

A Glimpse of Job...and Job's Wife

Perhaps you found yourself watching the news with a little more disbelief this week. Perhaps it was the horror and the tragedy of the story being told. Perhaps it was because the news event was a reminder that there truly is no place where we are safe.

Then again, perhaps you were drawn into watching events of this event unfold because the culture of the people was one that always held a bit of mystery for us. Or perhaps it was the “odd” sort of way that the news media showed us how another culture grieved...and reflected theologically on those events.

The tragic event of which I speak is the shootings of 10 Amish children in Pennsylvania. A shooting that left 5 children dead, as well as the gunman.

I reference this event – to remind you to continue to lift this community and its families in your prayers – but also to put this very real tragedy next to the tragedies that the lectionary lifts up in the book of Job this morning.

Again, very real tragedies. And the book of Job. A book containing a folktale written in prose about the tragedies that befall a man named Job.

The very real tragedy. As written by Ann Curry of NBC News:

“More details about the Amish school shootings emerged Wednesday, with the Lancaster County deputy coroner revealing one of the victims had been shot nearly 20 times. But the Amish here are quick to forgive, burying their anger even before they bury their children...Plain and simple describes the Amish way of life. A Christian denomination, they set themselves apart from nearly all modern conveniences, even electricity. They refuse government assistance and don't serve in the military. Forgiveness is a core belief.

The grandfather of two sisters killed by the gunman spoke to WGAL-TV, the NBC affiliate in Lancaster.

‘Is there anger towards the gunman’s family?’ asked a reporter.

‘No,’ said the grandfather.

‘Have you forgiven?’

‘In my heart, yes.’

‘How is that possible?’

‘Through God’s help.’” (MSNBC)

A footnote to the story: On Saturday, when the gunman was buried, of the 75 people in attendance, half were Amish. (Pause.)

Now, I am going to guess that there are several of you out there who are like myself – trying to wrap your heads and hearts around the Amish understanding of God’s presence and God’s call for forgiveness so quickly after such a horrific event.

But I have no deep insights. Just admiration for a people and a culture trying to articulate their faithful response to a tragedy to a culture so foreign to them as ours.

Nonetheless, it strikes me odd that we would get a glimpse of Job in the midst of this event.

Job. He is the main character in the Old Testament book of the same name. The one containing a folktale about the tragedies and misfortunes that befall this upright man of God.

As the story goes, one day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before God. Satan also came to present himself. And God says to Satan, “Where have you come from?”

“O, I’ve been here, there, and yonder,” said Satan. “Been walking around on earth. Thought I’d stop by.”

And God said, “Did you check in on my pride and joy, Job? There’s no one like him. He still worships me even though you had me destroy his family and livestock.”

Satan replied, “Well, it’s one thing to take away his possessions. People will give anything to save all that they have. But his health...that’s a different matter. Take away his health and see what happens.”

It was Satan who inflicted the sores on Job. And Job found himself sitting in ashes and using a potsherd to scratch and scrape his skin.

(Pause.)

But the story doesn’t end there. In comes the voice of reason, the voice of his wife, a voice previously overlooked and underrated. And Job’s wife, Sitis, says to him: “Job, are you still worshipping God? He’s changed the rules on you, fool! Curse him for doing this to you!”

And Job replies, “You sound like everyone else out there. Do we not just receive good from God? Does God not send bad as well?”

And the narrator of Job carefully closes the story with: “In all this, Job did not sin with his lips.” (Odd that his heart is not mentioned.)

Now, I don’t know about you, but I have met many a Job in my lifetime. They appear in almost every hospital bed that I have visited as a chaplain. Sometimes Job is male, other times female. Job has been young and old. And sometimes Job is not in a hospital bed at all. Sometimes Job sits in a church pew. And sometimes I see Job in the mirror.

The tragedies that befall these Jobs are varied. Some have lost possessions. Some have lost jobs. Some struggle with illnesses. Others face a terminal disease. All of them find themselves grieving their former lives...life before their downfall, life before the diagnosis. Many of them spend their days picking away at their own demise, reliving moments of pain.

When asked, they will profess a faith in God, a relationship that has been steadfast over the years. They do not blame God for their situation. They accept it for what it is. And once in a while, one of these Jobs will push my theological button and say, “It was God’s plan.”

(Pause.)

I have always felt that every Job that I have met has needed a “wife”. Someone to balance out the situation and the theology. As I said before, Job’s wife is a voice that has been previously overlooked and underrated. She offers so much to the story. And she offers us a perspective of ourselves, perhaps the darker side of ourselves, but a side of ourselves that we need to explore.

In my research this week, I found an article titled “Mrs. Job Reevaluates Her God”. I’d like to share with you some of the reflections contained therein.

“Mrs. Job has lost 500 oxen, 70000 sheep. 3000 camels, her servants, 7 sons and 3 daughters. Yet even in the midst of what must have been mind-numbing grief, there is no record of her questioning or objecting to the theology of her world. She lives in a time dominated by a theology of an anthropomorphic, king-like arbiter of justice based on strict obedience to His [sic] laws...

“In Mrs. Job's world, her tragedy would clearly be blamed on her failure before God...

“It is only when Job himself is struck with what appears to be leprosy and becomes an untouchable do we see evidence of Mrs. Job's primal anger that the God she has worshipped and honored is no longer operating under the same rules...

“The heart of Mrs. Job's argument is that, like Job, she recognizes that he has not violated any requirement that would provoke such severe divine retribution. She is well aware of his attempts at righteousness and reverence for God. She has no doubt echoed them in her own worship and lifestyle. So clearly, the rules have been changed, and not by Job! Her God is no longer a God of predictable principle. When she warns, "Curse God - die" perhaps she is acknowledging what Job does not acknowledge until much later in the story: they never really knew their God...

“While the book of Job continues with Job's pursuit of the relationship with God, which has always sustained him, it is at this point that Mrs. Job feels called to reevaluate her faith. If her God is not present, is there a God at all?...

“Mrs. Job's spiritual growth requires her to discard her legalism and move foreword to discover a connection with God founded in relationship, and not fearful sacrifice...” (Cook)

Every Job needs a wife. Every one of us needs that balance in our life.

The Job within who follows God's commands and who daily seeks guidance from the scriptures...needs a Mrs. Job who will help us grow beyond the rubrics of our faith.

That Mrs. Job part of ourselves is what allows us to further explore our relationship with God...allowing us to confront God with our anger, to question God with “Why?” and to genuinely *feel* the emotions – the good, the bad, and the ugly - that we have in our relationship with God.

It is in embracing that dark sided Mrs. Job part of ourselves that we are able to move forward in our relationship with God and past all the fears we had/or were taught of God when we were children.

Just as we desire a relationship with God, so too, God desires the same with us. Not a relationship built on fear. But one built on love and trust. One that can handle the truly tragic events of life and the deepest questions of our grief as well as the joyous praises of thanksgiving and the gratitude we have for life's simplest pleasures.

(Pause.)

Poor Job. He sits alone in misery. He's sitting among ashes using a potsherd to scratch his skin. His grief is almost palpable.

We know. We've been there.

And just as his disease eats away at his skin, his wife's question will eat away at him. In time, he will confront his deepest questions about his legalistic faith and discover more about himself and his relationship with God...even in the midst of tragedy.

And so will we. Amen.

Cook, Mary Crocker. "Mrs. Job Reevaluates Her God". Women in Judaism: Contemporary Writings. www.utoronto.ca/wjudaism/

Curry, Ann. "Amish display the true meaning of forgiveness" NBC News. 6:32pm CT October 4, 2006. MSNBC.com