

**Homily – Theocracy**  
**Canon Doug Edwards**  
**October 20, 2024 – St. Barnabas Episcopal Church**

Here's your word for the day: Theodicy. In the philosophy of religion, a theodicy is an argument that attempts to resolve the problem of evil that arises when all power and all goodness are simultaneously ascribed to God.

There are two categories of evil that must be considered. Moral evil and natural evil. Moral evil is when people treat others wrongly... murder, robbery, internet harassment or state sanctioned raining of artillery on innocent civilians. Natural evil is when the creation causes random harm to innocents. Hurricane victims in North Carolina, a million Americans dead to Covid-19. How do you account for evil in the world while believing in an all-powerful, benevolent God?

The worldwide Covid Pandemic changed so much. I lost my mother and my father-in-law to the virus. I suppose many of you lost someone close. It changed how we worship. We don't touch each other in Church these days. For some senior members, touching at Church is their primary physical contact. School-aged kids lost so much educationally and developmentally.

But we adapted. The workplace was transformed from office coffee clutches to the ubiquitous "Zoom Meeting." I love Zoom, the very notion of being part of a group when we cannot gather in person. Lynn is a regular Zoomer. Another consequence of the pandemic was a change in the way we entertained ourselves at home when we could not venture out in safety. Enter Netflix. How many of you watched Netflix.

A lot of Netflix programming is made of multi-episode stories. I confess to a lot of that couch behavior known as "binge watching," sitting through 5 hour-long episodes at a single setting. I still love Netflix and Britbox, and, occasionally, I still binge.

Today's OT Lesson from the Book of Job is like turning on Episode 4 of a five-episode Netflix story. It has enough material to stand alone, but you know that you are missing the broader context. You feel like you must go back to Episode One and watch the whole thing.

So, here is my Netflix-Cliff Note version of The Book of Job. The Book of Job is not an easy read unless you are an English Lit major. It is 90% poetry. Also, it never answers the question that it posits throughout the pages: Why do bad things happen to good people? The Epilogue offers the happy ending, and is very dissatisfying to lovers of Irish or Russian stories which never end happily for the protagonist. But what the Book of Job will do is take you to a more profound place than you intended.

Episode 1: God grants His Prosecuting Attorney's petition against a Righteous Man.

The story opens with a prologue expounding the virtue of our hero, Job. He is righteous, blameless in everything. Proof of his goodness is that He is uber rich, the richest in the land. His ten children are also rich. Good guy, good dad, faithful to God.

The scene shifts to the Heavenly Court where God recounts Job's goodness to all present. But one rises in objection, Satan. Satan is Hebrew for prosecutor or accuser. If you are unfortunate enough to be hauled into an Israeli courtroom today, the prosecutor is indeed called Satan. God's District Attorney objects that the only reason Job is just is because you, God, keep rewarding him for being so. He is richest man in his country, so of course he honors you and toes the line. Let me have at him and you will see that he is no better than the rest.

God grants his DA's petition has allows him to cause Job any and all suffering as long as no hand is laid upon Job. Job's notion of justice is about to be tested by virtue of suffering. End of Episode One. We are hooked! Time to microwave the popcorn and settle in.

Episode 2: Job under siege is action packed...

But unsettling. Job experiences horrible human suffering at the hand of Satan (but allowed by God.) In the course of a few days:

- The Sabeans attack and steal all of Job's oxen and donkeys and killed a portion of his servants (Job 1: 14-15).
- Fire falls from the sky "and burning up his sheep" and more of Job's servants (Job 1:16).
- Next the Chaldeans attack and steal Job's camels, killing yet more of his servants (Job 1:17).
- No sooner than receiving this terrible report, another runner arrives with worse news, "A mighty wind swept in from the desert" destroying the house where all of Job's children were gathered for a birthday celebration, killing all of them (Job 1:18-19).

So, there you have it... moral and natural evil falling on Righteous Job. Job's response to is twofold: he tears his robe and shaves his head as an act of mourning, and then he worships God (Job 1:20-21) uttering the words of this famous passage: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised."

