



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

“Job – a pawn in Satan’s game?”
20th Sunday after Pentecost – October 6, 2024
Mark 9:30-37

A Homily by The Reverend Jo Popham

As of this morning ### have perished from Hurricane Helene. This most recent storm is among the deadliest to hit the mainland US with the damage and death toll sure to grow along the Blue Ridge mountains from Georgia to Tennessee.

Hurricane Katrina that struck Mississippi and Louisiana in August 2005, was the most deadly storm since 1950, and the third most deadly dating back to the 1800s.¹

The state of Louisiana evacuated approximately 1.5 million people before Hurricane Katrina made landfall, but 100,000’s stayed. Of the confirmed dead, 1,118 victims perished within Louisiana, while 346 victims perished outside of the state of Louisiana. 135 were listed as missing. Of those 5 were found alive. And the number of fatalities from the flooding following Katrina is estimated at 3508.

80% of the city of New Orleans and 98% of neighboring St. Bernard Parish were inundated with water. New Orleans and areas in neighboring parishes, were flooded for weeks. The death statistics were frozen as of October 1, 2005, but no one actually went into the homes that were flooded until the following January.

Hurricane force winds lasted 17 hours and devastated coastal Mississippi. Waveland was considered ground zero. The high watermark of 27.8 ft was recorded at Pass Christian. More than 60% of the dwellings in southern Mississippi were destroyed or rendered unlivable. 11 tornados touched down in Mississippi and 51 in other states.

What can we do in such times? Pray and give and respond in any way we can to attend to the needs of our fellow human beings – and their pets. (On St. Frances Day 2007, I blessed a Katrina dog who had made its way to Calgary, Alberta in Canada two years

before. Its new owners named her Katrina. A baby born and abandoned during the storm also was adopted in Calgary. They did not name her Katrina!)

Jim and I had just graduated from seminary in Austin in May of 2005 and had moved into a home that had never flooded. After the levees broke we had 8 ft. of water in our neighborhood. We lost not just our home and all its furnishings, we lost our future ministry in the Diocese of Louisiana. We were homeless for 22 months. We chose who to impose on among our friends and family by opportunities for continuing education in the area. We learned the difficulty of finding placements for two priests in one family, and we learned what most clergy still do not know – and that is how to let people love us and care for us. Street ministry in the lower 9th Ward of New Orleans was both fulfilling and frustrating. Preparing meals for a couple we had mentored in seminary was a delight. Being at their graduation was a joy, as was being there for the birth of their twin boys 3 weeks after their graduation. We got to be at their baptisms and stood as their Godparents. That was the highlight of our time in the diaspora. They marveled at our ability to take the disaster that had become our lives in stride. Yes, there were disappointments after being Katrina'ed, but also joyfulness. Our son Troy had evacuated with us in spite of his protests.

Jim took Troy back into New Orleans on day 5 to bring out elderly people from nursing homes to a facility in Opelousas; I went back to Austin to help set up the chaplaincy program in the convention center which became home to 5000 of our fellow evacuees for the next month. On day 32 when we were able to get back into our neighborhood and to Troy's house just a few blocks away, there was the body of a young man about his age that was caught in a tree as the water went down. We did 2 forays into the mess Katrina left behind and were able to save a very few things. But we have so many beautiful stories about people on the floor of the shelter who were saved from the disaster of becoming a deadly statistic of Katrina. We got to hear Troy's many stories of his service to the elderly, and we got to know the loving hearts of so many who helped us

and all the evacuees. I tell this story because one of those we mentored said to me: “I thought your name was Jo not Job.”

Were we modern day Jobs? Why did we have to suffer in a world that a good and just God created? Now we were not as pure as Job, but we were good people. Job was completely innocent. He was “blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.” Job was not just a good man; he was the best in the whole world. If Job had had any flaws it would have ruined the moral point of the myth. And if ever there was a man who did not deserve to suffer, it was Job.²

Our reading today is a prologue of sorts for this myth or parable, not as history. And surely it is one of the most theologically challenging of stories in the Old Testament and the most sophisticated.³ The characters are God, Job, of course, his family, his four friends, and one of God’s messengers, the satan. The setting in Act I is the throne room of God where the Lord receives his court – his ministers and servants, often called his angels or messengers. Among them was “the satan.” Now the satan is not exactly the devil – more on that later, but more like the devil’s advocate who has just returned from earth with news of Job, the disgustingly faithful Job.⁴

Spoiler alert: if you have not read the whole Book of Job, I am about to share Job’s sad story. Jim and I got to read the Book of Job in its entirety after Katrina because it was the daily reading from the Old Testament for all of the fall of 2005.

