

It’s all fun and games until someone gets hurt. Remember, rock breaks scissors but paper covers rock and scissors cut paper.

It’s all fun and games, and the opening scenes of Job take us behind the veil to see a disturbing possibility: God and Satan are playing a game, and Job isn’t going to win. Is what’s true for Job true for us?

The conversation goes something like this: “Hey, Satan where you been?”

“Oh, you know, around, here and there, the usual coming and going.”

“Did you see my servant Job? He’s good people.”

“Yes, he’s good people. You won that round. No matter what, he wouldn’t *“curse God and die.”* But, hey, how about that Judas? Sealed with a kiss – that was pretty good too.”

“Yes, Satan, you won that round. We’re even. Say, let’s make it best two out of three. There are these folks in Pennside Presbyterian Church; they’re good people. I dare you to break them. In fact, I double dog dare you.”

Is that it? Is that how it goes – we’re all just puppets on a string, pawns in a high stakes game in which the winner takes all but we’re the ones who lose? Do our lives have meaning and purpose, or was Macbeth right:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.¹

Shakespeare wasn’t the first to think that. We won’t be the last who wonder at times if it is true. Why am I going through this? Will the pain ever end? Is there hope, or is this all there is?

Job speaks to these essential existential questions by way of parody. Job draws our deepest fears out of hiding so that we can see them in the clear light of day. Do we really think God plays games with us? Do we truly believe that good people lead the good life, or does “no good deed go unpunished?” Do we believe in God, or is

our faith only skin deep? Is faith merely a means to an end, or does faith deliver us from the tyranny of the urgent and the ill winds that blow into our lives?

We speak of “the patience of Job.” Modern translations call it “the steadfastness of Job,” and on this World Communion Sunday, as we begin a month of Sundays in Job, we are invited to live with the freedom of Job.

Job’s wife asks the central question of Job. She only has one line in the entire book, and given all that his friends say wrong, perhaps the less said the better. Consider this: While Job will be commanded to pray for his friends’ forgiveness at the end of his ordeal, he won’t be asked to do so for her. Is that simply another instance of the ancient world’s ill treatment of women (for instance, Calvin called Job’s wife, “Satan’s tool.” Thomas Aquinas suggested that the devil spared Job’s wife to be a troubler and tempter of him.), or is she on to something?

She asks, Job 2:9 (NRSV) “*Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.*”

The word for “curse” and the word for “bless” is the same word, *barak*. That’s part of the joy of Hebrew; some things you figure out from the context. So her statement could be “bless God, and die.” It could be a compassionate, loving response to a man who’s lost his family, his fortune, and now his health. “Give it up, Job. Let it go. Bless God and die.”

Job won’t do that. Job will “*persist in his integrity.*” He will live by a faith that is more than skin deep; he will live by a faith that sustains his soul and sets him free.

Job teaches us that we have the fundamental freedom to choose who we are and how we live. We cannot always choose our circumstances, but we can choose to live with integrity. We can choose to define ourselves rather than to allow circumstances and expectations to define us. We can choose to be whole and complete, even when we are broken and deeply wounded. We can choose to say, “I believe in God the Father Almighty and in Jesus Christ His only Son.”

This is the gift we are offered every time we come to the communion table. We break bread, and we remember that Jesus was broken; we remember our brothers and sisters around the world who are being broken; we remember the ways that we are broken. We pour the juice, and we remember that Jesus’ blood was poured

out; we remember that blood is being poured out today; we remember our own suffering and sorrow.

We remember it all. We declare that it is true, and that we do not have the answers. We do not know how to make it alright. We take our seat with Job outside the city. We take our seat next to our crucified Lord. We take our seat and say that all of the horrors of history are true; nonetheless, “I believe in God the Father Almighty and in Jesus Christ His only Son.”

This faith is far more than skin deep. This faith is soul sustaining. This faith cannot be held captive by circumstances or expectations. This faith sets captives free.

“In his *Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis records the advice of a senior devil, Screwtape, to his nephew Wormwood, who is trying to undo the faith of a recently converted Christian. At one point, Screwtape says to Wormwood, “Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy’s [i.e. God’s] will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of [God] seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.” Such a stance is testimony to a faith that is much more than a means to some selfish end.²”

The table is set. We are invited. We are invited to receive. We are invited to believe. We are invited to “persist in our integrity” and live by a faith that is far more than skin deep. Our circumstances and other people’s expectations need not confine us nor define us. We have a choice.

Make your choice. Come to the table. Believe with Job. Believe in Jesus. Believe in God, Who is sometimes hidden and often-times hard to understand; nonetheless, choose to believe and be blessed with the freedom of Job. Amen.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 39. In J. S. Randolph Harris, “Job 1:1; 2:1-10, Homiletical Perspective,” *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 127.