

**Preacher:** Tim Hollenberg-Duffey

**Scripture:** Job 1 and 42

I want to begin my sermon with a video clip of an interview with Dr. Kate Bowler, who is a Church History Professor at Duke Divinity School. A few months ago, in the newsletter, I featured a book entitled “Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved” by Dr. Bowler, who wrote this book after being diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer in her 30’s when she was told there would be no cure. This interview was featured on PBS just this past week, and this clip recounts a snippet of her story as a contemporary Job.

Have you ever asked a question knowing that there would be no adequate answer? I’m always asking Anita questions knowing that I may not get an adequate answer. Although her squeaks and giggles are perfectly adequate, they are not informative. There are other moments in life, however, when we throw out a question to an audience and we are met with deaf ears and no reply, or maybe their reply beats around the bush and misses the point. But some questions, while they must be asked, will never have an adequate answer. To me this is the story of Job. While the texts from Job that I’ve selected cover the beginning and end of this large piece of wisdom literature, I don’t believe you can preach only a small portion of Job. You have to preach on the whole book. To preach only a portion would be to miss the largest themes.

I remember as a youth hearing a sermon on Job which focused on the importance of keeping your faith in God even when terrible things are happening in your life. While that certainly is a theme in the book, to stop at that theme misses the greater questions that are cast out to the wind. Those questions for which we desperately long for an answer are the ones that find none. Job is like the book an inquisitive kindergartner might write asking why, why, why, why...over and over again pushing his parents ever deeper until they do not know why any more.

But in order to understand the questions, allow me to walk you through a simple progression of the story. Job is a righteous man; no one can compare to Job. In a meeting of heavenly beings, Satan proposes to God a plan by which to test the desires of humankind. Is Job pious and righteous only because he is richly blessed? To test such a question, Job becomes the case study as he endures the loss of his property, his wealth, his family and his health. Despite it all, Job proclaims that the name of the Lord is just. Then begins the human debate. Job is joined by three friends in solidarity and silence for seven days, until Job breaks the silence. He declares that he is innocent and undeserving of such calamity and misfortune; therefore, the Lord must have made a mistake in his judgment. Job’s friends all, in turn, deride Job for claiming the Lord could make a judgment mistake; rather Job must have sinned against God to cause such catastrophe and he must repent. But Job repeatedly insists upon his sinlessness and demands an audience with God to justify and make right what has been done. When God does show up in a whirlwind, God rebukes all of the men for speaking into what they do not understand. God says nothing as to the purpose of human suffering but forgives Job and his friends, and God then restores Job’s fortunes.

What a story?! It’s a story where both God and humanity are asking questions of each other. God wants to know why people would choose to follow him. Humanity wants to know why bad things happen to good people or any people. So let’s look at both of these questions.

First let’s start with God’s question: Why do people follow me? Why would someone choose to be righteous and good? Satan seems to propose that people are only good because they think they’ll be rewarded for their behavior. This certainly bears some merit in the Bible.

Many weeks ago, in a sermon, I mentioned something called the Deuteronomic code which referred to a set of laws reiterated by Moses in Deuteronomy, that if the Israelites would but follow these laws, it would go well for them and they would inherit and prosper in the land that God had given them. The Deuteronomic code perpetuated the belief that people who follow the law would be blessed and that those who didn't follow the law would be cursed. It's a simple lesson that many of us continue to believe is true.... to some extent.

There is something to be said for the "you reap what you sow" argument. Many times, we do cause the trouble that we are in because we get angry and act out, because we push ourselves too far and overextend ourselves, because we neglect good communication and people in our lives. When these things happen, we do "dig our own hole," so to speak. And, of course, if such negative consequences follow bad behavior, then good rewards will follow good behavior—treat your friends and family well and you will have a happy clan. Live a good life and you will go to heaven.

Many of us believe in the Deuteronomic code of "do good and get good results, do bad and get bad results," but let's return to the original question. Why would someone choose to be righteous? Is our full motivation to be righteous, to be God followers revolving around the desire for God to bless us with happiness, good things, and heaven? I would hope not, because when you say it that way it sounds rather selfish.

Job is pointing to a greater motivation for be righteous, although the author of the book doesn't have a filled-out answer. He believes there exists a higher motivation to do good. Biblical Scholar James Crenshaw refers to this alternative motivation as disinterested righteousness—and I must admit this one took me a while to understand, so bear with me as I explain. Disinterested righteousness.<sup>1</sup> Think about a financial investment you might make—would you be willing to invest in something that gave you no interest? Would you get excited about putting your money into a CD with a zero-interest rate? That probably wouldn't be an account you'd want to go tell your friends about. Disinterested righteousness is the idea that you are willing to invest in righteousness, in being righteous, in following after God even though you are guaranteed no interest, no gains, no rewards. Essentially, will humanity be righteous for righteousness sake? Satan believes we cannot or we will not do that.

And, Satan might have a point. Think about the words to that popular Christmas song "Santa Claus is Coming to Town," which say "you better be good for goodness sake." At Christmas, we don't entice our children to be good for the mere sake of goodness. It's not for goodness sake at all—it's for the sake of all those presents.

The reality is that we ought not be reward driven when it comes to our faith. God wants more than that for Job and for us. The other reality is that our faith needs to be deeper than a reward-based faith because bad things do happen, calamities strike, illness plagues. This is life, which leads to our next unanswerable and complicated question—the one from the perspective of Job and humankind—why do bad things happen to good people or any people? Theologians have called this question one of theodicy which refers to justifying a good God in the face of evil.

Job's friends are convinced that the death of Job's family, the destruction of his property, and the illness that plagues him are all a punishment from God for something Job must have done. Do bad things happen to us because God is punishing us for something? Certainly th, is theme is perpetuated in the Old Testament as the kingdoms fall because of disobedience to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Crenshaw, James. Harper Collins Study Bible. "Job."

But certainly, this isn't always the way things work. Job's friends test reason after reason why God would do this to Job, but none are satisfactory for Job nor for God.

When God shows up, God doesn't provide the grand answer to life's largest quandary, God just reminds Job and his friends of his ultimate power, perspective, and concern. As you read the entire book of Job, you really are hoping for an answer, but the greatest lesson of the book of Job is that some things cannot be answered or understood by you and me. We can postulate and wonder and imagine. We can write sermons and study scripture, but still we won't find all the answers. And God says to us in Job, that's ok.

Kate Bowler in her interview said that people rushed in just like Job's friends to provide a theological rationale for her suffering, but they're wrong, probably. Some things go unanswered. Can we live in ambiguity and still believe unswervingly in God Almighty? I think so.

So, in the meantime, let's keep asking the tough questions, "Can we be motivated to righteousness for righteousness sake?" "Why do bad things happen to good people?" "Why must I suffer?" But let us not convince ourselves of a need to answer these questions perfectly. Some things reside in the mind of God. Maybe someday, we'll understand and yet then it won't matter so much.