

August 5, 2018
Job 42:7-17

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“The Hope of Job”

Over the past six weeks we have been exploring themes of faith and suffering, the mystery of life, and protest and prayer in the Book of Job. We have been posing critical questions to this text, both about its portrayal of God and its portrayal of the power of human faith within the context of great suffering. One of the themes that has emerged as we have been reading through this text is the power of the witness of Job himself, the passion of his faith, the nature of his plea, and his protest before God. Last Sunday I suggested that we might read Job as an *intercessory* figure, a figure who *wrestled* with God, on our behalf. We have moved alongside Job in his loss and in his despair, in his unyielding determination, in his resoluteness and passion to seek and find his Lord through the battlefield of his life, when shots had come at him from every side. We have accompanied Job and his experiences of suffering and, with and alongside Job, we have been led to ask questions about the nature of God’s goodness and God’s justice. This morning we now consider the conclusion of this story, a conclusion that might strike us at first glance to be just a little too neat and tidy. It is a nice resolution to a rather dramatic book, is it not? A kind of fairy-tale ending. God has won the bet. Satan has lost. And Job has received everything back *two-fold*, double, his faith has been vindicated through long-suffering, and in return he has received wealth, a beautiful wife, new children, and together they all live happily ever-after.

What I would like for us to explore this morning is the possibility that there is more to this text than what we might initially see at first glance; I want us to entertain the possibility of fairy-tales. What I want to suggest to you this morning is that the Book of Job when read as a whole contains a message not of despair, but of *hope*. The text is almost *utopian*, even magical. That utopian message is this: that God is faithful and that the poor and those who suffer under the weight of the world might well indeed *inherit heaven and earth*. And perhaps the lesson to be drawn from this text is this: that we too are called to live our lives in hope, to wager on the possibility of the *impossible*, to *live as though this story were true: that God is faithful and that the poor and suffering will indeed inherit heaven and earth*.

Despite my graying hair, I am not very old; but it seems to me, and the old-timers in the room can correct me on this, but it seems to me that as one ages and as one learns about human history, and as one experiences the hardness of life in the world, it seems to be pretty common for one to lose confidence in the possibility that things can ever really change. Of course this is not always true. In fact, I know that this is something of a *truism*, but in my own experience I can see how this can take place. When I was young, the whole world seemed radically open to possibilities; I felt like I could do anything. I believed that if I had enough faith that I could fly, that magic was real. When I was a child I was totally convinced that I was spider-man. Like, no joke. I was spider-man. I used to wear my spiderman uniform all the time, seven days a week (which sadly, based on the photos that I now see, were simply pajamas!). Of course my mother, while very gracious and supportive of my career, did not think my line of work was really sustainable seven-days a week, day and night. The pajamas needed to be washed and spiderman, well, he wasn’t allowed to go to church. I fought with my mother about this. I fought and I fought and I fought. I

insisted that I *must* continue my work as spiderman on Sundays. Then, my mother, had an idea: “*you know,*” she said, “spiderman is also *Peter Parker!*” True. That was a good point; and it was hard to argue with it. So, that’s how my mother got me out of my spiderman pajamas. Of course, I reminded her that Peter Parker must always be *ready* to transform into spiderman. So, surely, I should be allowed to wear my uniform *underneath* my Sunday best!

When you are young, the whole world seems radically open. Life is full of abundant possibilities. The present and the future consists of dreams. But as one grows up, one learns some lessons, the wisdom of life: you’re not spiderman and there is nothing new under the sun. It becomes very difficult to see the world with fresh eyes and fresh possibilities. Over time, we come to view our youthful hopes as the stuff of fairy-tales, fantasy, unrealistic, utopian. The literal meaning of the word u-topia is, after all, “no place.” And we realize as we age and grow into the reality of the world that there is no such place; that we must learn to live within the limits of our given, sinful world. Our sense of what is possible is cut down to what we take to be reality. We can perhaps establish some semblance of hope, but hope, we think to ourselves, must be re-calibrated to fit what is realistic. This thought-process is what we might call “realism.” And realism, I have come to believe, is one hell of a drug. We might say that realism has the power to turn utopians into moderate Democrats, or worse. Realism has the power to turn Mennonites into Lutherans, or worse.

The conditions of our birth into the world and our growing up in the world tend to hide creative possibilities from us. When we enter our world, we find it already there, ready and solid, old and strong. Before we are, the world has already been. And because we were not there when it was created, we come to believe, that our society, the given social and political order, is what it is because God created it this way. In a sense we are educated *for* our given reality: that is, we are made to believe that human wholeness and well-being depends on our ability to fit within the given social order. Once we are conditioned to the given order in this way, however, it becomes very difficult to imagine how things could be otherwise, how freedom and justice and peace, and how our dreams, could become an actuality for us. Instead, we allow ourselves to be defined by institutions, programs, and political parties that were brought into being by people who are now gone. In a sense, as the Brazilian theologian, Rubem Alves once put it, “we define ourselves by the dead.”

Rarely, however, do we ask ourselves just where our understanding of reality comes from. The sociologist Karl Mannheim once said that what is to be regarded as utopian is always determined by the dominant group which is in full accord with the existing, established order. In other words, it tends to be those who have power and wealth and privilege who define for us what counts as “realistic” and what counts as unrealistic, or “utopian.” What is possible is always relative to the structures and systems that declare to us what is real and what is unreal or impossible. And why would one *rebel* against this? Is not rebellion childish, or worse, neurotic? Isn’t rebellion against realism like me *insisting that I am spiderman and insisting that I wear my spiderman pajamas everyday of the week?* Isn’t it better to simply adapt and adjust, to grow up, become an adult, re-calibrate our expectations, acquiesce to reality as we know it and to the brute facts of life. Don’t hope or ask for *too* much; don’t believe in utopian fairy-tales; join the established political party with the best chance of winning and moving the goalposts a little closer to what you desire. To do otherwise is to give up on things altogether, after all. Right?

