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**A Sermon for the Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost, 2009**  
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**Christ Church + Washington Parish**

We've been reading through the book of Job for four weeks now. Well, actually we've skipped most of it and only hit the highlights – sort of like the Twitter version of Job. And now we've gotten to the happy ending. But before we say good bye to Job, and take up the juicy parts of the book of Ruth after All Saints Day, I thought it was worth thinking a little about what we've been hearing.

*In what is really a double-edged message, Job teaches us that the universe, wild, beautiful and dangerous as it is, does not exist for our purposes. Wildness and beauty, rather than order and fairness, may indeed be God's purpose and delight in creating it.*

Now, bear in mind that the book of Job is more like a novel than anything else in the Bible. To recap the plot, it starts with satan and God making a little bet. Satan has been wandering around the earth, and he's come back to give God some good-natured ribbing about the imperfections of creation, and especially of humankind.

God offers up Job as a counter-example: "A perfect and upright man," who says his prayers and flosses his teeth every day, I suppose, and does whatever else constitutes human perfection and uprightness. Satan, and we should be clear that this is small 's' satan, not the devil of our modern imagination – a word and not a name, that means "adversary" in the sense of "lawyer who argues the other side of the case," anyway, this adversary says to God that of course Job is faithful. He has every good thing a person can have, and has it in abundance: land, treasure, family, cattle, and crops. Take that away from him and then see what happens!

And God says, "Okay, give it a whirl," which doesn't seem entirely loving, but there you have it.

So Job loses all his wealth and his children and his land, and everything, in fact, that gives him any value or standing in the culture of the ancient Middle East.

But despite the entreaties and scorn of his wife, Job remains faithful to God. So the adversary challenges God one more time” “Okay, you took away Job’s stuff, but he’s still got his health. Take that away and Job will turn his back on you.” And God says, “do your worst, only spare Job’s life.

So Job is reduced to a state of abject misery. His body covered with terrible, reeking, draining sores. He sits alone on a dung heap, and asks God to explain, “What did I do to deserve this?”

Now this is the central question of the book of Job; the reason it was written and the reason we still read it. For Job’s question just won’t go away. “What have I done to offend you, O God?” “Why do bad things happen to good people?” “How can a loving God allow suffering in the world?”

The question of why there is pain and suffering in the world, and particularly why there is pain and suffering in *my* world, is one that every religion must wrestle with. And indeed Job himself wrestles with it mightily. A good portion of the parts of Job we left out of our Sunday readings is the account of Job’s friends stopping by the dung heap to tell Job that he must have done something really bad, and he needs to tell God he’s sorry, and everything will be all right.

But, of course, Job can’t do that, because (and this is how we know that this is a work of fiction) Job cannot think of anything he has done wrong. Ever. So since he can’t answer the question, Job demands that God answer it. “Show me my sin,” he says, “and I will repent.”

And although all of his friends tell Job to stop being so self-righteous and give up his quest for answers from God, God finally does show up. But instead of answers, God has nothing but questions for Job. Appearing in the all-powerful aspect, rather than in the compassion suit, God speaks to Job out of a tornado. A tornado, for goodness sake! And God asks Job what he knows about being God. “Did you see me make all this stuff?” “Were you there when I called the universe into being?” “Do you know just how deep the whales can dive?” Do you have any idea how many birds there are?”

This is not what Job was hoping for. This is not vindication, or condemnation, or even an answer, really. “I am God and you are not,” God seems to say, “so how do you dare question me?” Classic pattern of parental abuse, really, all that power and fury instead of an answer. But somehow, Job finds the answer he needs in all of that. “I had heard about you, but now I see you, and I’m sorry. I was wrong. Wrong about me, wrong about you, wrong about the universe, and I asked the wrong question. Oops. Sorry. My bad.”

And for that, in today's conclusion, Job gets everything back, doubled. Health, land, cattle, treasure, wife, children.

Job is a symbol, of course, for any one of us who has ever wanted to take God to task for something awful that has happened to us or to those we love. But Job is also a stand-in for the whole nation of the Israelites, who collectively have, over the years, at least as many reasons to ask God "Why?" as any of the individual members.

And the main gift that the book of Job gives to them and to us is the way it breaks the connection between our actions and what befalls us. It reminds us that there is no cause-and-effect relationship between our virtue and our reward. Bad things happen to good people, and the wicked prosper, and it is not because God is punishing or rewarding, despite what we would sometimes like to think.

In what is really a double-edged message, Job teaches us that the universe, wild, beautiful and dangerous as it is, does not exist for our purposes. Wildness and beauty, rather than order and fairness, may indeed be God's purpose and delight in creating it. And death, disease, sorrow and loss are the inevitable consequences of living in that wild, beautiful, dangerous universe. So soul-searching and self-blame are not in order just because bad things happen.

And, on the other hand, the improbable restoration of Job's fortunes reminds us that we cannot take credit for what seem to be signs of divine favor. The good things that happen to us are not ours by merit, but by our good fortune.

Which is not to deny the value of hard work and good ideas and perseverance. But some who work hard prosper, and others don't. What Job teaches us is that those who prosper are not enjoying God's special favor, and those who are less successful are not hated by God.

So from Job we learn not to blame the victim, nor to credit the fortunate, because neither they nor God are responsible for what befalls them.

But wait!

If that is so, is there any point to our faith? Is there any reason to worship God?

I would submit that this is exactly the reason that God answers Job with questions, and with a glimpse of God's own self, rather than with explanations and reasons. Because, just as the story challenges the relationship between virtue and reward; between suffering and judgment; it also challenges the idea that we are faithful because of what we get out of it.

We worship God not because we thereby earn God's favor. We worship God because God is God. All of that display of power – the tornado and the dawn of creation and the leviathan and all of that – God doesn't do that to intimidate Job like an abusive parent. God does that to counteract the idea that faith is transactional. God shows the full display of power and glory so that Job will know, and so that we will know as well, that we have no currency with which to buy God's favor. We have no bargaining chips. There is no balance.

We worship God because God is God, and God loves us because God is God.

And that is our great good fortune. Because since we didn't earn God's love, neither can we lose it.

Amen.