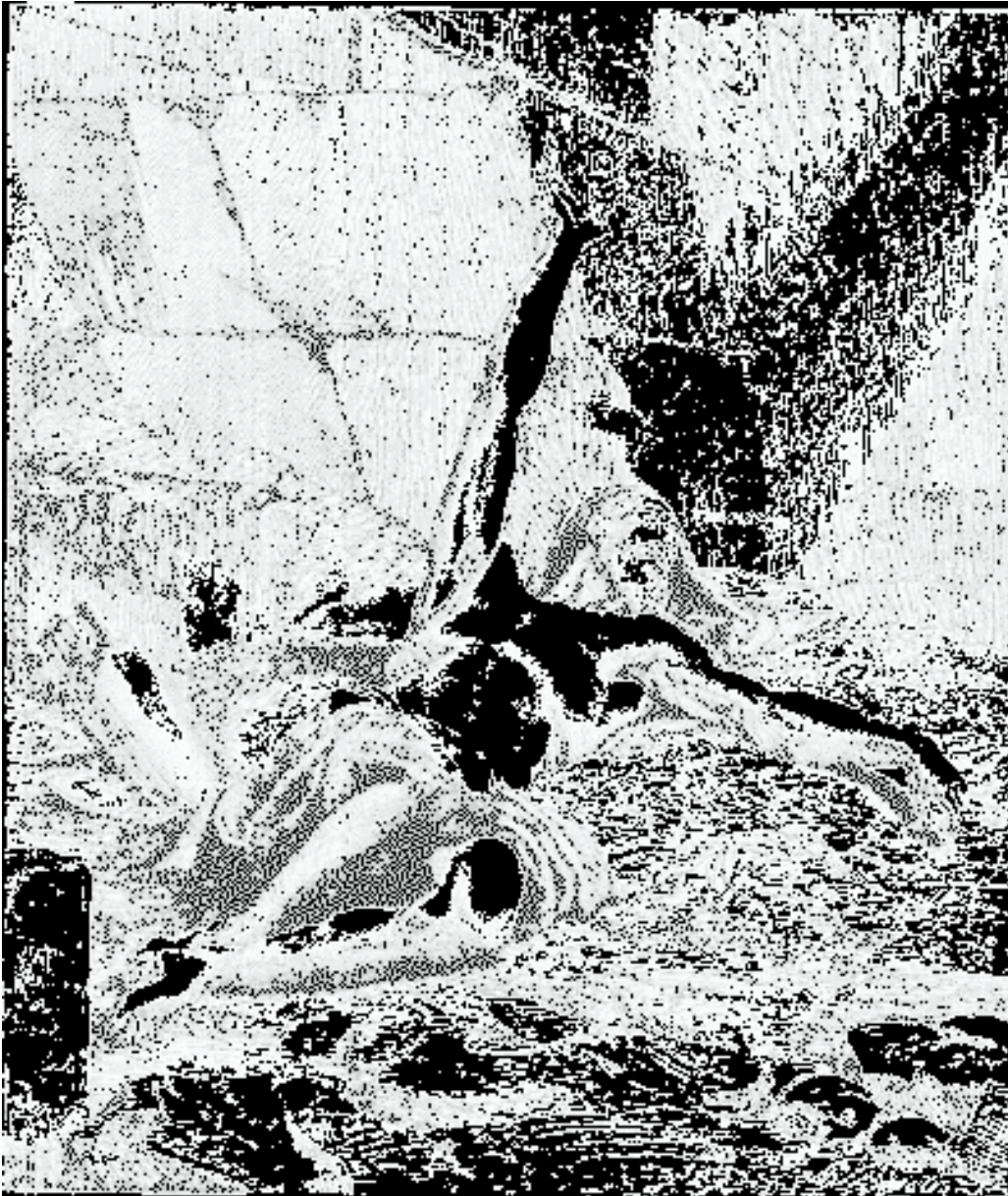


FAITH, PAIN, AND DIVINE RESPONSIBILITY

A Study of Job

2014 Lenten Education Series Instructors Guide



St. John's Episcopal Church

Charlotte, Michigan

The Rev. Fr. Richard C. Sauerzopf, Ph.D.