Satan is annoyed with Job noble response to suffering and requests God's permission to up the ante with a direct attack against Job's person. Permission is granted. So, Satan "afflicts Job with painful sores" from the bottoms of his feet to the top of his head (Job 2:7). His pain is so great that he wallows in the dust and tries to scrape off his sores. End of Episode Two. Time for a bathroom. This is intense.

Episode 3: Friendly counsel arrives

Job's first counsel is from his wife. She has lost all her children, her family wealth and now her husband's health. Her suggestion: "Just curse God and die." Job rebukes her. "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" Then three friends arrive and try to help him (and themselves) make sense of Job's suffering. This is the bulk of the text. After sitting with him in silence they try to explain the situation. It reduces to the

following: God is just. Job is suffering. Therefore, Job has done something wrong to merit his misfortune. They then proceed to imagine the wrongs he may have committed. God is justly punishing Job for his secret sins or maybe even sins unknown. The problem is that Job is indeed innocent. He has done no wrong, their wisdom isn't adequate for his circumstances

Job grew up believing in the simple principle of retributive justice, where each person gets what he deserves: suffering for the evil and prosperity for the good. But now he is suffering even though he is good. Unwilling to change his paradigm, He calls God out as either incompetent or disinterested.

A fourth visitor appears and offers that suffering may be designed prophylactically to prevent against some future calamity, or perhaps Job is serving as an example for others. This is theory that while AIDS swept through the US gay population in the 1980s, it actually averted millions of deaths in Africa through the development of medicines which otherwise would not have been created and manufactured.

"Not good enough," says Job who ends the visits by demanding that God hear his case directly and in person. This is reminiscent of those dying in the Holocaust who held God at trial for the genocide taking place against them.

#### Episode 4: God challenges Job

In Episode Four God grants Job's demand. Speaking to Job directly in a whirlwind, He shows Job how vast and complex the universe is. God is very sharp with Job: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding. Can you lift-up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you?" God goes on at some length to show Job that he lacks wisdom to understand how the universe operates, that the universe is complex and dangerous. He invites Job to micromanage the universe for a single day using the strict principle of retributive justice that Job had touted, that every bad deed gets punished and every good deed rewarded. Job doesn't take up God's offer.

The Almighty then reminds Job of two of God's creatures: Behemoth and Leviathan. These mythological creatures are not evil, but neither are they safe. They symbolize disorder and danger. The point is that God's world is amazing and VERY GOOD, but it is not perfect or always safe. God's world has order and beauty, but it is also wild and sometimes dangerous, just like these two creatures. The creation is not designed to prevent suffering. And that's God's response.

Our Episode ends with Job acknowledging the foolishness of his complaint and his provincial perspective on justice. He repents and acknowledges that God is God and he, Job, is no position to judge the Almighty.

Job's task is to trust in God's wisdom and character. It is the storyline's great "Aha" moment. I wish our Netflix show would have rolled the credits here, but the viewers wanted our hero, Job, to get more than wisdom. So, in a short 17-verse epilogue, God restores Job's fortune with "14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, 1,000 yoke of oxen, and 1,000 female donkeys. But there's more. Job gets seven new sons, three daughters, four generations of grandchildren. If you are

keeping score, that's 20 children Job's wife brought into the world. The final verse is useful: "And Job died, an old man, and full of days." (Job 42:17) Roll the credits.

Theodicy attempts to resolve the problem of evil that arises when all power and all goodness are simultaneously ascribed to God. This week Lynn and I travel to New York City for a large event designed to raise enough money to free 1,000 children from slavery. Slavery is a moral evil with long tentacles. In the end, I have no resolution to the problem of evil. It is real and often devastating. But I can respond, not by demanding retributive justice... an eye for an eye, but restorative justice...being an agent of hope and God's mercy in the world.

Jesus began his earthly ministry quoting Isaiah, "Now is the acceptable time to free the captives, to welcome the stranger, to bring hope to the oppressed." This is how we are to serve God's very good but not perfect creation, as moral agents for goodness and mercy. Anything less is adding to humanity's misery and the creation's disorder and chaos.

Want to participate? Then bring these values into the voting booth. It is our best way to collectively address the problem of evil in the world.