

God Knows de Trouble I See
By Rev. Michael Blackwood
The United Church of Christ
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Job 1:1 NRSV, 2:1-10 CEB

^{1:1} There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

^{2:1} One day the divine beings came to present themselves before the Lord. The Adversary also came among them to present himself before the Lord. ²The Lord said to the Adversary, “Where have you come from?”

The Adversary answered the Lord, “From wandering throughout the earth.”

³The Lord said to the Adversary, “Have you thought about my servant Job, for there is no one like him on earth, a man who is honest, who is of absolute integrity, who reveres God and avoids evil? He still holds on to his integrity, even though you incited me to ruin him for no reason.”

⁴The Adversary responded to the Lord, “Skin for skin—people will give up everything they have in exchange for their lives. ⁵But stretch out your hand and strike his bones and flesh. Then he will definitely curse you to your face.”

⁶The Lord answered the Adversary, “There he is—within your power; only preserve his life.”

⁷The Adversary departed from the Lord’s presence and struck Job with severe sores from the sole of his foot to the top of his head. ⁸Job took a piece of broken pottery to scratch himself and sat down on a mound of ashes. ⁹Job’s wife said to him, “Are you still clinging to your integrity? Curse ^[b] God, and die.”

¹⁰Job said to her, “You’re talking like a foolish woman. Will we receive good from God but not also receive bad?” In all this, Job didn’t sin with his lips.

JOB

Today begins 4-weeks of Job

- * this is a fable-like story, not historical/factual
 - > “There once was a man from the land of Uz – his name was Job”
 - > As one reads and studies the book of Job, this must be remembered. Too often, people get bogged down in the specific details of “the dialogue between God and Satan”
- * The adversary is NOT an actual person, but rather a role/title
 - > works FOR and ON BEHALF of God – is a servant of God’s
 - > what the adversary (Satan) does is what GOD instructs
- * Contextual point:

> Job is part of the post-Exilic Jewish community; representative of “the righteous” community who lost everything and suffered

* Ch 1 –

> 7 sons, 3 daughters, 7k sheep, 3k camels, 500 oxen, 500 donkeys, large staff of servants.

> God, the divine beings and the adversary were hanging around.

> Whacha doing, adversary?

> Just hanging around, roaming the earth

> Did you see Job? He’s righteous. Adores me. Avoids evil.

> Yeah, but he’s got it good. Take away everything and he won’t be righteous.

> Take your best shot! But you can’t HURT him.

> Animals stolen by marauders and/or killed by natural disasters

> Servants are killed as well

> Kids dead because of a tornado / bldg. collapse

> **Job loses everything - his family, possessions and his source of living, but never curses God**

* Ch 2 – a repeat of chapter 1, except now Job loses his health (but never curses God)

These opening chapters of Job welcome us into the deep and challenging dialogue about Theodicy, which is the overall theme and point of the story of Job.

> THEODICY:

HOW or WHY does a good God permit the manifestation of evil and the horrors of suffering?

The Cross & The Lynching Tree

As we begin reading selections of Job this month, this week we also began our book study on The Cross & The Lynching Tree.

In the first chapter of the book, we have been introduced to the “The cross and the lynching tree [as] the two most emotionally charged symbols in the history of the African American community. In this book, theologian James Cone explores these symbols and their interconnection in the history and souls of black folk. Both the cross and the lynching tree represent the worst in human beings and at the same time a thirst for life that refuses to let the worst determine our final meaning. While the lynching tree symbolized white power and black death, the cross symbolizes divine power and black life; God overcoming the power of sin and death. For African Americans, the image of Jesus, hung on a tree to die [and the experiences of Job’s suffering along with his faithfulness], powerfully grounded their faith that God was with them, even in the suffering of the lynching era.

After the Revolutionary War, Jim Crow laws and the westward movement that followed, “Lynching was [seen and accepted as] an extra-legal punishment sanctioned by the community....Lynching was not regarded as an evil thing but a necessity - the only way a community could protect itself from bad people out of reach of the law” (3-4).

In Job, the adversary was allowed to wreak unfettered havoc and torture upon Job.

In the lynching era of America (1880-1940), whites had an almost completely unrestrained power to rob, decimate and destroy *all* aspects of black American life. Black Americans existed (barely) under a constant threat of persecution from their white adversarial American peers.

In the south, “the claim that whites had the right to control the black population through lynching and other extra-legal forms of mob violence was grounded in the religious belief that America is a white nation called by God to bear witness to the superior of white over black” (7). This mentality raged in the rural south following the outlawing of slavery and especially following the racist propaganda film of 1915, *Birth of a Nation*, which was regarded by some as a religious experience and “‘it rendered lynching an efficient and honorable act of justice’ and served to help reunite the North and South as a white Christian nation, at the expense of African American lives and bodies” (5).

Blacks were at the mercy of whites for anything and everything;

Blacks were lynched for gambling, rape, incest, murder and robbery. AND ... also for such insignificant and legal things such as “being obnoxious,” “arguing with a white man,” and “violating a quarantine.” Imagine getting tracked down and violently tortured and murdered because you disagree with the current mask mandates and refuse to stay at home?