The secret of realism, its seductive and hidden power, is that it tells us that happiness can be achieved without changing the structures of the world. It assumes that reality has already arrived and that there is no basic contradiction between *our dreams*, what we believe in our hearts to be true, and the present order of things. Realism interrupts our imagination for creative possibilities. Realism cuts in to inform us with a condescending smile: “Reality has no room for your hope for a world without war; no room for your hope for a world without racial injustice; no room for your hope for a world without disparities between the rich and the poor; no room for a world without prisons, police, a military, and protected borders; all of that is to be regarded as merely *utopian* dreaming. It’s like believing in magic or unicorns; it’s madness and foolishness. “Reality *determines* what is possible. The limits of what can be in the future are laid down by what is real now. Nothing that goes beyond these limits can ever exist!” (Alves, *Tomorrow’s Child*, 104). But when realism declares that our dreams are utopias, it unwittingly reveals the *narrow limits* of the reality in whose name it speaks.

And Jesus knew this, which is why he said that one must have faith like a child to hear and act on the good news of the kingdom of heaven.

What might it look like to open ourselves up again to our *dreams*? What might it look like to open ourselves up to a faith and way of life in the world that entertains the impossible and refuses to allow our perceptions about what is real, what is given, to determine what is possible in the present? What if we demanded the impossible? What if we lived our lives out of hope for things not yet seen and for things that have not yet come into being? What if we lived as if the Gospel proclamation were actually true: that the poor and suffering of this world will indeed *inherit heaven and earth*?

I want to close by telling you a story about a woman who, for me, is the embodiment of faith in the impossible. A woman who refused to allow her given reality to dictate her life. Her name is Nuria and she is part of our congregation. She is thirty-two years old, she has three beautiful children, and she is, from my perspective at least, the strongest woman in the whole world. Nuria knows what it means to *lose everything* she loves; she knows what it means to be dispossessed, broken and beaten down, cut off from life, from her family and from her home. Nuria knows what it means to suffer unjustly. Nuria knows what it means to *wrestle* with God. Nuria knows Job. Nuria *is* Job. And Nuria knows what it means to *risk an act of faith*, to leave her home in the middle of the night, in search of freedom for her and her family. Let me tell you: this, here, is a woman of *great faith*. And, my God, is she a living witness of *hope*. Along with her son, Daniel, full of courage and love and strength, and her daughter Vannia, full of grace and kindness, and her son Brian, the full of joy, Nuria set out on her journey for freedom. They began in Tegucigalpa, traveled through Guatemala, and in the middle of the night they crossed the river into Mexico to join 1500 people on the Refugee Caravan organized by a group called “Pueblo Sin Fronteras” (People without borders).

Nuria, and her cousin Edward who also made this difficult journey but alone, who is with us this morning, they did not have the privilege to *adjust* to their reality, to their world. Reality for them was simply permanent crisis. Out of the depths of a reality that had become unbearable, they forged a kind of utopian dream for freedom. And in the passion of faith and with an unbelievable love for life, they set out on a

totally impossible, totally crazy journey that would lead them through deserts and mountains; by bus, by foot, or riding on top of train cars, they set out across rivers and fields, all in order to escape the violent powers of death that they did not create and could not dismantle alone. They dreamed of freedom. Living and acting only by faith, they set out from everything familiar, left everything and everyone they had ever known and loved, and sought after the impossible. They were possessed by love and they lived out of the power of the resurrection. They lived by hope. They lived by faith. They lived by prayer.

For weeks on end, Nuria and I spoke nearly every day. She did not know me and I did not know her. When I took up the request to sponsor her I had no idea that I too would be drawn into participating in a utopian act of faith, hope, and love. The risks were not as serious for me, of course. For me, what was difficult was simply opening myself up to creative possibilities, ways of acting that broke through the implicit realism and resignation that had come to shape my everyday life. When the institutional support systems failed us, we pressed on for contact, for touch, for connection, for love. And in that connection was forged new dreams, a new kind of struggle for freedom, and a new kind of love that I have never known before, and never thought was possible. We like to tell people that together we found a way to defeat the designs of the most powerful person on earth. When he called for the National Guard to crush her and her family we decided to love each other instead. We felt like we were David fighting Goliath. Job against Satan and a God who would make deals with Satan. We pressed on, we acted out of a utopian longing. And when we met at the airport four weeks ago, we were both speechless, we embraced, and looked each other in the eyes; and we wept; we wept, because we knew that against all the powers of death and destruction and fear and military might, life and love and had won. And now our family has nearly doubled; we cook together, we eat together, we pray together, we dance together, we sing together, we play together, we dream together. And though our struggle continues, though Nuria is still in shackles, we know that there is absolutely nothing that can separate us from one another, no power whether in heaven or on earth can separate us from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus. We do not fear evil, for we have experienced a love and a life that can overcome the death-dealing realities of our world. And we know that we must live out of that utopian hope of the Book of Job, wagering on the possibility of the impossible, living as though this old story is true: that God is faithful and that the poor and suffering will indeed inherit heaven and earth.