

20th Sunday after Pentecost B  
October 7, 2018  
Church of the Advent

### **God and Satan walked into a bar...**

This is one of those Sundays when you could say our readings might just be *crowded with incident* or *too much of a muchness*. It seems that if you meant this morning to come in here to worship and hear a soft and gentle holy word of God looking for some escape and alternative from the cacophony of the uncivil discourse out there, I am afraid you might be disappointed. But our task is to set to digging to see where the Good News might be buried here, so let's get out the tools and get to work.

First, we land a little ways into the story of Job--our *go-to* guy who knows how to take a beating and keep coming back for more. You might remember Job as that one righteous man whose name came up in a conversation between God and Satan, a self-appointed spokesperson for the heavenly beings presenting themselves to the Lord. Satan had been traveling the world looking for someone he could use to prove that God's plan for the creation of humanity was flawed. God seemed to believe Satan had taken on a thankless task, taunting him about his servant Job--a man who was blameless, upright, and who turned from evil. Not sure if Job was

the only human who fit the bill; but unfortunately for him, it was his name that came up. *Sure*, Satan said, why wouldn't Job be a good guy; he was a man blessed with everything--home, family, lots of servants and livestock, too. Why wouldn't he praise God and be righteous? Then Satan bet that Job's righteousness would evaporate, leaving him cursing God if he no longer had it so good. God took the bet, and the game was on.

And that's when Job's luck started to turn--and not in a good way. When we enter the story today, Job has just learned that his donkeys, his sheep and his camels have all been carted off by different bands of bandits who killed his servants, right before a wind came across the desert, collapsing his house and killing all of his children inside. All of this in Round 1. Job tore his clothes, shaved his head and fell to the ground, but did *not* curse God, saying,

‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’

Yes, that's where that hateful line comes from, that thing you should never say to someone who has just experienced the death of a loved one.

Nevertheless, out of Job's mouth: *the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken*

*away*. Needless to say, so far this had not gone as Satan had planned.

Round 1 to God.

Today's reading picks up the story at Round 2. Satan tells God that sure, Job can do without his stuff, but what if he was suffering *physically*? Humans are not so righteous when our bodies are falling apart and we are in pain and staring death in the face. So poor Job gets a mean dose of *skin for skin*: loathsome sores that made him scrape himself with pieces of broken pots. Still, in spite of encouragement to the contrary from his wife, Job did *not* curse God. In the face of all his newfound misery, Job says to her, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?"

Round 2 to God. Satan must have been fuming, for surely he knew we humans are more likely than not to think that when we experience good in this life, we must have done something to deserve it, and when something bad happens to us, it must have been someone else's fault? Is not that how the evil one works in us, in those places where we believe ourselves to be most righteous and deserving of God's favor, and never deserving of life's tragedies?

You might remember that this goes on for a while longer, and the calamities are added on until Job is finally beaten down. Even Job's best friends abandon him to his misery, believing he must have brought it on himself--afraid his bad luck might be contagious. And finally Job asks God what the deal is: Why him? What did God have against him, anyway? And then God reminds Job who he was and who God was--the One who made everything, who gave Job everything in the first place--even his very life. And Job repents of his insolence, is forgiven, and all is restored--and then some.

Beginning in an almost cartoonish setting, it could just as easily have begun with, "God and Satan walk into a bar..." Its technique of personifying God and Satan as rivals in a parody of an all-too-human one-upmanship contest of power, would almost be funny--that is if Job had not been the innocent butt of the joke. If we were sitting quietly down the bar sipping on a beer, would we be drawn in to the game? If someone was taking bets on the side, who would we lay down a dollar on God or Satan? Or would the riskier bet really be on the righteousness of Job, the one who silently suffers? It is so much easier to get caught up in the drama of a contest--measuring the strength of rivals, assuming their motivations,

getting sucked into the energy of their hostility--that to stop and take a measure of the cost to the ones who will feel the impact of the outcome. I keep wondering who would Jesus root for? How would he teach the Book of Job to the disciples, who jostled for recognition even as he told them that the last would be first, and the first last?

Our other challenge today comes from the Gospel of Mark, a passage that has been used for centuries in the Christian church to batter people whose lives have already fallen apart. I do not believe, nor do many theologians, that this passage is included to shame people who are divorced. The clue that this is another drama of a more political than spiritual jousting for power is in the first line: "Some Pharisees came to test Jesus and they asked..." Mark could have started with "some Pharisees and Jesus walked into a bar..." The Pharisees were the legal scholars of the Hebrews, internal judges if you will, of the Law. They knew that Jesus--who had an informal power in the eyes of the disciples and crowds who followed him--did not always follow the Law. Jesus challenged their legitimacy, their standing, their power, so the Pharisees made it their goal to try to trick, demoralize, embarrass, shame, and delegitimize Jesus every chance they got. This time they surely had him, for who could argue with

Law plainly written, attributed to Moses himself, which allowed a man to divorce his wife. An important thing to note is that a woman could *not* divorce her husband--even if she wanted to; for that matter, women--even married women--had all the status of property and could be discarded by men at will. A woman turned out by a divorce would have no legal recourse, no means of material support, no access to her children, and would most likely be used as a slave or prostitute if she managed to survive. The Law as it was then written (and not so different from laws written just a generation ago) allowed men to divorce and discard as many wives as they wished, for any reason or for no reason, just because they wanted to. So Jesus called out the Pharisees for their hardness of heart in upholding a Law that was inherently abusive, and offered them instead a scripture lesson from Genesis holding up the equality in God's eyes of each human being as intended from the beginning of creation.

You would think that would be enough sparring for one day, but ironically we find Jesus speaking sternly to his own disciples who were trying to prevent parents from bringing their children to Jesus to be blessed--children who were below even women on the status chart. Perhaps the disciples were so into the drama of the contest with the

Pharisees that they missed the point--that Jesus would always be on the side of the ones who suffer--showing love and welcome to those who found themselves with nothing to left to lose.

The Good News today is the reminder that Job--and all of us--were created out of God's goodness, and that goodness is stronger than anything life can throw in our way to trip us up. Even when life offers us suffering, God is standing by, believing in us and our God-given capacity to do the right thing--to hold on to faithfulness and love of neighbor even when we think we have earned our bitterness and resentment. The Good News is that self-interested power does not have the last word when it comes to God, who loves with an everlasting love--especially those we might not notice--the ones who are most beaten down, the ones who are cast out, the ones who are turned away because they are not important to the world. The Good News is as followers of Jesus, ready to place a bet, we should bet on love and goodness, and not on power. Every time. Amen.