

*“The Patience of Job”*

*Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12*

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*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

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Ah, the Yankees and the Orioles! Yankee fans here abound. Long-suffering Oriole fans like me, not so much! Would that all suffering be so benign! Both teams hope to do well.

One thing you can say about this season is that all of the action has been on the field. That wasn’t the case a decade ago when NY Yankees pitcher David Wells published his tell-all book Perfect I’m Not. The revelations earned Wells a \$100,000 fine from Yankee management and the cold shoulder from the late Yankees owner George Steinbrenner. And when he gave you the cold shoulder, it was a *very* cold shoulder.

Giving someone the cold shoulder. Bringing home the bacon. Stewing in your own juices. The patience of Job. What these idioms have in common is that their origin is often obscure or forgotten.

In the Middle Ages, giving someone a cold shoulder meant more than snubbing them in public. You’d give guests a cold shoulder of beef rather than a nice hot roast to give them the message they’d overstayed their welcome. Today, bringing home the bacon means coming home with a paycheck. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a church in Britain awarded cured bacon strips to couples who would swear, after one year of marriage, that they had never once regretted the decision. They literally brought bacon home! Today, stewing in your own juices means suffering the consequences of your behavior. But in the 13<sup>th</sup> century the phrase meant being burned at the stake, a horrible fate in which you’d literally simmer in your own bodily fluids.

Then there is “the Patience of Job.” Job’s story is that of a righteous man who—either despite or because of his moral and spiritual purity—is subjected to a devilish test in which property, children and health are lost; and his integrity and faithfulness to God are challenged.

The idea of Job’s patience is the opinion of the Biblical author of the Book of James (chapter 5, verse 11, King James’ Version): “*Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.*” Yet the word “patience” doesn’t appear anywhere in the book of Job.

No wonder! Conventional wisdom says that Job’s patience enabled him to suffer while taking the long view: despite huge losses, he would experience the compassion and mercy of God in patient waiting.

Oh really? Many adjectives describe Job—blameless, upright, faithful, long-suffering, steadfast, and honest—but “patient” is not one of them. He does not bear his affliction calmly: “*I loathe my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul*” (10:1). Cheerful patience? 17:1: “*My spirit is broken, my days are extinct, the grave is ready for me.*” Quiet certainty? “*God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; if only I could vanish in the darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!*” (23:16-17)

Honest, yes. Patient, no. This is not to devalue patience, but to say that Job’s message is really about the nature of suffering and faithfulness to God. (By the way, discovering and understanding this and other tensions within Bible passages is a great reason to participate in Bible study.)

Not all human suffering is deserved: it is not necessarily the divine cold shoulder for a Wellsian life of debauchery. Job is righteous and blameless yet loses his property to raiding invaders and his children to a

natural disaster. If this is not painful enough, he is covered with loathsome sores from head to foot. As the story unfolds beyond today's reading, even his friends wondered, "*What did he do to deserve this?*"

The answer is "*nothing.*" Jesus elsewhere reminds us that God "*sends the rain on the just and the unjust.*" (Matthew 5:45) In other passages—the man born blind in John 9, those killed when a tower fell—Jesus says that suffering is not always a corollary to bad behavior, and we should be careful not to assume it is.

Gerald Sittser was a history professor with a wonderful family. In one horrible moment his life changed forever when his wife, 4 year old daughter and his mother were killed by a drunk driver. Eight months later the driver was acquitted of vehicular manslaughter because the defense attorney was able to cast enough doubt on the testimony of several witnesses.

Sittser's rage gave way to discomfort in his assumption that he had a right to complete fairness in life. In his book *A Grace Disguised*\* he wrote "*Granted, I did not deserve to lose three members of my family. But then again, I am not sure I deserved to have them in the first place.*" His wife loved him through some very hard times. His mother lived well and served people until her life's end. His daughter sparked with enthusiasm. "*Perhaps I did not deserve their deaths,*" he concludes, "*but I did not deserve their presence in my life, either.*" Job makes the same point when he asks the question in today's reading, "*Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?*" (2:10)

Job's story also tells us that faithfulness to God is essential. Neither Job nor Gerald Sittser abandoned God in times of trial, at least not permanently. Nor, for that matter, did Chuck, the brother of my

\**A Grace Disguised* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1996)

friend Karen who years ago had terminal cancer. People would ask Chuck, “*Why you?*” and Chuck would reply “*Why not me?*” And consider the late Yankee Lou Gehrig, the “*Iron Horse,*” 2,130 consecutive games played, a record that stood for 56 years, Hall of Fame great, one of baseball’s greatest first basemen. At age 36 he was stricken with Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), which is often called Lou Gehrig's Disease. He could have been bitter. But consider his retirement speech in the old Yankee Stadium less than two years before his death:

"Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about the bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of this earth. I have been in ballparks for seventeen years and have never received anything but kindness and encouragement from you fans.

"Look at these grand men. Which of you wouldn't consider it the highlight of his career just to associate with them for even one day? Sure, I'm lucky. Who wouldn't consider it an honor to have known Jacob Ruppert? Also, the builder of baseball's greatest empire, Ed Barrow? To have spent six years with that wonderful little fellow, Miller Huggins? Then to have spent the next nine years with that outstanding leader, that smart student of psychology, the best manager in baseball today, Joe McCarthy? Sure, I'm lucky.

"When the New York Giants, a team you would give your right arm to beat, and vice versa, sends you a gift - that's something. When everybody down to the groundskeepers and those boys in white coats remember you with trophies - that's something. When you have a wonderful mother-in-law who takes sides with you in squabbles with her own daughter - that's something. When you have a father and a mother who work all their lives so you can have an education and build your body - it's a blessing. When you have a wife who has been a tower of strength and shown more courage than you dreamed existed - that's the finest I know.

"So I close in saying that I may have had a tough break, but I have an awful lot to live for."

And there’s more, when suffering comes around. “Kisses for Kate,” the pillow-making enterprise that filled Dodd Hall last Sunday afternoon, started when a family in grief after their young child’s death decided they’d do something for others. I couldn’t be with our youth and their adult guides long last Sunday—an afternoon of appointments filled my calendar—but for the short while I was there I could feel the

life-giving energy. Call it what you want, it was the Holy Spirit at work, bringing life and hope from the ashes of despair. Walking for Diabetes. Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. These and countless other examples of positive responses to life's adversities are rooted in a willingness to embrace life in all its complexity and, for people of faith, have an honest and intimate relationship with the God who gives us this life.

Can we yell and scream at God? You bet! Job shouts, "*I will not restrain my mouth, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.*" (7:11) Rejected by another in my early twenties, I can remember standing in my apartment, shaking my fist at the ceiling, tears rolling down my cheeks, shouting one word at God, "*Why?*" "Why" is not always a question but often a cry of pain.

But our pain must not cause us to let go of God. Job sure didn't. And staying connected with God meant staying connected with hope. Were all Job's questions answered? No. They seldom are. But Job moves to a place where he is at peace with God because God responds.

So for us. Our challenge is to accept both the bad and the good, to make something good out of even the bad, and to remain in close contact with God through every twist and turn of life. The Sacrament that Christians everywhere celebrate today draws us close to the One who gave body and blood for our redemption. As we sing the response to the benediction at the close of today's service, let it not be just words but truly a reminder of Jesus' promise:

*Fill my cup, Lord, I lift it up, Lord.  
Come and quench this thirsting of my soul.  
Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more;  
fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole.*