WEEK I DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Note: These discussions are guided. Since this is a class project, and not an actual product, I have included some annotations, here and there, which indicate the sort of direction which informs my questions, and which I might expect or hope to see develop in the group responses. These annotations are indented, and printed in italic letters, such as this present note is. As I am an experienced teacher, I know the dangers of over-leading discussions. Therefore, these annotations only indicate my thinking, and preliminary goals, and are notes to myself, and are not decisive answers which I intend to fish for aggressively to the detriment of an open, creative, flowing, and formative discussion. The same can be said of the questions themselves. I accept that despite my best efforts, I may not have anticipated all of those primary questions which might be most useful for my parishioners to ask, and to seek answers for, together.

- Who is Job? What kind of man is he?

“Blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from Evil.”

- Who, or what, might the heavenly beings be?

Relate to the first Creation myth.

- Who is Satan, as he is depicted here?

After some speculation, I might make a note of the different position Satan had in these scriptures from that ascribed to him today. Here, I would make the analogy of a public prosecutor, a district attorney, or “devil’s advocate.”

- What is the nature of God’s question of Satan regarding Job, and what purpose does it serve? Is God boasting?

The question, at a minimum, serves to certify that in God’s mind, Job is upright, blameless, et cetera, which is important for us to remember about Job as Job struggles with his challenges, and his “friends.”

- What does God mean when he refers to Job’s fear of God?

A concept which includes fidelity. It is not the same thing as terror. It is an important distinction to make, I think, since “fear of the Lord” is so frequently mistaken and abused in so many more evangelistic church communities today.

- What is Satan’s challenge to God? What fundamental (and theological) question are Satan and God concerned with here?

Is there such a thing as “disinterested” faith? Can human beings be faithful to God in such a manner as that faith is abstracted from reward and punishment?

- What does Satan do to Job, to his family, his wealth, and his body, and what does it mean?

Satan has divorced Job from his full participation in his community, and so has made of him a man who is effectively dead, but yet, still alive. I might note the significance of the effects of Satan's actions on Job's body, and how such bodily imperfections were signs of impurity. So not only has Satan cut Job off, he has also marked him as unclean, which must be especially horrifying for Job, the upright and blameless man. Does this action and its significance subvert traditional notions of purity? -- my speculative question...

- What can we make of Job's wife's challenge to Job to "curse God and die?"
- What can we make of the three friends' first response when they see Job, which is to sit with him in silence for some time?

Sometimes, in the wake of a shocking tragedy, this is the best we can do, at least to start with. His friends are right, it seems to me, here to resist the temptation to "make it better." In their silence, they offer to Job the one thing that they have to offer him, their empathetic presence, and in that, their acknowledgement of the gravity of the situation for Job.

- Who is responsible, ultimately, for Job's suffering? Is it really Satan, or is it in fact, God?

It's God, of course.

- Who is responsible, ultimately, for human suffering, period?

WEEK II DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Job is saying to God, basically, “I wish I were never born.”
- Is Job just being dramatic here, or does he really mean what he is saying?
- Why, from Job’s perspective, does death, or never having had life, seem preferable to life as he has come to know it?

Because at least the dead have peace. He is all but dead, but has no peace...

- What is Job’s position vis a vis life and death, as he finds himself?
- Why doesn’t Job try to justify himself?

He is, from the normal standpoint of things, justified already, and he knows it, and this fact is certified in the text. This is one instance where we need to take a passage in its larger narrative context. But also, he’s pissed off! Job is in no mood, it seems to me, to justify himself, or plead his case.

- Why doesn’t Job ask God for anything explicitly?
- What might Job ask God for?

Answers, an explanation, and acknowledgement of the pain he is experiencing.

- Is it wrong to complain to God?
- Can any good come from complaining to God?
- Does complaining to God show a lack of faith, or a lack of fidelity?

