

BEING JOB

There was a poor farmer named Pablo, and times were tough. He was a good man and a hard worker, yet it never seemed to rain enough, and his crops failed.

Then one year, his wife couldn't take it anymore and left him.

Alone and distraught, he kept going, but still his crops didn't grow.

The next year, it got even worse – his mule died.

Frustrated and broken, and on his knees in the dusty field, he looks up to the sky and cried Out, "God, why me? Why is everything going wrong?"

Suddenly, clouds gathered, the sky darkened and a loud voice was heard from the heavens,

"Pablo,..... I don't know what it is, but..... there's something about you that just ticks me off."

There may be times that we wonder what God has against us.

We may be inclined to think that if we try to be a better person, then God will bless us with relief and good fortune.

And, we may ask God to intervene, to send a lightening bolt or change our bad circumstances.

Many of us want to believe that God controls everything, and that assumption works when things are going well, yet presents problems when life has become ugly.

Sometimes our theology just doesn't work. It has gotten stale.

And, maybe our model for God doesn't fit any more.

There are patterns, assumptions and beliefs from the past, that worked in the past, yet don't seem to apply in the present anymore.

The Sadducees of Jesus' time, were people who were holding on to the old ways, but times had changed.

In comparison, the Pharisees had adjusted their religion to fit in better. There were many other religious subgroups, too andthere was Jesus.

Still, the Sadducees were the defenders of how things used to be, and that old way was how they hoped things would remain.

Change doesn't come easy, especially when it involves things that we hold dear, such as our belief system, our life style or the way we do church.

One radio talk show host, caustically defends the car culture, even though that mode of commuting can no longer be sustained.

Churches tend to be very reluctant to change or inappropriate in their lust to embrace pop culture in order to attract people.

As Mennonite Church Canada, we are trying to be relevant in our Global, mass communication world that jumps from buzz to buzz.

We have chosen to engage in the Public conversation by going public with our peace message, yet coming out of our old, silent comfort zone, has not be easy. We liked how things used to be. The past is familiar like an old song, and memories are nice to visit.

Yet, our model, our description of truth that was used 10, 20 or 30 years ago would not be understood as truth today.

After my father died, I read some of his old sermons. When he delivered them, they were likely valid and clearly understood. Yet, 40 years later, they didn't make much sense.

Another example: for a while, I resisted owning a cell phone. Now I depend on it, and get scolded if I forget to turn it on. Plus, without one, it would be almost impossible for me to talk to my grandson.

To be sure, it is tempting to want to live in a realm that we think we understand. We don't like it when the rules change /when life changes around us. We want to drive our cars in the city..... because.... well.... we know how to do that. It is familiar.... it's ours to own.

The American "Tea Party" offers no answers for today's big problems. Their emotionally charged pursuit is to turn the country into what to what they think the past was all about. Sadly, their assumption of the past is a myth and their tainted reality / model for culture just wouldn't work anyways. Things change. America has changed, and to keep up with the change, Americans would be prudent to dismantle their military and to learn Spanish.

To keep in step / to connect with people / to be in truth we must be relevant.

In order to really be alive and to faithfully engage in the world as Jesus did.....we must be relevant.

The Luke text presents an example of how the Sadducees tried to trap Jesus with an absurd example in order to prove that their old, limited view was correct.

They were the ultimate literalists, and as literalists often do, they distorted the passage they cited.

They presented a string of dead brothers, husbands to one widow... who then eventually died. They assumed they understood what the resurrection was all about, and so challenged Jesus to conclude that either that view was wrong or that there was bigamy in heaven.

I wonder how the women who were present felt about such complete disregard to the blight and suffering of being a widow?

Jesus countered by noting that in the resurrection with God women would no longer have to worry about being dependent on a man to survive. There would be no need for such mortal controls.

And then, citing Exodus 3, from their sacred Pentateuch, Jesus revealed that life continues with God. Jesus clarified this more by saying that God is not a God of what is dead—what is past and gone, but rather God is God of the living.... what is now! This declaration confirms the resurrection theology, and it challenges all to focus on being present with God – living in the now..... with God.

Even so, sometimes circumstances and events can challenge our belief that God is present in the moment, especially if our assumptions don't fit with what is going on.

Our assumptions can lead us to ask, “Why do bad things happen to good people.”

The story of Job is an extremely old narrative that wrestles with big theological assumptions. They are: God is all powerful; God is fair and just; God is good; God is in control, and God blesses those that are righteous and good.

The story is a wonderfully creative and fanciful narrative, with heavenly beings in a conference with God and God taking a dare from Satan.

Even though it’s an ancient story, the book of Job was in the last group to be canonized, and it was placed as the first book in the poetry collection.

Most of are familiar with the story of Job, how he was very affluent, which we assume is a blessing from God, because he was righteous and just in every way. He was faithful to God. He worshipped God, and even did sacrifices.... “just in case”.... just in case his children happen to slip up and need the insurance coverage.

When life is good, it is tempting to assume God is blessing us / that we deserve our lot in life. The affluent tend to think that they have “earned” their riches / that they are entitled to the good and easy life.

We might say that we reject the theology of prosperity—that God gives wealth to those who are righteous and good, yet..... when things turn south / when we are hit with hardships and calamities.... we often think or pray, “O God, I will be more faithful / I will do better.... if you take away my problems.” And, we may ponder, “I must have done something wrong to deserve my misfortune”.... or.... “Maybe God is teaching me a lesson.”

In our limited thinking, we are prone to think of life as a balance sheet, Such as, hard work equals good pay, devotion to God and faithful living will ensure God’s providence and protection from misfortune.