During the lynching era, even talking about their plight openly and honestly was challenging for black folks. Heaven forbid that a white man heard a black person complaining about their ill-treatment. Such a situation in itself could lead to lynching because self-defense and protest were just out of the question. Blacks were expected to suffer in silence. Their suffering was a spectacle that was announced, attended and celebrated by whites.

However...through what would become known as “the blues,” black Americans in the rural south sang about their lives, the conditions in which they were subjected and how they confronted them.

A lyric from bluesman, Robert Johnson’s song, *Hellhound on My Trail*:

“I got to keep movinnnnn,’ I got to keep movinnnnn,’ Blues fallin’ like hail and the day keeps on worryin’ me, there’s a hellhound on my trail.¹

The Blues became a modern-day Psalms; Poems, laments, thanksgivings and songs of both sorrow and joy, speaking of crying and moaning in one song and then about dancing and laughing in another. The juke joint on a Friday or Saturday night, was a welcomed respite, if only for a moment.

Speaking back to the tragedy of the lynching tree in the Blues song was one way for black folk to overcome its terror. “If the Blues offered an affirmation of humanity, religion offered a way for black people to find hope” (18). Like Job, black Southerners refused to succumb to the terrors of the lynching tree by blaspheming their God, instead turning the crucifixion cross into a symbol of salvation and hope.

“In the mystery of God’s revelation, black Christians believed that just knowing that Jesus went through an experience of suffering in a manner similar to theirs gave them faith that God was with them, even in suffering on lynching trees, just as God was present with Jesus in suffering on the cross” (21-22).

As Cone wrote his book, “[he] concluded that an immanent presence of a transcendent revelation, confirming for blacks that they were more than what whites said about them, gave them an inner spiritual strength to cope with anything that came their way” (xviii).

¹ Robert Johnson, “Hellhound on My Trail.” (1937), *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings*, Legacy, Columbia Records, Sony Music Entertainment, New York, 1990.

“That God could “make a way out of no way” in Jesus’ cross was truly absurd to the intellect, yet profoundly real in the souls of black folk. Enslaved blacks who first heard the gospel message seized on the power of the cross. ‘Christ crucified’ manifested God’s loving and liberating presence IN the contradictions of black life - that transcendent presence in the lives of black Christians that empowered them to believe that *ultimately*, in God’s eschatological future, they would not be defeated by the troubles of this world no matter how great and painful their suffering” (2).

As we read Job and as we study “The Cross and the Lynching Tree,” there are many difficult ideas for us to confront and discuss – about the history of lynching and white oppression in America, about the extent of human evil, as well as about the nature our Judeo-Christian God.

We are encountered with:

- * while some suffering is brought about by sin, sometimes the innocent suffer as well
- * suffering is NOT a sign of sin – sometimes there is a correlation, but it is not necessarily causal
- * *everyone* experiences suffering

Does any of this help us in our relationship with God?

Does any of this speak to our faith?

Reading the story of Job’s suffering and reading about the the real torture, suffering and human evil that black southerners endured (and many black Americans still experience today), could we ever imagine *NOT* cursing God? Of finding *HOPE* in crucifixion and/or lynching?

TODAY

In response to these questions, we must not forget that such evil and suffering as experienced by Job or blacks of the lynching era is not a thing of the past.

- * evils of war continue throughout the world
- * Horrors of climate change/planet destruction/etc. – this year 23 species declared extinct
- * Wickedness of racism that still plague our country

Evil human actions - Lynching is still happening...

- * James Byrd Jr, 49

6/7/98

Texas

Accepted a ride from three white men, one of whom knew Byrd from seeing him around town. Instead of taking Byrd home, the three men took Byrd to a remote county road out of town, beat him severely, spray-painted his face, urinated and defecated on him, and chained him by his ankles to their pickup truck before dragging him for about three miles. Byrd’s right arm and head were severed from his body during the event.

He was lynched for being black and accessible

- * James Craig Anderson, 47

6/26/2011

Mississippi

Trying to get into his car (lost his key)

Ten white men, admittedly out to “cause trouble for black people,” saw him “breaking into a car,” approached him, beat him, and then ran him over – killing him. Yelling racial slurs.

He was lynched for being black and accessible

* Ahmaud Arbery, 25

2/23/2020

Virginia

Out jogging

Three white men “pursued the man because he resembled a suspect in a string of local burglaries,” shot him with a shot gun.

No action, charges for 74 days – only because of video

He was lynched for being black and accessible

The human horrors of lynching are real and current. That’s why we read Job and why we read and study “The Cross and the Lynching Tree.”

A continual recognition of the history in America, in which white dominance and racism played a significant role, and still does, is necessary. Much of what we have and how we live is based in those vestiges. History cannot be erased...it **should not be**. It must be a source of learning – acknowledging the horrors but focusing on justice and the good work that has been done toward finding right relationships for all of God’s children and creation.

“We build on foundations we did not lay... We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant. We drink from wells we did not dig. We profit from persons we did not know. We are ever bound in community.” Reverend Peter Raible

Cone said, “if I have anything to say to the Christian community in America and around the world, it is rooted in the tragic and hopeful reality that sustains and empowers black people to resist the forces that seemed designed to destroy every ounce of dignity in their souls and bodies” (xv).

Suffering is real.

Faith is paramount.

Hope is never lost.

Action is necessary.

AMEN