

Job lost his family. Job lost his fortune. Job lost his health. But after he said he was sorry, God gave it all back to him, and he lived happily ever after.

Is that the story of Job? Is that what we are to learn – hang in there and good things will come our way. “Grey skies are gonna clear up. Put on a happy face?” Does Job finally end up validating the conventional wisdom he’s questioned for all these chapters?

Job comes full circle. He has a family. He has a fortune. He has so much health that he will live to 140. He will die “old and full of days,” which is the Bible’s way of saying, “fat and happy.”

Job comes full circle, and that is a clue for us. If we take Job at face value, it will fool us (and make fools of us) but when we dig a bit deeper and pay attention to the clues the text gives us, we can discern and discover wisdom that can guide us through the difficult times in our lives; wisdom that transforms us and reforms us so that our story ends with a blessing and not a curse.

On this Reformation Sunday, when we celebrate our tradition that calls us to be, “the church reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God,” and as we prepare for All Hallows’s Eve, also known as Halloween, and All Saints Day, when we mock death and evil as the defeated foes they are, and when we remember the heroes of faith who model for us what a life reformed by the Word looks like, it is fitting that we bring our journey with Job to a close, because no one made a fool out of the Devil like “my servant Job,” who did more, much more, than live happily ever after.

— The Punch Line

Job is a joke. It’s a parody that protests the easy answers well-meaning people give when they encounter suffering. Answers like, “One day you’ll back on this and laugh.” “It must be God’s will.” “God has something better for you.” “You can always have more children; maybe you should adopt.” “There are plenty of fish in the sea.”

Job is a joke, but it’s not funny. It’s also not a tragedy. That may surprise you, because Job is undeniably sad, but a tragedy occurs when a great man is brought low by some fatal flaw, usually pride or *hubris*. Job’s pride isn’t the problem. It’s clear from the start that Job’s suffering has nothing to do with Job. He doesn’t deserve it; it’s a cruel joke. Satan and God have a contest, and here in chapter 42, Job’s friends and family return (where have they been

I wonder?) and God owns up to his part: *Job 42:11 (NRSV) Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring.*

God did it, so we are advised to slow our rush to judgment to a walk or better yet a crawl. And in verse 6, Job delivers the punch line, and the joke is complete: *Job 42:6 (NRSV) therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”*

With lines like that, Jeff Dunham need not worry about losing bookings. The way the NRSV translates the Hebrew seems to confirm conventional wisdom, but there is a growing consensus that another translation is preferable: “Therefore, I recant, and repent of dust and ashes.¹” (For more on this, see the footnote).

The difference between the two translations is significant. The NRSV and other older translations suggest Job is taking the blame. “Who was I to ask questions? Sorry about that – my bad.” But this has Job suddenly accepting what he’s spent 41 chapters protesting.

Something more is happening here; something more that resolves his pain; something that empowers him to live again. The punch line is the Bible’s answer to the reality of evil (not answer as in “What’s 2 + 2? 4.” But an “answer” in the sense of a response, as in “the Giants answered their doubters with a barrage of hits and home runs off of Justin Verlander in Game 1.”

The answer for Job came in the form of an encounter with God. *Job 42:5 (NRSV) I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.* The presence of God comforts Job; peace fills the void created by loss; love conquers death. Following this encounter, Job chooses to live again. “Therefore, I recant, and repent of dust and ashes.” “I will live again.”

Job’s choice quickly bears fruit. Job is able to pray for his friends. God’s blessing follows. Job is restored to his home, his family and friends, and to even more of a fortune. Job and his wife (Remember her? Good old “curse God and die;” “Honey, I’m home. Did you miss me?”) are

¹ The Hebrew verb translated “despise” or “recant” (possible meanings of the same verb) requires a direct object, but the Hebrew is literally, “I recant, and repent in/on/above/below dust and ashes.” Translations supply the missing direct object, e.g. the NRSV “myself,” but this reflects the perspective of the translator rather than the Hebrew. In my view, given what has taken place in the previous 41 chapters, the NRSV’s suggestion that Job accepts blame for his questions and his demand to be heard by God is in error.

reunited. Job is able to love and be loved, 7 sons, and 3 beautiful daughters bring new joy.

Job's come full circle; he's back and better than ever; but he's not the same. He began the book living in fear – someone may have sinned. He ends the book and lives his life in faith – God is with him always; God's love isn't dependent on our actions; therefore, Job can choose to live; he can celebrate his life as a gift and live more, much more, than happily ever after.

Two Witnesses

Job is a tough nut to crack. He's suffered, and for those of us who haven't suffered, or at least who haven't suffered like he has; it's hard to know what to say, because it's all too clear that we don't understand. We haven't been there. We don't know.

Some have been there. They do know. And we can listen and learn from them.

First, the witness of Latin American theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, who ministers among the poor in Chile. In his book, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, he writes with the mass graves of Ayacucho in the 80's in view (I read it thinking about events in South Sudan):

“God is a presence that leads amid darkness and pain, a hand that inspires confidence. Not all ignorance is dispelled, but the route is clearly marked. Luis Espinal, a priest murdered in Bolivia, wrote these beautiful and profound words:

Train us, Lord, to fling ourselves upon the impossible, for behind the impossible is your grace and presence; we cannot fall into emptiness. The future is an enigma, our road is covered by mist, but we want to go on giving ourselves, because you continue hoping amid the night and weeping tears through a thousand human eyes.²

That is what Job did: he flung himself upon the impossible and into an enigmatic future. And in this effort he met the Lord.³”

The second witness is named Mary Ann. She was in her 40's when I met her. We met, because her significant other, the love of her life, Pete, had terminal cancer and was in hospice. She

² Luis Espinal, “Gastar la vida,” in *Oraciones a quemarropa* (Lima: CEP, 1982.) 69.

³ Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. Trans. Matthew J. O'Connell. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985. 91-92)

cared for him all the way to the end, but she was emotionally fragile. After Pete died, she fell apart. She couldn't function.

She attended our bereavement support group, but every week it was the same. She'd break down. She'd weep bitterly. It was as though Pete had just died, and by now, months had gone by.

The last night of our group, it was more of the same. After everyone left, my co-leader Elaine and I wondered if we should intervene more directly. Her grief was so profound!

A week later, I bumped into Mary Ann, and she was transformed. She was calm, at peace, and making plans for the rest of her life. She said that something we said clicked for her and gave her the permission she needed to live again.

Mary Ann poured her energy into landscaping her yard. Flowers bloomed, and her property won awards as the best in our community. And after a few years, I bumped into her again; she was holding hands with a gentleman and beaming. Eventually, they married, and as far as I know, Mary Ann is still happily married and energetically tending her flowers.

God answers evil in Job. God answers it with presence, with awareness, with a transforming encounter that empowers Job to live again.

Good for Job, you may say; and good for these witnesses; I'm glad they had that kind of encounter, but what about me? Where can I go? Where can I have that encounter and hear that word that empowers me to choose to live again?

Come to church. Come to worship. That's what Job was doing; that's what sustained the lives of these witnesses. And time and again, you have witnessed to me that a word you heard was the Word; the Word that sustained you; the Word that strengthened you; the Word that empowered you to rise up from the dust and ashes and take on the challenges that were before you, so that you could live more, much more, than happily ever after. Amen.