

SERMON TITLE: "Give Thanks Always"

TEXT: Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Hebrews 2:5-12

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

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This morning, we are beginning a four-week look at the story of Job.

Just as in September with the book of James, we will look at other passages along the way, but our primary focus will be on Job.

I have remarked to many people over the past week or so that I am well aware of the irony of a Thanksgiving sermon with Job as a text!

Job is, after all, a book about human suffering! Not exactly a cheery topic on a day we set aside to give thanks for the *good* things in our life.

And yet... The more time I spent with this passage and the story of Job in general this week, the more I became convinced that this was, in fact, a very appropriate Thanksgiving text.

We'll see if you agree in about 15-20 min. I am hopeful that a Thanksgiving sermon on suffering will not itself prove to be an instance of suffering to endure 😊.

There was a time when I had a bit of a fascination with the book of Job.

I was a budding philosopher (at least in my own mind) and was excitedly pursuing all kinds of difficult questions about life and faith and meaning and God and evil.

I took courses at university on "theodicy"—a fancy word that has to do with rational attempts to justify God in light of all the evil and suffering in the world.

I wrote essays about how evil could logically fit in a world presided over by a sovereign God.

In all of this wrestling and writing, the story of Job loomed large.

All kinds of interesting questions came out of this story for me.

- Why is there evil in the world?
- Why do the innocent suffer?
- If God knows everything, why didn't God just tell Satan that he had pressed the divine fast-forward button, and knew that Job would preserve his integrity?
- Why make Job go through all of that misery if God knew what he would do?

- Come to think of it, why does God ask Satan where he's been if God knows everything?
- Does Satan actually have the power to "incite" God against human beings?
- Why does God allow such a horrible experiment, anyway? This God doesn't look much like Jesus...

These are just a few of the questions that bubbled up as I read, and reread this magnificent book.

Initially, this was a kind of intellectual curiosity for me. I wanted to understand how it all fit together.

But as I'm sure you know, the older we get the more these questions move from the theoretical and abstract to the personal, the existential.

We're not just curious about the intellectual problem of suffering; we want to have help with **our own** suffering!

We're not just interested to figure out how a powerful and good God can allow bad things to happen to good people, we want to know what to say to **the people we love** in the midst of very real pain.

The longer I have lived with Job and the more I have thought about sin and suffering, and the life of faith, the more I have become convinced that Job really wasn't written to address the kind of abstract questions that I had enjoyed thinking about.

Job isn't a philosophy or a theology textbook. It is an ancient **story**—and a story meant to highlight universal human themes, including the theme of wisdom that we have been looking at over the last three weeks.

There are abstract questions behind the story of Job, certainly, but at the centre is the question of how a human being is to live in a world where we never know as much as we would like to know, and a world where, to borrow Jesus' words in Matthew 5, the sun rises and the rain falls on both the righteous and the unrighteous.

There are many questions about this book. Who wrote it? When did they write it? Was Job a real historical person or is this "just" a story meant to instruct? And where is Uz anyway?

Lots of questions, not many answers. The short answer to all of the above is: we don't know.

We don't know who wrote the book or when it was written. There are plenty of theories—some say it is the oldest book in the Bible, some say it was written much

later; some say the story of Job is historical, some say that its poetic nature (most of the book is poetry—some English translations bring this out better than others) indicates that it is a story meant to deal with universal themes.

Nobody really knows where Uz is (it may just mean “east”)—theories have ranged from Syria to Uzbekistan—but scholars are pretty sure it was not in Israel, and that Job was thus, not an Israelite.

We just don’t know much about the historical details of this book.

What about the story itself? Well, as we already heard in our reading starkest terms imaginable. Job loses *everything*—health, wealth, family, etc—as a result of a wager between God and the accuser over whether Job is only righteous because of his material blessings.

Our text this morning picked up the story a chapter in. We read of Job being afflicted with all kinds of sores, etc. In the previous chapter, Job had his first batch of losses—family, livestock, possessions, etc.

Our text concludes the “prologue.” Job has literally lost everything. The scene is set for the main part of the book, which is a series of extended dialogues between Job and three “friends” about why Job is suffering.

We will look at these further over the course of the next month.

But our passage this morning ends with Job, sitting on a pile of ashes scraping his itchy sores with a piece of pottery.

His wife tells him to curse God and die (one can only imagine how grief-stricken she would have been too—the losses were hers, too, not just Job’s!)

And then, Job utters these famous words:

Shall we receive good from the hand of God and not receive the bad (Job 2:10)?

It’s an interesting question, isn’t it?

Perhaps some of us would say, no! We’re happy to receive good from God and attribute it to him.

This is what we do on Thanksgiving—we give thanks for the blessings in our life. For the love of family and friends, for material blessings, for food and shelter, for health and strength, for meaningful work, for a free country in which to live, etc.

These are gifts from heaven, and we do well to attribute them to the hand of God.