In these final questions, I think that it would be good if the emphasis of the conversation were to head towards two directions. First, that God can handle our complaints. Second, that if we mean to complain, we should be honest about it. Our entire relationship with God is not about behavior, or being nice, at all so much as it is about, well, having a relationship with God. If that relationship is to be close and sincere, then complaints must almost certainly arise in the process, as they do in the course of our lives with anybody with whom we live and about whom we care.

WEEK III DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Were there any specific passages in this week's readings which you found particularly insightful, challenging, inspiring, or troubling?
- Eliphaz makes the claim, in chapter four, that in God's care, the innocent do not perish. Is this really true?

Of course it isn't true! It is a simplistic idea that is comes with very hurtful implications if it is accepted as true.

- If it is true, then what can we say about young children who are abused, or even killed? Are they guilty? Do they deserve to be punished by God?
- Eliphaz also suggests that Job is suffering because he is being punished? Is this true?

Of course not. We know that God is not being punished, as the introductory narrative makes clear.

- What do you think of the concept of divine punishment?

I, personally, rather hope that God might punish, from time to time, insofar as it might be the best means at times to draw us towards God. But to interpret suffering as punishment as a matter of course is bad theology, and spiritually damaging.

- Can we ascribe our suffering to divine punishment?
- If we cannot, then how do we interpret or otherwise deal with our suffering?

Even if we conclude that our suffering is not caused by God directly, and intended for some particular purpose, that doesn't mean that we should not seek understanding and growth in it through and in God. This is a fundamental point, it is about the mystery of redemption, and it is one I would seek to make through the course of the seminar.

- How do Job's expressions in these passages differ from those of his lament in chapter three? Has he gone from bewailing his loss and expressing anger towards God to justifying himself before God? Look at chapter 27 especially.

I would argue that he has made such a transition, and I would further contend that it is a psychologically astute transition, which the author has crafted. Job has gone from shock and horror, to anger.

- If Job is justifying himself, it would seem to be a normal or understandable response. As understandable as it is, can we see problems with it?

It doesn't get us anywhere, for one thing. And it binds us in a futile project which distracts us or blinds us with regard to those broader perspectives and realities, in God, which are our only hope.

- Why do Job's friends pursue him? Why do they insist repeatedly that he listen to, and agree with, them? Shouldn't they just leave him alone?

Well, they are fictions serving a purpose of course, but in this, they remind us of those who seek affirmation of their thinking in the assent of others to their views. Each of his three friends seems to pass a point where their purpose might be to help Job, however problematically, and moves to a place where they are more concerned simply with convincing Job that they are right, and getting him to assent to their views. When they cross this point, they cannot possibly help Job, just as we cannot possibly help people by getting them to agree with us. We need to ask in our lives of mission and ministry when we consider our actions, who are we really trying to help therein?

- Have we seen instances of people working hard to get others to confirm their views by agreeing with them?
- Consider chapter 24. Is Job just concerned about himself? Or rather, is he concerned about the big question, why bad things happen to good people and vice versa, with regards to everybody else more generally?
- Does Job's struggle with his friends, and their arguments, and with God, in his efforts to make his case before the Lord, have any purpose?
- Do our struggles to understand pain, and our relationship with God therein, have any purpose?

WEEK III DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Look at chapter 32, verse 8. What is Elihu saying about wisdom here?
- Consider Elihu's first disputation in chapter 33. What does Elihu have to say about pain and suffering here as it relates to God's purposes?
- Can we find the purposes of God in suffering? And if so, what might those purposes be?
- Do they include:
- Direction?
- Purgation?
- A reorientation of our values, such that we might better appreciate the gifts of life which we do have?
- In chapter 35, Elihu makes some powerful claims about our own actions and their relationship to God. He argues, in effect, that our actions and inactions do not impact God, that we cannot hurt God, or help God by either our sins or our fidelity. What do you think of this position? Is God beyond being affected by our actions and inactions? And if so, then how and why might God be concerned about our fidelity, et cetera.
- In Elihu's fourth disputation, in chapter 36, he commends praise of God. Granted that we are commanded to offer God praise, we can still ask the question, what purpose does it serve? Does praise of God serve a purpose even when we are angry with God, like Job is?

