

“Not the Whole Story”
Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:13-16
A sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
Sermon for Every Sunday, 2021

When my children were young enough to crawl onto my knee, the way we imagine the children in Mark’s gospel crawling onto Jesus’ knee, one of their favorite books to read was *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. Do you know that book? Almost everything you can imagine goes wrong for Alexander that particular day. He wakes up with gum stuck in his hair, slips and falls getting out of bed, is the only kid at the breakfast table without a prize in his cereal box. At school, the teacher does *NOT* appreciate Alexander’s drawing ((of an “invisible castle”)); she then faults him for singing too loudly, and for skipping 16 as he counts to 20. The dentist finds a cavity in Alexander’s tooth. The elevator door shuts hard on Alexander’s foot. His brother Anthony pushes Alexander into a mud puddle, and his brother Nick calls him a crybaby, then when Alexander punches Nick, his mom sees the punch, and she’s mad (of course) at Alexander. Everything is wrong all day: lima beans for dinner, soap in his eyes, a burned out night light, the cat choosing not to sleep with him.

This story about Alexander has come back to me many times in the last year and a half, when so much of what has happened has seemed no good and very bad. From the pandemic (and all the associated upheaval and death) to climate change (and all the associated upheaval and death) to the persistent problems of gun violence, poverty, addiction, rancorous politics. It’s been an awful season, in many ways. “I think I’ll move to Australia,” says Alexander, repeatedly throughout that book. He’s not the only one to whom an escape is looking pretty good.

The biblical character of Job has had an unbelievably horrible day – far worse than Alexander’s or mine or yours. We find him today on a pile of ashes, where Job has gone to mourn all he’s lost: oxen and donkeys captured by the Sabean army, sheep and servants consumed by lightning, camels carried off by Chaldean troops. Worst of all – unspeakably terrible – his sons and daughters are dead. They’d been feasting together in the eldest brother’s house, when the roof fell in and crushed them. And while Job is still reeling with this news, his own skin breaks out in painful, itchy sores.

Imagine for a moment that you don’t know the backstory – God’s wager with the Adversary the story calls Satan. Thinking just about what’s happened on the ground, this story is unbelievably unfair. At the time it was first told, folks trusted that good people would have good lives. God rewarded folks that way; everyone thought so. And in all the earth, there was no person better than Job. Job was righteous and faithful to God in the way that Snow White was kind and the fairest of them all. Job was perfect in his integrity. So what happens to him is, without question, undeserved and unjust.

But we *DO* know the backstory, which makes it even worse! Job is not just let down by God, he’s betrayed by God. God has brought Job to ruin *for NO REASON*, “other than to use him as a chip in a wager with the [Adversary].” Now seven sons and three daughters,

countless servants, and who-knows-how-many animals are dead “at God’s instigation and with God’s permission.” Samuel Balentine, who wrote a commentary on Job, calls this description of God (incited and manipulated by the Satan) *the most disturbing description in the whole Old Testament.*ⁱ

It’s a terrible, horrible story – without any of the humor of Alexander’s story, with no place to escape and no hope that tomorrow will be better. I’ll be honest. Part of me hates that this story is part of the scriptures. I don’t believe that God makes bets about the fate of God’s people. I am here today, because I believe in God’s goodness, because I believe that God blesses us, and has meant to bless all God made: from the beginning *and FOREVER*, God intends to keep blessing the world. It is *NO GOOD* to imagine God like this.

... At the same time, part of me is grateful for this story, and my friend Patrick Willson helped me to articulate why. He said this story puts words and images to the times no story makes sense of what we’re going through . . . when it isn’t just a day or a week that’s horrible, but *EVERYTHING* is bad, everything is *LOST* ... times you feel like you’re being thrown around, casually as a pair of dice, like there is some *secret cosmic bet* on what you do next and whether you’ll make it.

There is always someone feeling that way, says Archibald MacLeish in his play based on Job – a play called *J.B.* written in 1958. “There is always Someone playing Job,” MacLeish said.

