

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time
13th February 2022

Job 4:1-11 & 1 Corinthians 13:1-2, 6-13

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Evolving to Love

We don't know a lot about the authorship of the Book of Job, from which Julie read this morning, but we suspect that some parts of it, particularly some of the poetic sections, may be some of the oldest writings in the Hebrew Bible, maybe dating as early as the 7th century BCE.

I mention that because the existential question raised in the book of Job is not a new one—the question of evil, of why good people suffer, that's a question as old as humanity.

First, a bit of Job's backstory. Job is a parable of a

man who was “blameless and upright...who feared God and turned away from evil.” He was blessed with a large family and considerable wealth for his time—7000 sheep, 3000 camels, 500 oxen, 500 donkeys, and many servants. Job had it all.

Until a heavenly being approached God with something of a bet. The heavenly being is called ha-satan, a Hebrew word that means “the accuser.” And Ha-Satan, or Satan in English, comes to God with an accusation. The accusation is that Job is only upright and blameless because God had blessed Job, put a heavenly fence

around him and prevented evil from befalling him.

“Take away Job’s blessings,” taunts Satan, “and Job will curse you for sure.”

What ensues is a tragic tale of Job losing everything...first his wealth, then his family, and finally his health.

Job’s friends come to console him, and one of them, Eliphaz, questions Job in the excerpt that Julie read.

“What did you do wrong?” asks Eliphaz. “Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble are the ones who reap the same.”

To Job’s friends, we reap what we sow. The only reason so much tragedy would befall Job is if he had done something wrong. If he had done something to deserve it. Bad things only

happen to bad people, and good things happen to good people.

The Book of Job explores that ageless question of why the universe doesn’t work as we feel like it should, as we want it to. Our sense of fairness, indeed our sense of divine justice, leads us to imagine a quid pro quo universe. Those who live virtuously are blessed by God, and those who do evil suffer a painful fate. Except that in Job, as in life, things don’t always work that way. And no matter how hard we try in life, nothing can protect us from the inevitability of pain.

These past two years may have brought home that very sense of injustice to many of us. People who have done everything we’re supposed to do—masks, vaccines, social distancing—have still gotten sick, in some cases died, from this pernicious virus.

People who were struggling to scrape by have lost jobs, have fallen ill and have gone bankrupt as a result. We look to the political stage and see people spread lies and foment hatred, that spend public money for personal gain, that abuse others and ignore the needs of those they are elected to serve, and who not only escape punishment, but often reap untold rewards. In our lives, in our communities, in our nation, the justice of God seems absent.

Deep in a forest in South Africa, a herd of giraffes spot an acacia tree. They make their way up to the tree and begin to take a nibble from some leaves high up in the tree. The first bite is pure deliciousness. But by the third or fourth bite, the leaves have suddenly turned acrid and unpalatable. The giraffes could try another nearby acacia tree, but those, too,

are now inedible as well.

At the first sign of danger, the acacia tree has sent out a warning to other nearby trees in the forest, alerting them to proactively release the same toxic chemical that prevents the giraffes from eating their leaves. Even those trees that no giraffe has yet sampled have been notified that hungry giraffes are coming.

Under the forest floor lies an intricate, interconnected, dynamic web of communication between organisms, including fungi, plants, bacteria, and animals. In fact, ninety percent of all the plants and trees on earth are involved in this mutually beneficial network. The superorganism that makes all this communication possible is called mycelium. If you made it to Adult Forum this morning, you heard Julie Wade talk about this amazing super organism. If you

missed it this morning, she'll be continuing presentations for the next couple of weeks.

We're all familiar with the reproductive part of mycelium—mushrooms. If you see a mushroom in the forest, it's a sign that underneath lies part of this network. What exists under the forest floor, and extends upward, is an interconnected community. But this ecosystem is more than just a talkative group of plants.

When a tree is cut down in the forest, other nearby trees reach out to the victim through their root tips and send life-saving nutrients to the roots of the tree stump—water, sugar, and other nutrients. These are sent through this mycelium network, and this altruistic act from neighboring trees can keep the stump alive for decades and even centuries.

This doesn't just happen for trees of the same species

either. Trees will send the same nourishment to trees of other species. And there's no discernible benefit for them to do so. The stump will rarely grow back into a tree or be able to reproduce or spread its DNA. And yet the trees act for the health of the entire forest, nourishing beings that are different than themselves.

The question of injustice that is taken up in the Book of Job supposes that we live in a world, in a universe, of cause and effect. Every action results in an equal and opposite reaction. Job sinned. Therefore Job was punished.

And as much as our experience tells us otherwise, as much as we see that bad things do happen to good people and that evil is not always punished,

I think at some level we all want to believe that there's a

larger plan,

that God is in control in
some way

that will ultimately bal-
ance the scales,

that if justice is not served
in this life,

then maybe it will be in
the next life.

Because the alternative is
a universe with no one in
charge, a universe of random
consequence, an unpredict-
able universe. And that can
be far more terrifying.

As you know, today is
Evolution Sunday in our
church, and today, and this
whole month, we are cel-
ebrating the contributions
of science to a life of faith.
In the chapter from First
Corinthians that Julie read
this morning, Paul writes
that when he was a child, he
thought and spoke and rea-
soned like a child. Then as
he matured, he put an end
to those childish ways.

For me, my childhood
faith lasted well into adult-
hood. I wanted to believe in
a God who was in charge of
everything, who had a plan
and could control the out-
come, even when experience
seemed to contradict that.
Part of my own faith jour-
ney has been letting go of
that kind of faith, the kind
of faith that Job's friends
have, the kind of easy faith
that Job himself resists. It's
a faith that expects God to
take care of everything, to
right all wrongs, to reward
the faithful and punish the
unjust.

When Paul writes about
losing that kind of child-
hood faith himself, though,
it isn't to give up on the idea
of God. He writes about
how his understanding of
God evolved. The injustice
in the world, the kind of
injustice for which Job's
friends wanted an explana-
tion, Paul suggests that the

response to such injustice is not to trust that God will fix everything. The response to injustice is love.

When I first read about the communication throughout the forest facilitated by mycelium, it fascinated me. Not because it's an evolutionary miracle, though it certainly is. But because here, right around us, is this tremendous interconnected biome of trees and fungi and bacteria all teaching us how to love.

Even as I say that, "love" seems like a strange word to use. We tend to think of love as a human emotion, an affection toward something – another person, a pet, chocolate cake. But Paul's understanding of love is an action that contributes to the wellbeing of another. And here is this biome all working together to do just that...nourishing a felled tree stump, warning near-

by flora of danger, joining together for the good of the whole, even when there is no benefit to the individual organism. That is love, and love is the path God chooses to respond to the injustice of the world.

Faced with injustice and suffering and darkness in the world, we need look no further than the trees around us to find the Divine response. The suffering and injustice and anguish around us become the crucible through which we can not only experience God but participate with God in responding in love. Evolution is a celebration of nature's response to the hardships and challenges of life in the universe. Nature has evolved to learn that the best, the only, way to survive and thrive is to love. Can we evolve enough to do the same?

Blessed be. Amen.