WEEK V DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- God asks of Job a long series of questions beginning in verse 4 of chapter 38. What is the purpose, or what are the purposes, of these questions?

God is forcing Job to understand that in comparison to himself, and others who he knows, God is inexpressibly more majestic, powerful, and mysterious, so much so that Job cannot hope to understand God and God's reasoning and purposes in any particular way. This is true for us too. We can be sure that God's intentions towards us are good and loving, but can we comprehend all of the means by which God is good and loving towards us and all of creation?

It is critically important to note that in making these challenging questions, God is also showing enormous love and care for creation, even for the smallest bits, and apparently most trivial aspects of creation. God is not just interested in "the big picture" here, but in all of life and existence, down to its smallest details. This must include Job, and his problems, as it must include us, and ours. In this, in the face of so many challenges, we find a powerful affirmation of the care and compassion of God.

- God asks of Job in chapter 40, "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond." I think that this question is well put, as it seems it applies to most of us as well, if we are honest. What can we make of Job's response?

So many people dream of the day that they will be able to confront God, and ask of the Divine so many questions. But Job's response, which is to be speechless, is not more appropriate, so much as it is more natural. When we think that we will have these conversations with God, we do not account for the overwhelming, and absolutely terrifying, majesty of the Divine presence.

- We need to pay special attention to material in chapter 42. Here, in response to God, Job says "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you." What does Job mean by this?

Job is expressing the profound difference between understanding God intellectually, and knowing God, essentially. All of the discourses which Job is made to have with his friends and with Elihu are about the former, his direct experience of God, his theophany, is about the latter.

- What does this statement of Job tell us about the difference between understanding God and knowing God truly?

The latter, of course, is a gift of Grace from God, exclusively. No amount of human understanding can ever lead to it.

- If knowing God is a gift of grace, what can we do, if anything, to receive that gift? What does Job do, in the end, to receive that grace?

By the course of divine intervention, Job stops trying to justify himself. He has gone through a long and terrible struggle with pain, confusion, and anger. He has railed at God, and argued with his friends. But in the end, and by God's grace, he lets go, he gives up, and so offers to God the opportunity now to be present to him.

- More than anything else, going right back to Job's lament in chapter three, Job wanted to understand his fate through answers from God. Does God ever really answer Job's questions?

No, God doesn't. God does not offer self-justification to Job. To do so would be to fundamentally disturb the natural order of things.

- If God does not give Job what he asked for, what does God give to Job?

The experience of the Divine Presence, the greatest gift of all, a gift which in itself gives essential meaning to life of the sort which far transcends, and makes irrelevant, those more immediate questions and problems. Does this make our problems or questions irrelevant then? No it doesn't. I think that we have to ask them, and struggle through them, just as Job did. Job only comes to know God after he has struggled with God. It's the same for us, I think. Perhaps this fact offers some clue to the meaning of suffering. Or, perhaps it at least shows us how God can use suffering, and redeem it, for good purposes, in love. But our understanding of this fact does not solve our problems. We still, in the end, must struggle with pain, and with God.

- In the Epilogue, God is made to restore to Job his fortunes. What can we make of this? Does it even matter, much, in light of that greatest gift of Divine Presence, and knowledge, which God has given Job the grace to know?

Perhaps it does, really. I used to think that this section was nothing but a mediocre tack-on written by somebody who just could not bear to leave Job without those things which had so wrongfully been taken away from him. Furthermore, I thought that this addition was made more to protect the good name of God, than out of sympathy for Job, though both motivations make sense. However, I think that the passage does serve the purpose of reinforcing God's care for us, even in the littler things, or more worldly things, especially as those things are meaningful for us. God cares about those things because we care about them, and God cares most certainly for us. And so, I think that these last words represent rather a tender expression of Divine care, in the end, which assures us that we can address God with regard to the things of our life, as God is not too big, or too removed, to care for them through our care for them.

Is there anything particular that anyone would like to share about this course, and how it has gone, and what it