

RECEIVING THE GOOD AND THE BAD
JOB 1:1; 2: 1-10

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University Church of Chicago

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St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City was founded in 1959 as a seminary to educate and train students for pastoral ministry. Eight faculty members, including the newly-named president of the seminary, Don Holter, met to start a graduate school from scratch, to plan a curriculum, to recruit additional faculty and, of course, students.

When the seminary announced that a huge fiftieth anniversary celebration of the school would be held last week, I put the initial brochure aside. I graduated in its fifth class, the class of '67, and because I have made it a rule not to attend class reunions—high school, college or otherwise—I had some hesitation. I have lived by Bennett Cerf's dictum that he did not attend class reunions, "because those folks have grown too fat to recognize me."

When I realized that a fiftieth anniversary of the founding of a seminary is different from a class reunion, I decided to go. And I discovered that a form of Bennett Cerf's rule still held: my classmates had grown too gray to recognize me. However, one of the now-retired professors who came after I graduated, a wonderful colleague and friend who grew up in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Tex Sample, presented a lecture on Tuesday night. I have known and loved Tex for many years, so I bought his most recent book, *Earthy Spirituality*, "a testimony of narratives where this strange God appears."

When Tex writes in his introduction, that "I am not helped much by conventional approaches to spirituality," I thought, "Yes!" He goes on, "I find it almost impossible to do 'devotions.' Daily Bible study in the sense of devoting twenty to thirty minutes a day never worked for me. I cannot get around to scheduled times for prayer on my knees with head bowed. I find labyrinths and prayer beads boring. I am ever and again distracted in silent meditation. I simply cannot sustain a spirituality based in such things. Yet, Bible study, prayer, worship and Eucharist form the heart of my practices, but it is a different spirituality."

I knew then that Tex was my kind of spiritual person, one who brings "a spirituality for unspiritual people." The first chapter of his book is entitled "The Death of a Blue Jay," and it concerns the travails that Tex and Peggy had with their son Steve over the twenty-eight years of his life, years filled with drug and alcohol abuse, jail time, resolves to quit, relapses, the whole familiar story that more than a few of us have experienced. When Steve was twenty-eight years old, he met a woman named Nancy who was a drug user also. They were soon engaged. But "Nancy went into a drug rehab program, dried out, and began that long quest for sobriety. At first Steve said that was the end of their relationship, that they could never have a life together with her in a rehab program; but Nancy encouraged Steve to come into

the program with her...He went cold turkey, endured the DTs and the terrible withdrawal from fifteen years of drug and alcohol abuse. Miraculously he dried out.”

Because of his love of motorcycles and the way he excelled in racing, Steve found his way into an usual group called the Visions Motorcycle Club. This was an Alcoholics Anonymous motorcycle gang that combined their love of bike riding with the struggle to stay dry and work for sobriety. Those nine months were the best years of his life. The Visions group became his church and they played and prayed together.

Until one unusually warm February day when Steve and Nancy were riding on highway 116 in the rolling hills north of Kansas City and a truck driver blinded by the sun did not see them at an intersection. Nancy escaped from the collision with minor cuts and bruises but the collision swept Steve under the truck and the momentum carried them across the roadway.

At his funeral, held in the chapel at St. Paul School of Theology, my good friend, Gene Lowry, said:

We all have to be acutely aware that we gather as stricken companions caught in a whirlwind of grief and pain. Underneath it all is the question of why? Why now? Why? The question is inevitable; it is inescapable. Why? The trouble is the heart raises questions that the mind cannot supply. I simply have to say that it is better to live with our questions unanswered than to be content with answers that will not do, will not sustain, will not empower.

Because, of course, the question is unavoidable; we forget something about the question itself and that is that the question *why* has an answer built in. Because when you ask the question “why?” the assumption is that there is an answer, and that is an assumption. We are tempted to wonder, worry, think about, consider some special providential purpose, some divine mandate, that has cause that lies behind this moment of grief. I say, if we finally resolve to some sort of answer, to some hidden purpose we have to adjust ourselves to, then we will malign the very character of a caring God, a God who weeps when we weep and who suffers when we suffer. I want to say, clearly, that in my view we have come together this day by accident. And we are confronted by the larger mystery of life and death, and the larger mystery is not why we die, but how is it that we ever lived?

How many people do you know who can be described in the way that the Bible describes Job: “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil...” (1:1)? Nobody in any congregation I ever served could be so characterized. Even the best of us, the saintliest, the most devout and pious has flaws.

When the hyperbole starts piling up—in the case of Job four straight adjectival descriptions of praiseworthy behavior—don’t you and I start sniffing for a rat? Something is going on. Nobody is really that good. So somebody is telling this tale for a reason.

The plot of the Book of Job and the dialogues within it raise vital questions about theodicy, that is, how the goodness of God can be vindicated in the face of the various evils in the world to which innocent

people are subjected. The book scores three main points. First, while some suffering is brought upon ourselves through our own sin and foolishness, at least some, perhaps even most suffering is undeserved. Second, to argue that all suffering is somehow deserved misconstrues the character of the person who suffers unjustly as well as the character of God. Third, how God can be affirmed as good and just in the light of such innocent suffering is a mystery beyond our finite human comprehension.

