

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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Defiantly Faithful

Job was a good man. He worshipped God; kept all the commandments. He did all that the Law prescribed. And life was good for Job. He was a rich man. He had many cattle, and sheep, and land. His family also prospered. He had seven sons and three daughters. They all enjoyed the goodness of their family's wealth. Job was so scrupulous that he would make sacrifices on behalf of his children just in case they happened to have cursed God in their hearts. Better safe than sorry. Job was such a good man that God himself bragged of his servant Job to his heavenly council.

Then one day it all changed. Marauders came and captured his cattle. What livestock that wasn't taken were destroyed. Even his beloved children were killed in a terrible storm. He was left with nothing. In the depths of his despair, Job still kept his faith in God and the goodness of God. He was careful not to say one thing to curse the Lord. Then he himself was afflicted. Job developed horrible sores from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. He suffered mightily, and threw himself in the ashes, and scraped himself with a sharp piece of broken pottery. He must have felt like a broken pot –useless, destroyed, shattered, and scattered.

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever felt like somehow God had something against you? Maybe you've had a bad day that seemed like it would never end –spilled hot coffee on yourself in the morning, forgot something important at home and only realized it when you got to work, missed an important meeting because you were stuck in traffic, misplaced your glasses for the nineteenth time, and when you got home found that your dog had chewed your favorite pair of shoes. Or maybe there are more serious circumstances in your life. Perhaps

there is illness, your own or someone you love. Perhaps you have suffered loss, like our friend Job. Sometimes life isn't fair. Sometimes bad things happen to basically good people.

It was this very injustice that seems to be inherent in life against which Job thundered. He knew that it wasn't fair that he was stricken as he was. You see, the theology of the day said that God rewarded those who were good and punished those who were bad. The rewards and punishments were given out in this life. There wasn't any after-life that leveraged us against our behavior in this life. Sometimes, it was understood, that God would not visit his punishment on an individual, but would store it up, and bring it upon the heads of his or her children, or grandchildren, or great-grandchildren, or great-great-grandchildren... You get the point. That was one way of explaining why we didn't always see God's justice doled out as even we mortals knew it should be. We mortals... What do we know?

Well, we know what we have learned from God's self-revelation. Job felt confident in this revelation. He had committed his life to the service of the God who was revealed in the ancient stories of the Garden of Eden, the life of Abraham, King David, and the Psalms, and in the Law of Moses. This was the God he knew, and the God he served with his whole being. He knew God to be a God of justice, a God who was true and ever faithful. That was why Job was so angry.

You see, Job hadn't done anything to deserve all the misery that had befallen him. He was innocent, and he knew it. Even when Job's so called *friends* come to visit him, and they constantly point out that God doesn't punish unjustly, and therefore Job surely was guilty of some sin, even then Job asserted his innocence. You may say that Job stood defiantly before God and argued his own innocence. He pointed out how the wicked prosper, living long lives

full of riches, and dying in peace. And he, an innocent man, suffered so. It's just not fair. It's just not fair!

Now, you and I are sophisticated people. We can explain things to Job. We could tell him that God's wisdom is greater than our own; that we could never hope to understand why God does things, or doesn't do things. We could explain to dear Job that sometimes God is working out a greater good than we could even imagine, and that the momentary ills we experience are just not worth comparing to it. Or we could even challenge the theology of Job's day, and say that God does not willfully inflict suffering on his creatures whom he loves, and that even from the deepest sorrow God is able to bring good. All of these explanations would be true, and I'm sure we could think of more, but let's just hang out with Job for a while, shall we? Let's just be with him in his suffering, in his sorrow, in his indignant expectation of God to act according to God's own character revealed in Holy Scripture.

We might call Job's reaction to his situation sacrilegious. His friends certainly did. Job failed to accept his fate humbly. He failed to take responsibility for the sin which his friends were sure he had committed. How presumptuous, right? How utterly impertinent!

Job wants to go to God's dwelling place and speak directly to God. He wants to plead his case before God, to make his arguments to his face. He is sure that God would have to see that he is right. Surely the just God would accept the truth of what he says. Job laments that he is not able to find God to make his case this way. Wherever he goes, God is not there.

Have you ever felt like this? Have you ever felt abandoned by God? The psalmist certainly did, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Yes, that should sound familiar. Jesus quoted Psalm 22 from the cross at the very darkest moment of his own life. Jesus, like the Psalmist, and like Job, had a profound faith out of which this cry came. Job's very expectation

of justice from the God of justice, in spite of all the injustice he had suffered, tells us of the depth of his faith. Even though he has suffered so, even though in his own experience the ungodly have gone unpunished, even though there is no evidence at the moment to support his hope for vindication, Job clings to it like a snapping turtle. One commentator described it as Job's faithful defiance, and his defiant faithfulness.

Job asks some serious questions that we need to take seriously in our own faith journeys. We shouldn't jump too quickly to the end of the book, which we will hear next Sunday, where God puts uppity Job in his place. How often we are like Job, questioning God, demanding an explanation for the injustice in our lives, the injustice that is all around us. Let that questioning be an honest expression of our own faith. Let it be a demand based on our belief that God does not abide injustice. Don't be afraid to take God at his word. Don't be afraid to lay upon God the worst of your thoughts, fears, and anxieties. God can handle it.

When Jesus utters those words from the cross, he does so from real pain and a real sense of how alone he was in that pain. It is the most pathetic moment in all the stories about his life and death. Job did not have the story of Jesus to comfort him. He did not know the story of the cross. Still, Job knew that God would set things right in the end. He depended on it. You and I have what Job did not. We know that our redeemer lives, and we know his name: Jesus. I pray that you and I may have also what Job did have –the faith to put our lives in our redeemer's hands, and the confidence to know that at the last we shall see him who has been with us in all our sufferings.

Amen.