But what about the bad?

What about the cancer? The lost job? The fractured relationship? The failed pregnancy? The depression? What about the countless tragedies that happen every day—to us, to those close to us, or even to perfect strangers?

If you're like me, you kind of chalk these things up to the "consequences of living in a fallen world" category.

But "**from God?**" Not really.

According to the story of Job, perhaps we ought to rethink this. Job invites us to consider *everything* that happens as in our lives under the sovereign hand of God.

Does this mean that we are to think of every specific instance of suffering as directly visited upon us from God?

I don't think so. I think it can be psychologically and spiritually crippling to think of our worst miseries as coming directly from the same God who is "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, rich in love" (Psalm 145:8-9)

There are some things that just happen in a broken world.

But I think the example of Job reminds us we do have to hold two important things together, even if it is difficult:

1. We don't know everything, and we certainly don't understand the meaning of suffering or the role God plays in bad things in our life. Like Job, we have no idea what is going on "behind the veil."
2. We are convinced that God is sovereign over his creation and that he is guiding the story of our world to a good future.

In other words, the story of Job is a story about trust.

One of the NT texts for this Sunday comes from the book of Hebrews. We didn't read it earlier, but I want to read a bit of it here:

- ⁶ But there is a place where someone has testified:
"What are mere mortals that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?
⁷ You made them a little lower than the angels;
you crowned them with glory and honor
⁸ and put everything under their feet."

In putting everything under them, God left nothing that is not subject to them. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them.⁹ But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

¹⁰ In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered.

One of the reasons we are drawn to Job is because we know that despite his immense suffering he is innocent. He has done nothing to deserve this treatment.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that our salvation is due to the one true innocent sufferer, Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, we are reminded that God thinks quite highly of us. Just a little lower than the angels. Crowned with glory and honor. Everything under our feet.

We are brought back to the language of Genesis where humanity was given dominion over all of creation—told to “be fruitful and multiply.” It is a vision of humanity being the kind of grateful stewards we were created to be.

Yet at *present*...

Well, at present everything’s messed up. Human beings have rejected God and abused our role as stewards. Human beings have introduced suffering into the world and have agonized about the meaning of our pain ever since.

As the writer of Hebrews says, “At present we do not see everything subject to them.” In other words, at present, things are not how they are supposed to be, how they were designed to be, how they will one day be. Not yet.

But.

We do see Jesus.

We do see the one who entered into our suffering, not as an explanation, not as the solution to a logical puzzle, not as the decoding of a philosophical riddle, not as the ultimate solution to the problem of why good people suffer and wicked people prosper, but as the true innocent sufferer, the lamb of God who takes away the sin and the suffering of his broken world.

We do see Jesus—who tasted pain and death to secure our peace.

We do see Jesus—who blazed the trail for us, bringing many sons and daughters to glory.

There are many things that we cannot understand, many things we cannot see. Nothing makes this plainer than the problem of pain and suffering.

But we do see Jesus.

And *because* we see Jesus, we can live with gratitude and thanksgiving during this in-between-time when we experience both the heights of joy and the depths of pain.

I want to read a few lines from a poem by Wendell Berry. It's called, "Manifesto: the Mad Farmer Liberation Front":

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it...

Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.
Ask the questions that have no answers...

Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.

I love that line: "Be joyful, though you have considered all the facts.

Perhaps we could also say, "be thankful, though you have considered all the facts.

To be a follower of Jesus in this world is to unashamedly be just a little ridiculous—to do things and to believe things that "don't compute," to be foolishly hopeful, to stubbornly persist in a life of thanksgiving, no matter what life throws our way.

Every decision to give thanks in an ambiguous world full of suffering is an eschatological act—based not on what *is* but on what we are convinced *will be*.

It is a bold claim that our spiritual temperature and devotion need not be mechanically tethered to the quality of our experiences at any given moment—that

we alone among God's creatures can transcend our circumstances and *choose* how we will live and whom we will love.

It is a declaration that regardless of what we might be facing at any given moment, that behind the veil, the Author of our story is good, trustworthy, and is guiding us to a future of hope and peace.

Like everything else worth having in our world, this kind of gratitude requires practice. It requires the patient, disciplined cultivation of habits of praise and thanks, even when circumstances do not automatically call these forth.

It requires practice. And more practice. It takes trying and failing and trying again.

And, like Job, it requires a trust that the character and purposes of God are bigger and more lasting and true than our suffering.

It requires a deep conviction that all suffering, no matter how severe, no matter how bleak and desperate and confusing, is not the final word on our story or on the story of our world.

There's a famous line in a famous hymn that many of us know very well. The hymn is called "This is My Father's World," but before it was a song, it was a poem written by American clergyman and writer Maltbie Babcock.

This is my Father's world. O let me ne'er forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.

God is the ruler yet. And because of this, we can be people of gratitude in all seasons.

Thanks, *thanks* be to God.

Amen.