Even God defends Job in the conversation with Satan. Job is described by the Creator as “a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil” (2:3; cf. 1:1). Pay attention to something important in this telling of the story. Satan is not described in this book as the diabolical opponent of God’s righteous purpose as he later appears in Jewish apocalyptic and New Testament writings. In this story Satan works for God! This provides us with a clue about the mystery of God’s relationship to the powers of evil: Satan cannot act at all without God’s permission.

But Satan is depicted, as he always is in the Bible, as smart and charming and convincing. In this theological debate, he raises the critical question of the book as a whole: “Does Job fear God for nothing?” (1:9). I mean, he is saying, everything is going Job’s way—he’s successful beyond measure, he has money and prestige and a wonderful family and a really good lifestyle. Who wouldn’t love God and be thankful under those circumstances?

What is the relationship between blessing and faith? Do you and I believe in order to be blessed? Or is faith an expression of gratitude because we have been blessed? What constitutes a blessing? And what happens to faith when those blessings disappear? Why is there suffering, and what effect does it have on our faith? Why do healthy people suddenly grow terminally ill? How can those who worked and saved for a lifetime lose everything to corporate evil? In a world of such abundance as ours, how can tens of thousands of people still starve to death every day?

In the preface to his play, “Doubt,” John Patrick Shanley, writes, “There’s a symptom apparent in America right now. It’s evident in political talk shows, in entertainment coverage, in artistic criticism of every kind, in religious discussion. We are living in a courtroom culture. We *were* living in a celebrity culture, but that’s dead. Now we’re only interested in celebrities if they’re in court. We are living in a culture of extreme advocacy, of confrontation, of judgment and of verdict. Discussion has given way to debate. Communication has become a contest of wills.”

We see the truth of Shanley’s analysis every day, don’t we? The health care debate rages with lies told about “death panels,” the cost of health care reform, the Public Option and Medicare. The very real threat of global warming doesn’t keep our attention because we live comfortable, air-conditioned, big car lives.

And yet. Just below the smooth shiny surface of our indifference, there moves a spiritual *ennui*, a wondering, something alien. It is called Doubt. “I know my answers to so many questions,” writes Shanley, “as do you. What was your father like? Do you believe in God? Who’s your best friend? What do you want?” We can make easy responses, but underneath them there is another You. And it has to deal with Doubt.

The play "Doubt" is set in a Catholic school in 1964 in the Bronx. It deals with the possibility of sexual abuse, lies, deceptions, power struggles and the doubts that fill our lives. The play begins with a priest, Father Flynn, in his late thirties, working class, who gives a sermon:

What do you do when you're not sure? That's the topic of my sermon today. You look for God's direction and can't find it. Last year when President Kennedy was assassinated, who among us did not experience the most profound disorientation. Despair. "What now? Which way? What do I say to my kids? What do I tell myself?" It was a time of people sitting together, bound together by a common feeling of hopelessness. But think of that! Your *bond* with your fellow beings was your *despair*. It was a public experience, shared by everyone in our society. It was awful, but we were in it together! How much worse is it then for the lone man, the lone woman, stricken by a private calamity? "No one knows I'm sick. No one knows I've lost my last real friend. No one knows I've done something wrong." Imagine the isolation. You see the world as through a window. On the one side of the glass: happy, untroubled people. On the other side you. Something has happened, you have to carry it and it's incommunicable. For those so afflicted, only God knows their pain. Their secret. The secret of their alienating sorrow. And when such a person, as they must, howls to the sky, to God: "Help me!" What if no answer comes? Silence.

I want to tell you a story. A cargo ship sank and all her crew was drowned. Only this one sailor survived. He made a raft of some spars and, being of a nautical discipline, turned his eyes to the Heavens and read the stars. He set a course for his home, and, exhausted, fell asleep. Clouds rolled in and blanketed the sky. For the next twenty nights, as he floated on the vast ocean, he could no longer see the stars. He thought he was on course but there was no way to be certain. As the days rolled on, and he wasted away with fevers, thirst and starvation, he began to have doubts. Had he set the course right? Was he still going on towards his home? Or was he horribly lost and doomed to a terrible death?

No way to know. The message of the constellations—had he imagined it because of his desperate circumstance? Or had he seen Truth once, and now had to hold on to it without further reassurance? That was his dilemma on a voyage without apparent end. There are those of you in church today who know exactly the crisis of faith I describe. I want to say to you: Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost, you are not alone. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The questions of Job's prologue are particularly troubling to a faith in our faithful obedience is offered in exchange for God's blessing. The Satan offers God the challenge of poking the proverbial stick in Job's spokes, betting that if God removes the hedge of Job's blessing—family, fortune, health—enough to send Job over the handlebars, Job will curse God. Why does Job believe, after all?

That's not a bad question for you and me. Why do we believe? Is faith a commodity? The prosperity preachers on TV will tell you that faith is, indeed, a commodity, and if you are good enough, God will give you everything you want.

In his *Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis records the advice of a senior devil, Screwtape, to his nephew Wormwood who is trying to undo the faith of a recently converted Christian. At one point, Screwtape writes, "Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do God's will, looks around the universe from which every trace of God seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken. And still obeys."

And still obeys. Is that the blessing?