

October 25, 2015
From Sugar to Salt and Back to Sugar
Annette Hill Briggs
Job 42:1-6, 10-17

⁴² Then Job answered the Lord: ² “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ³ ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ⁴ ‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.’ ⁵ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; ⁶ therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”

¹⁰ And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. ¹¹ 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. ¹² The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. ¹³ He also had seven sons and three daughters. ¹⁴ He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. ¹⁵ In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job’s daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. ¹⁶ After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children’s children, four generations. ¹⁷ And Job died, old and full of days.

My daughter and her husband bought a great house in a Cincinnati neighborhood that has seen better days. The house itself had been empty three years before a builder bought it and flipped it. The day they moved in their neighbors, Margie and Donna, came over to meet them.

“Do you have any little ones for us to fall in love with?” Margie asked. She’s in her 80’s. Donna is her daughter. When I met them, Margie told me not to worry about Mariah and Jeremy. She said, “I’m watching out for them. And I’ll tell ya, I’ve lived in this neighborhood 43 years. I knew it when it was full of families who all knew and watched out for each other. I’ve watched it go from sugar to salt and I see it coming back to sugar again.”

The book of Job is the story of a man whose life goes from sugar to salt and back to sugar again. It's told in a very long, poetic script, every chapter a conversation between at least two voices, sometimes more. In chapter 42 the voices are Job and God. They've been at it for pages and pages. The gist of their argument is: Job demanding that God explain God's self, and God asking who Job thinks he is to demand an explanation from God.

That is a wildly oversimplified commentary on Job. *Wildly*. Job had his reasons, mainly the terrible suffering he endured. He lost his home, his fortune, his reputation, and then his children — they all died. His health, all of it — poof! His wife survived and was understandably bitter. He kept three friends who were either really supportive or really judgmental — depending on their mood. Many, many books, reams of commentary, have been written in an attempt to untangle the book of Job, to explain the divine tolerance of human suffering, why God lets bad things happen to good people — a difficult theological question on a good day when everything goes right.

Another question altogether on a day or in a world where nothing goes right. Germany in 1939, for example. Rwanda in 1994. The hospice floor at Riley Children's hospital. Syria, South Sudan. We could make a long list. I've been preaching 25 years and I've barely touched it, certainly not from Job.

To my mind the book has too many irreconcilable lessons. God seems both generous and vengeful in the story — say one true thing about God and three paragraphs (or three sentences!) later, it's contradicted. Only when pulled way back from the nitty-gritty of the story, from the widest possible angle of Job's life, can I make any sense of it. And then, only a sliver — a useful sliver, but a sliver nonetheless.

From this wide perspective, I see a prosperous man with a fine family. A praying man who was grateful and obedient to the God from whom all these blessings flowed. And when it was all taken from him by no fault of his own, when his friends and his wife begged him to figure out what sin he had committed to bring all this suffering down upon him, the man kept on praying. Sometimes he cried and sometimes he shouted.

He complained and he accused and he sassed and he despaired. But he kept praying and God kept listening. God kept responding, never explaining God's motives or reasons, but always hanging in there with Job until chapter 42, where

it seems to me that Job let go of the very last thing to which his heart and mind still clung, which was his need to know “Why?”

It might be the biggest loss of all, given its power to sustain us through all the other losses: the need to understand, to find cause, to make meaning. It’s what makes us human, and also what makes suffering all the worse to bear.

Friends, the fact that we aren’t Syrian refugees is cause for gratitude. Neither does it mean we don’t suffer and wonder why. If I knew, I’d tell you for free. Then, I’d write it in a book and sell ten billion copies and give all the money to cure kid cancer. But I don’t know, so I won’t. Instead, I have a handful of observations I find useful, when the question “Why does God let such terrible stuff happen?” starts drumming in my heart and mind.

Observation Number One: Blessing and suffering are both in God’s hands. Once all the suffering that is caused by humans is extracted from the total, the difference between what God causes and what God allows is semantic. The vast total of human suffering is easily traceable to war, poverty, and pollution — all of which are human-caused. Caused by some humans, and not prevented or sufficiently disrupted by the rest.

God does not destine us to do these things nor prevent us from NOT doing them. We are entirely capable of living together peacefully, generously, compassionately. As a species we choose not to do so. Extract all human-caused suffering, and the remainder I personally can blame on God and sleep well. But it lacks theological integrity to blame God for the entire mess.

If we trust God’s promises to be loving, to allow us the freedom to do his will (or not), to not abandon us even in death, and then if God doesn’t keep those promises, then that’s on God. And in that case, by my thinking, we are free to blame God, and God is big enough to take it. Provided, PROVIDED, that our side of the street is clean, really clean. Are ya with me?

Observation Number Two: Human suffering does NOT equal God’s absence. Job learned that he was not entitled to know WHY God did as God did, but he was free to ask . . . and wail, and complain, and grieve — and God listens. God is there, and Job was not alone.

Observation Number Three: ALL theology is a reduction of God. The worst of it is heresy. And the best falls far, far short. Robert Farrar Capon — who writes books on theology, preaching, and cooking — wrote that the most accurate human description of God is no closer to the reality, than a pearl in the deepest sea is like a ballerina on the stage. We are allowed to grow and change, within the truth of God's nature, and ordinary life is the usual teacher.

Perhaps suffering's only value may be in what we learn of God's grace: that it is so much bigger and deeper than we'd ever imagined before, because we'd never needed so much of it before. Nah, there's more than just that. Because when suffering comes and breaks us, from that broken ground all kinds of things can grow: compassion for others in their suffering, fearlessness in new adversity, openness to new change, and deeper, more joyful trust — in God and in one another.

My fourth and final observation is this: sometimes just getting through the day counts as faith. Some of you are going through some really hard and scary stuff. Stuff that is painful, that doesn't make much sense. And it doesn't help much to be told that you aren't entitled to know why. It's such a tiny word — but one word that comes from Job is, hang in there. You can pray and argue and complain and throw whatever you want at the Lord. The Lord can take it. Sugar to salt and back to sugar, remember.

Finally there came a day when Job just didn't need to argue any more, he didn't need to win, he didn't need to be right, he didn't need anything from God — except God, God's presence, God's attention.

“Now I understand,” Job said, “now I understand that I don't have to understand. You are enough, I can trust.”

And so can we, friends, so can we.