There must be
Thousands . . .
Millions and millions of [humankind],
burned, crushed, broken, mutilated,
Slaughtered, and for what? . . .
For walking around in the world in the wrong
Skin, the wrong-shaped noses, eyelids:
Sleeping the wrong night in the wrong city
London, Dresden, Hiroshima . . . [these days, maybe Kabul or Port-au-Prince]
[We’ve seen Job] everywhere . . .
His children dead, his work for nothing,
Counting his losses, scraping his boils.ⁱⁱ

There is always Someone playing Job, feeling, like Job, that her fate is undeserved and unjust . . . then beginning to wonder: if fate is cruel, is God cruel, too?

Job will ask some hard questions in the chapters to come; that’s part of his faithfulness. He dares to lament and doubt and rage at God. But what remarkable and hopeful, I think, is that even as Job laments and rages, he sees that his story is not the whole story, but part of a larger and better story. It’s the story of our faith, too, where God is present and worth talking to. Where God cares for us. Where God is powerful, even in the midst of trouble, and at work for our good.

Thinking about people with faith like that got me to remembering Kelly Gissendaner. Do you remember her? She was executed in Georgia a few years ago, and sang “Amazing Grace,” while she was injected with the poison that killed her. Even if you believe in capital punishment, even though you must be appalled she conspired to take a life, you might agree her execution was particularly unfair. It was her lover who wielded the knife and committed the murder, not Kelly. He pled guilty and testified against her, so he got a life sentence; she got death row. While she was there, she was unquestionably rehabilitated. The guards in prison, her fellow inmates, her family – all kinds of people have testified to the way Kelly helped them, even saving their lives. Rehabilitation is the point of prison, right? Still, she was executed.

One of Kelly’s teachers in recent years said that Kelly’s version of hope was a “deep belief in the promises of God.” And she clung to that belief. That she could sing of God’s grace that had *saved her*, even as she was being killed . . . it reminds me of Job.

Thinking globally, too . . . a story told by one of our Presbyterian mission co-workers, Bob Rice, comes to mind. He attended the School of Reconciliation in Rwanda. There the victims and perpetrators of genocide dared to believe their story, horrible though it was, was not the whole story. They met together. Victims and perpetrators of genocide met together! They took to God their woundedness and pain. And they found in their worship an amazing kind of healing. They found freedom in their souls and found the grace to repent and forgive and work for reconciliation in their communities.

Bob Rice thought: my community in Congo is just as troubled and divided as this one. So he brought some 25 Congolese to Rwanda to learn how they did it – how they kept the horrible things they’d done and suffered from defining them, or defining God. It was such a transformative experience for this small group of Congolese, they took the practice home. They led their own School of Reconciliation for the pastors, elders, and deacons of their region. Folks from all four tribes in the area attended. It was powerful experience. One of them said it was like a hospital for his soul. Another said, “I came here with a wounded spirit. It was a long journey to come, but now I feel free.” They said that the teachings helped them to make sense of their tribal and national identities, and to see how those identities fit within the holy nation God’s creating, where all tribes and tongues will worship and serve as one people.

How’d they get there? With a Job-like willingness to trust that their story of injustice and pain and anger was not the whole story . . . but that God offered them a better story they could come to know and to tell.

World Communion Sunday began with such determination. It started in 1933, around the time that Hitler and Mussolini were proclaiming the Rome-Berlin Axis and Chiang Kai-shek declared war on Japan. The practice of World Wide Communion began then, and really caught on during the Second World War. A pastor who was part of it said, “We were trying to hold the world together. World Wide Communion symbolized the effort to hold things together, in a spiritual sense. It emphasized that we are one in the Spirit and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

It's a different world today . . . except that we're still fighting, still wounded, still struggling to hold together, still reading (and even experiencing) terrible, horrible stories of our own. May we, like Job, dare to trust that our stories are not the whole story, but that we, too, are part of the larger, better story of a God who is good, who means to give us good, and who can even *MAKE US GOOD*. May we tell that story together, and let it shape us into people who are free and whole and one in Jesus Christ.

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ⁱ Samuel Balentine, *Job*, Smyth & Helwys, Macon, GA, 2006, pp 59-60

ⁱⁱ as quoted by Ballentine