

Sermon Prepared by The Rev. Matt Rhodes for
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Forest, Virginia
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 3, 2021

(Job 1:1; 2:1-10)

From the very beginning of this morning's Old Testament passage, one thing is made abundantly clear to us. *Job ... was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.*¹ That important point is not just one to help set the back story for all that is to come, and it is not just offered as the opinion of those among humanity. We also learn it is a view shared and made clear by God: *You've heard about Job, of course, he says to his heavenly council; he is blameless and upright, one who fears God and turns away from evil.*

Anything in the Scriptures that is written or spoken twice is something to which we definitely need to pay attention. Notice that this is not the way Job acted in the *past*; it *was* and *is* the way he lives. He feared God and turned away from evil before, and he fears God and turns away from evil still. But like any good news/bad news situation, the other shoe is about to drop. We have learned about the strength of Job's faithfulness and character; now we are about to see it put to the test.

What is surprising is from where the challenge comes: a member of God's own group of heavenly advisers. "Satan" as referred to in this passage is not the opponent we traditionally think of in the New Testament; the original Hebrew phrase is translated as "the Satan" – "the adversary." In many respects, he is "a sort of prosecutor."² In that advisory, adversarial role he convinces God to allow him to prosecute the claim just made, that Job is faithful and without sin. Satan certainly goes into this with confidence, a certainty that Job will curse God under the right circumstances.

It does not start off well for Job. From the beginning, he is covered from head to toe with sores, sitting among the ashes. Whenever I read this verse, I think of the novel *The Great Gatsby* and the scene in which F. Scott Fitzgerald describes the so-called valley of the ashes: "[A] fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air."³ So among these ashes, among the landscape that I envision as similar to the grotesque gardens and ridges and hills of Fitzgerald's imagination, Job sits. He sits enduring his misery. He sits with his questions. He sits enduring the pleas of his wife to give in and curse God.

¹ Job 1:1 (NRSV).

² Paul E. Capetz, "Job 1:1; 2:1-10 - Theological Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 122.

³ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Kindle edition), p. 23.

As we see, Satan is wrong. Job does not curse God. Again, it was and is the way he lives. Because of his inner strength and his trust, he does not yield. In a moment when any other person might have collapsed from the stress and cried out to God “Why me?”, Job does not. He simply responds, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?”⁴

It is easy to express thanks when we are blessed, when we receive the rewards that God scatters into our lives like seeds upon rich soil. But to be thankful for the difficulties in life? How hard is it for any of us to get down on our knees and offer thanks for getting those things that we may think are mistakes, or punishment, or simply God being unfair when we have done nothing but be faithful to him? Would anyone suffering in mind, body or spirit instinctively want to express gratitude when most likely all we would want to do is what Job’s wife asks of him and curse God?

Occasionally in services of Morning Prayer worshipers will pray not the traditional “Great Thanksgiving” but rather “A General Thanksgiving” found further back in the prayer book. One line from this particular prayer draws particular appreciation and is a source of particular encouragement for some: *We thank you also for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone.*⁵ That is a very good reminder; even in the midst of the most difficult times of our lives, we should remember our dependence on God.

As part of that, however, and what I do not think we always remember is that God does not reinforce that thought by necessarily acting directly – or alone. Often God does his most powerful work through the lives of others. Many times those who are suffering look for God to intervene directly in their lives and may feel disappointed when he does not – only to discover that God did act in their lives. But the action was through a telephone call from a friend, or through an act of kindness by a family member.

God acts through those friends who help us with their support, their encouragement, and even their acting on our behalf. God acts through the warm greetings at the front door of this sacred place for those who may be feeling cold because of loneliness. God acts through the love and respect we show for one another. God acts through the prayers we offer for those who don’t have the strength to pray for themselves.

For Jay Gatsby, Nick Carraway was the friend who stood by him through both the joy of the Long Island summertime parties and the pain experienced when the world began falling down around him. Nick was steadfast in his defense of Gatsby and his refusal to turn his back on him. In the same way, you are a parish – you are

⁴ Job 2:10 (NRSV).

⁵ “A General Thanksgiving,” from *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 836.

a family – in which each of you is steadfast in your love and support of one another. Throughout it all, despite all of the trials he endured to test his faith, Job was the obedient servant who stood by God – steadfast in his faith and in his refusal to turn his back on the Lord.

Job was correct in his question: *Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?* For in both the good and the bad, we can see God at work in the world and in the lives of all members of this earthly family. In every one of those times, let us give thanks for all that God gives us.

Amen.