKS,  
 "HAVE YOU CONSIDERED MY SERVANT JOB?"  
 INTERESTING, IT IS NOT SATAN WHO POINTS JOB OUT TO GOD.  
 BUT RATHER GOD WHO MENTIONS JOB, SAYING,  
 "THERE IS NONE LIKE JOB ON THE EARTH.  
 HE IS BLAMELESS AND UPRIGHT,  
 FEARING ME AND TURNING AWAY FROM EVIL."  
 SATAN REPLIES,  
 "YOU HAVE PUT A HEDGE AROUND JOB  
 AND BLESSED THE WORK OF HIS HAND  
 AND HE HAS GROWN RICH.  
 BUT, IF YOU REMOVE THE HEDGE,  
 HE WILL MOST CERTAINLY CURSE YOU."  
 BELIEVING JOB TO BE FAITHFUL,  
 GOD ALLOWS SATAN TO PUT JOB TO THE TEST  
 GIVING HIM STRICT INSTRUCTIONS NOT TO HURT JOB.

SATAN THROWS EVERYTHING HE HAS AT JOB.  
 SABEANS WIELDING SWORDS SLAY  
 JOB'S OXEN, DONKEYS, AND THE SERVANTS TENDING THEM;  
 FIRE BURNS UP HIS SHEEP  
 AND THE SERVANTS TENDING THEM;  
 CHALDEANS RAID HIS CAMELS  
 AND MURDER THE SERVANTS TENDING THEM;  
 A TORNADO COLLAPSES HIS HOUSE  
 AND KILLS HIS TEN CHILDREN, WHO ARE INSIDE.  
 UPON HEARING ABOUT THESE TRAGEDIES,  
 WHICH COME IN QUICK SUCCESSION ONE AFTER ANOTHER,

JOB TEARS HIS ROBE,  
 SHAVES HIS HEAD,  
 FALLS TO THE GROUND,  
 AND WORSHIPS GOD SAYING,  
 "BLESSED BE THE NAME OF GOD."  
 THROUGH IT ALL, JOB REFRAINS FROM SINNING OR BLAMING GOD.

AFTERWARD, SATAN AGAIN APPEARS  
 BEFORE THE HEAVENLY COUNCIL.  
 WHEN IT IS HIS TURN TO GIVE HIS REPORT,  
 GOD PROUDLY BOASTS OF JOB'S INTEGRITY AND FAITHFULNESS.  
 BRISTLING FROM THE HUMILIATION OF HAVING BEEN PROVED WRONG,  
 SATAN TAUNTS GOD SAYING,  
 "PEOPLE WILL DO ANYTHING TO STAY ALIVE.  
 WHAT DO YOU THINK WOULD HAPPEN  
 IF HE BECAME SERIOUSLY ILL?  
 HE WOULD MOST CERTAINLY CURSE YOU!"  
 ONCE MORE TRUSTING JOB TO BE FAITHFUL,  
 GOD ALLOWS SATAN TO DO  
 WHATEVER HE LIKES WITH JOB  
 THIS TIME GIVING HIM STRICT INSTRUCTIONS  
 NOT TO KILL JOB.

SATAN CAUSES TERRIBLE SORES TO RISE UP ON JOB'S BODY.  
 THE SORES FORM ULCERS AND SCABS  
 AND COVER HIM FROM HEAD TO TOE  
 AND ITCH AND OOZE BADLY.  
 PICKING UP A PIECE OF BROKEN POTTERY  
 JOB WALKS TO THE TRASH HEAP AMONG THE ASHES.  
 THERE HE SCRAPS AT THE SORES DAY AND NIGHT.  
 SEEING HIM WITH HIS LIFE BROKEN IN PIECES  
 LIKE THE BROKEN PIECE OF POTTERY HE HOLDS,  
 HIS WIFE BEGINS TO TAUNT HIM SAYING,  
 "YOU'RE STILL HOLDING ON TO YOUR PRECIOUS INTEGRITY!  
 WHY DON'T YOU CURSE GOD AND BE DONE WITH IT?"  
 YET, JOB MAINTAINS HIS FAITH IN GOD SAYING,  
 "SHALL WE INDEED ACCEPT  
 THE GOOD FROM GOD AND NOT THE ADVERSITY?"