Yet, many in poverty work harder than Bay Street executives and bad things happen to good people.

Therefore, something in our assumptions about God is flawed.

God can’t be all of those assumptions, all powerful, fair and so forth... because that formula doesn’t hold true.

The Job story puts this dilemma out on the table to be experienced, and today’s passage is the climax/ the key lesson of the whole story.

Naively, we usually regard Job as a success story for restoring lost fortunes. When we are in the midst of a terrible series of events, we may consider Job, and declare..... “Well..... this is all a test.... I must be patient and everything will turn out in the end, as it did with Job.”

That interpretation limits the story of Job to words of encouragement, albeit a weird story about God toys with us, yet in the end God gives us what we want.

Any story is much more than it's conclusion. In fact, the conclusion of Job is really an epilogue, in essence saying.... "don't worry anymore about Job, it all turned out okay..... , BUT.... don't forget his experience.

Focussing on the result / the conclusion is missing the point.

Relating to Job, being JOB, is in the story, not the conclusion.

Job had the good life, and then he lost it all, including his health.

His friends rejected him and blamed him for his misfortune. Even his wife ridiculed him.

Job tries to defend himself. He firmly believes that he doesn't deserve all the terrible things that have happened to him.

At the beginning, we are told that God is holding back. That statement is significant... because it defies the assumption that God is in control.

The story says God was holding back because of a dare from Satan, but any sane reader knows better – such disregard would devalue our belief that God is fair and Good, and we dare not let go of those assumptions.

It doesn't make sense for God to be all our assumptions and also control events.

The only way the pieces fit together is in that opening clue: God self limits. God self limits so that choice is meaningful, so that we can choose God and love, and not be controlled by fear or fate.

I do believe that God is active in the world—touching and moving the hearts of people, and likely even persuading / caressing / slightly affecting the course of events.....

Yet, if God jumped in and controlled events.... it would bring about the end of time..... because, how could a fair and just God be selective?

It would have to be all..... or nothing, or God is not fair and just.

What I just said is one way to make the pieces fit—making sense of when bad things happening to good people or innocent people.

Another way is the deduction that it is all a mystery beyond understanding.

However,..... when we are overwhelmed with despair, torment or grief,... systematic theology really doesn't bring any comfort.

For whatever the reason, terrible thing can happen:

Divorce happens, cancer or accidents happen,... and loved ones may die way too young.

People lose their jobs, their investments, their homes, their safety and their health.

There could be abuse or persecution, and strangely with calamity, it seems friends drift away... and sometimes, in the midst of hardships, people will point their finger at you and declare that You are the problem.

That is what happened to Job, and maybe some of us can relate.

Job was ready to give up. He was ready to die, and all that he wanted was to have his name / his reputation cleared after he was gone.

He was at the end of his rope. He could not take any more of the abuse, and nothing made sense to him. Life was just not fair.

Yet, even though his assumptions of God no longer fit together, he refused to let go of God.

At his lowest point / at his nadir he held onto to God.

He accepted that God was God, and that God was in his life and death struggle.

He declared his only hope was in being in this struggle / living with God, period.

He invested in the relationship with God, and..... this key passage is in the middle of the story.

His relationship with God grew, and as with any relationship,... there were lots of questions, even a big argument, some humiliation and.... insight.

Job learned a lot about himself and about God. The relationship grew, and Job changed / his assumptions changed.

And, as readers,..... we are challenged to engage in the moment. We are given permission to protest / to scream out at God,.... and to be willing to change.

One of the reference books I used for research, rightly said that the important message in the Job story is Not a statement on theology, but rather a challenge for theology to be relevant,.... with the strong overtones to be respectful to each other....and to.... discover God in the moment.

Things change. Life is different that it used to be. There are new problems, new questions and new perceptions.

Reality is not what it was 5 years ago or 10, or 20.

The way we do church must also constantly be in change.

The way we define our beliefs and our passions must change.

The manner in which we interact with society must change,.... because if we do not remain relevant then we are proclaiming a dead religion, and our warm fuzzy old beliefs are meaningless in the present world.

In addition, following Christ demands that we engage with our culture / that we present a living, an understood and vibrant message... a message for now, not for yesterday.

God is with the living. God is in the struggle, and the struggle is NOW.

Moreover, being in the moment and being in relationship with God is our salvation.

It's the relationship. It's the love!..... that is what sustains us and nourishes the soul, nothing else.

A loving mother, can give medicine that may help a sick child, but it is the loving presence / the tender hugs that brings real comfort and the strength to go on.

A loving father's good advice and words of encouragement may help a child play better in a sport, but it is the presence of the father at the game that is truly meaningful and inspiring,.... especially in defeat.

Bad things will happen, even terrible things may come our way.
Life is changing around us, and change, especially to our belief system is very uncomfortable.
Today's passages challenge us to invite God into the moment / into our experiences..
We are prompted to be real and to be relevant, and that may include screaming in protest to God,.....
and receiving God response in return.

We are in relationship..... with creation, with each other and with God.
It is up to us to be alive / to nurture that relationship with vibrant honesty.

Regardless if the times are good or when all is falling down, be in the now / be present..... and invite God into the moment.

The living are with the living God.

The message in the hymn we are about to sing strives to present this "living and vibrant" relationship with God.

The label for God is from years gone by, so feel free to replace "Father's world" with Creator's world... and the word "his" with God's.

Let us be relevant and not afraid to hold onto God's love through all the changes and storms in life.

This is an invitation to be with the living God, now!