To try to understand the question of why people suffer as told in the late Old Testament Book of Job, we need to know that this story dates back to the 4th century before Jesus Christ. The people of Israel who God had chosen and made a covenant with were suffering and had no home, and their covenant with God required one thing... faithfulness. The Jewish community had lost everything – the land, the Temple, their homes, and many loved ones, and they were tempted to reject God. They must have thought that God had forgotten them since they were in the diaspora for so many

centuries, so why should they be faithful to God? And so this fable was told to deal with the problem of evil and how God can be good in the midst of great suffering.⁵ It begins in the land of Uz, a fictional land to the east of Edom, across the Jordan from the land of Israel. Really it is a “never-never land” that befits a fable. Uz in Hebrew means counsel or advice.⁶ But before we go to the Land of Counsel, let’s talk about Satan. In Hebrew Satan is preceded by the article “the” – *hasatan*. The satan was “a person, thing, or set of circumstances” that were an obstacle that “frustrated one’s purpose.” Only by the end of the biblical period would the Satan drop the article and become the demonic figure Satan.⁷ The Satan challenged God. God staked his honor on Job and made a wager with the satan that Job’s faithfulness would not waver no matter what the satan did to Job.⁸ And he would do horrible things to this faithful man, but he could not kill him. For the next three weeks we will hear Job’s response to his sufferings. As Paul Harvey used to say, stay tuned for the next several Sundays’ Old Testament readings from Job, for the “rest of the story.”

But first I share Job’s plight from Frederick Buechner: “Job was the richest man around, but in a single day he was wiped out. The Sabeans ran off with his asses and oxen and slaughtered the hired hands. Lightning struck his sheep barn and burned up the whole flock, not to mention the shepherds. The Chaldeans rustled his camels and made short work of the camel drivers. And a hurricane hit with such devastating effect the house where his seven sons and three daughters were having a party and there wasn't enough of them left in the wreckage to identify.

What happened next was that Job came down with leprosy. And what happened after that was that he cursed the day that he was born. He said that if he had his way, it would be stricken off the calendar entirely and never so much as mentioned again. He prayed to die, but his heart went on beating. He prayed for the sun to go out like a match, but it kept on shining. His wife advised him to curse God and then go hang himself, but he stopped just short of that because he was a very good man and a very

religious man and there were some lengths to which, even though he was almost out of his head with the horror of it all, he couldn't quite bring himself to go. And that was the crux of his problem — the fact that he was a very good and a very religious man and knew it. Why had God let such things happen to him?”⁹

And then there were Job’s insufferable friends who tried totally unsuccessfully to explain what was happening to him with ridiculous ideas of who was and was not worthy of suffering. As Job was about to respond to them, God himself spoke to Job with many unanswerable questions. When Job was finally able to speak, he said that he despised himself. But God did not let him despise himself for long. God dismissed Job’s faux friends. And God gave Job “more riches than he had ever had before together with his health, and Job lived to have a whole new set of children and to see them through four generations before he died old and full of days.”¹⁰ And Job knew that he didn’t need to ask God anything. “He no longer needed to make sense of his losses or pain with his own eyes he had beheld, and not as a stranger, the One who in the end clothed all things, no matter how small or confused or in pain, with his own splendor. And that was more than sufficient.”¹¹

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ The deadliest hurricanes, based on National Hurricane Center information with the number of deaths.

1. **Katrina** - 2005, 1,392
2. **Audrey** - 1957, 416
3. **Camille** - 1969, 256
4. **Sandy** - 2012, 219
5. **Diane** - 1955, 184
6. **Ian** - 2022, 156
7. **Agnes** - 1972, 122
8. **Harvey** - 2017, 103
9. **Helene** (preliminary), 100

² Stan Mast’s commentary; he has been a minister of Preaching in Grand rapids, MI for 22 years. See <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2018-10-1/Job-11-21-10>.

³ Kathryn M. Schifferdecker’s commentary of today’s reading. She is professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN. See <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-27-2/commentary-on-job-11-21-10>

⁴ “To believe for nothing?” https://www.taize.fr/en_article167.html?date=2014-07-01

⁵ See <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper22b/#Job1>= Pulpit Fiction is a podcast hosted by Rev. Eric Fistler and Rev. Robb McCoy.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, citing Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, v. 3 The Writings, p. 466.

⁸ “To believe for nothing?” https://www.taize.fr/en_article167.html?date=2014-07-01

⁹ Buechner on Job originally published in *Peculiar Treasures* and later in *Beyond Words*. See <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/8/2/job>

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*