JOB IS A RIGHTEOUS MAN.  
 GOD ACKNOWLEDGES THIS IN THE HEAVENLY COUNCIL,  
 AND JOB HIMSELF DEMONSTRATES THIS REPEATEDLY  
 THROUGH HIS REFUSALS TO CURSE GOD.  
 BY REMAINING RIGHTEOUS TRIAL AFTER TRIAL,  
 JOB DEMONSTRATES HIS UNCONDITIONAL TRUST IN GOD.  
 JOB'S IS AN UNCONDITIONAL FAITH,  
 A FAITH THAT BELIEVES IN GOD  
 WITHOUT LOOKING FOR REWARDS  
 OR FEARING PUNISHMENTS.

HE MAINTAINS THIS TRUST  
 IN SPIKE OF THE LOSSES HE EXPERIENCES  
 OR HIS WIFE'S TAUNTINGS,  
 OR FRIENDS ACCUSATIONS,  
 WHICH WE WILL HEAR IN THE WEEKS AHEAD.  
 JOB TRUSTS GOD AND EXPECTS NOTHING IN RETURN  
 UNLIKE SATAN AND ALL THOSE,  
 WHO HAVE A BARTER CONCEPTION OF RELIGION.  
 THROUGH HIS FAITHFUL RESPONSE TO TRAGEDY,  
 JOB DEMONSTRATES THAT THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NO LINK  
 BETWEEN VIRTUE AND BLESSINGS.  
 HE SHOWS THAT WE DON'T ALWAYS GET WHAT WE DESERVE.  
 RAIN FALLS ON THE GOOD AND THE BAD ALIKE.

SO, IF WE DON'T ALWAYS GET WHAT WE DESERVE,  
 WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN?  
 THE EVENTS THAT TAKE PLACE IN THE HEAVENLY COUNCIL  
 SUGGEST ANOTHER POSSIBILITY.  
 THE EVENTS THERE SUGGEST  
 THAT GOD ALLOWS BAD THINGS TO HAPPEN TO TEST PEOPLE.  
 THEY SUGGEST GOD SUBJECTS PEOPLE TO TESTING.  
 THIS PICTURE IS NOT VERY SATISFYING TO ME.  
 IT IS NOT SATISFYING,  
 BECAUSE I HAVE SEEN PEOPLE,  
 WHO HAVE BEEN BROKEN BY WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM,  
 SO BROKEN THEY COULD NOT  
 BE PUT TOGETHER AGAIN.  
 SOME PEOPLE TRY TO GET AROUND THIS PROBLEM BY SAYING  
 GOD NEVER GIVES US MORE THAN WE CAN BEAR.  
 BUT, AGAIN, CLEARLY ALL THE BROKEN PEOPLE IN THE WORLD  
 DEMONSTRATE NOT EVERYONE CAN BEAR  
 THE BAD THINGS THAT HAPPEN TO THEM.  
 WHAT'S MORE, IF WE PERSIST IN SAYING  
 THAT GOD ALLOWS BAD THINGS TO HAPPEN TO TEST US  
 DOESN'T IT ALSO SUGGESTS  
 THAT GOD SOMETIMES ACTS  
 CAPRICIOUSLY, UNPREDICTABLY?

HOW I WISH WHAT WE HAVE HEARD  
 OF JOB'S STORY THIS MORNING  
 GAVE US CLEAR AND DEFINITIVE ANSWERS  
 TO THE HARD QUESTIONS IT POSES.  
 SADLY, IT DOESN'T.  
 RATHER, IT LEAVES US TO GRAPPLE WITH DIFFICULT QUESTIONS  
 ABOUT GOD AND OUR OWN FAITH.  
 PERHAPS, AS THE STORY CONTINUES  
 OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL WEEKS,  
 ANSWERS WILL SURFACE.  
 TODAY, WE ONLY GET QUESTIONS.

THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION FOR US IS,  
AS IT WAS FOR JOB ALMOST THREE MILLENNIA AGO,  
"WILL WE TRUST GOD  
WHEN WE DON'T HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS?"  
WILL WE CHOOSE TO LIVE TRUSTING IN GOD  
EVEN WE ARE SITTING ON AN ASH HEAP SCRATCHING  
AT THE BROKEN CHARDS OF OUR LIVES?  
CHOOSE TO TRUST GOD UNCONDITIONALLY?  
THIS IS THE QUESTION FACING US TODAY  
AND ALL THE DAYS OF OUR LIVES.  
BE ASSURED, THIS QUESTION IS AN INVITATION NOT A TEST,  
FOR IT IS ONLY BY LIVING THE QUESTION  
THAT WE DISCOVER THE ANSWER.  
THIS DAY MAY WE LIVE THE QUESTION  
WITH EVERY SHARD OF FAITH WE HAVE. AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> (Karla Suomala, *Preaching This Week, First Reading, 10.4.15*).

<sup>2</sup> IBID