"Deserting Just Desert" Garry Sparks, guest preacher for Wellington Avenue UCC, Chicago IL
Oct. 29, 2006, 21st Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 25B/OrdinaryB)
(also week of Reformation Sunday and All Saints/Souls Day)
Readings: Job 42:1-6, 10-17 and Mark 10:46-52

Sermon

Once in awhile, almost as the proof we need that God exists, the near impossible happens such as a truly deserving film actually winning the Academy Awards. The '92 Awards offered such near-proof with Clint Eastwood's Western *Unforgiven*. *Unforgiven* has one of the best movie lines of all time. It's at the end of the movie after Eastwood has shot his way into the town's saloon because they have, as he puts it, used his best friend, Morgan Freedman, "to decorate their store window." Gene Hackman, the town's sheriff, lies flat on his back wounded, unarmed, under Eastwood's double-barreled shot gun pleading: "I don't *deserve* this!" Eastwood's reply: " '*Deserve*' doesn't have anything to do with it."

Our scripture readings this morning offer us two portraits of undeserved suffering. We recall that at the beginning of the Book of Job both God and ha-Satan, the Adversary, acknowledge that Job is innocent, undeserving of the physical and emotional affliction he will receive. And in the Gospel of Mark, while little is actually said about the blind man Bartimae'us, the people in Jesus' time commonly misunderstood physical disabilities as punishment for sin – an ancient assumption that these verses in Mark aimed to correct. In addition, however, to this imbalance of knowing little about the blind man while, in contrast, we have 41 chapters to tell us about Job, the healing of the blind man appears, at least to me, graciously fitting while the "happily ever after" ending for Job leaves many of us very dissatisfied. It appears, instead, more like restitution by God rather than true restoration for what Job endured. "Sorry you lost all of your family, heirlooms, and the farm, Job, but here's another house, new wife, bigger set of kids, and car... we'll even through in that consolation prize of a bottle of turtle wax." And yet, despite these two imbalances, both of these readings share a set of very ambiguous words, from Job to God and from Jesus to the blind man, which mutually serve as a key to understanding both stories.

Many commentaries point out that the older version of Job's story actually appears to end with Job's speech in 42:1-6. The Hebrew poetry ends here to only feed into the prose of an epilogue or appendix. This "happily ever after" prose in 42:10-17 matches the "once upon a time" prose in the beginning of the story. However, aside from the poetry of an older version of Job nestled between the bookend-like prose at the beginning and the end, we encounter a notable distinction with our reading this morning and the book's prosaic preface.[1] Remember that at the beginning of the story God and ha-Satan enter into a wager where God *allows* the Adversary to inflict suffering upon Job; however, in verse 42:11 the evil that befell upon Job is attributed not to ha-Satan but directly to God. Job, throughout the story, proclaims his

[1] For a poetic reading of the Book of Job in English see Stephen Mitchell, *The Book of Job* (San Francisco, California: HarperCollins Publishes, 1992) or, for a more liberal version, Archibald MacLeish, *J.B.: A Play in Verse* (New York: New York, Samuel French, Inc., 1956).

innocence and demands justice, an accounting, not from ha-Satan but from God.[2] Notably, both Job and the narrator consistently refer to God by the sacred name for the God of justice which Judaism still considers too holy to pronounce and only writes it as YHWH (hw"Ühy) and referred to in our scripture as the title LORD or *Adonai*.

In recent years this way of speaking to and about God has been softened. A close friend of mine, in a heated discussion about liturgy, once asked me if I could define "worship" in only three words. I confessed that I couldn't. "Praising God together," she answered. "So, what about lament?" I replied. So much of our contemporary churches only emphasize the "praising" – praise music, praise services, PTL or "Praise the Lord" television network of Jim and Tammy Faye Baker, Jerry Falwell, and the like – that Job, in the end, is often read as having acted inappropriately. As if "he shouldn't have spoken to God that way." Having a number of friends who do hospital chaplaincy I was recently told a story about one particular chaplain who worked with a patient, a young girl, who eventually suffered a long and painful death. Upon her death the patient's mother headed to the hospital's meditative garden and proceeded to hurl rocks at the statue of the Virgin Mary. Naturally, security was called, but just before they could reach her the chaplain intervened. "Don't bother her," he told the security guards, "she's praying."

While many of us were beginning to read this liturgical year's cycle from Job a few weeks ago, the Jewish New Year celebrated its annual reading of Jonah. And Jonah, who demands to know from God why good things happen to bad people, ends his argument with God the same way that Job does, as he demands to know from God why bad things happen to good people. They both end by sitting on a pile of dust and ashes. Despite many of our current churches' tendencies, Job's gripe against God is just as legitimate as Jonah's as they address the same issue from opposite angles. And Job knows this, holds on to this for 41 chapters until he is transformed *from* this in our reading this morning.

This final sentence from Job in 42:6 is actually among the most debated in the Hebrew Bible with one commentary counting no less than five possible ways to interpret the original language.[3] In part, this has to do with the ambiguity as to whether Job states that he is *of* dust and ashes and thus admitting his human frailty as a child of Adam or *on* dust and ashes and in mourning like Jonah. However, even at the beginning of this same sentence, Job's words are more cryptic. Most of our translations will have him say that he despises himself and relents or retracts his demands for

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[2] "God" is *'elohim* (~yhi_l{a/), the God of mercy, while "Adonai," LORD, or YHWH (hw"Ühy) is the God of justice. R. Shemuel bar Nahman, *Genesis Rabba* XXX:3 in Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts* (Oxford, England: One World Publications, 1998), 148, n. 6:3.

[3] Carol A. Newsom, "The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible in Twelve Volumes, Volume Four* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996), 629.

justice before and from God.[4] However, this is not in the Hebrew text: it is not said to what both of these verbs – "despise" and "relent" – are referring. While many our translations have tried to fill in the gaps, Job, in fact, does not say what or who he despises and what or who he relents.[5]

Recall from your Lenten reading group a while ago that, according to Gustavo Gutiérrez's commentary *On Job*, this final speech marks Job's shift from speaking prophetically, from merely demanding justice, to speaking contemplatively. This climatic shift is unlocked in this cryptic sentence. Until this moment Job, in the previous 41 chapters, has been professing his innocence and demanding an explanation from God as to why, after he has done everything right, he should suffer. He has adhered to the ethics of Deuteronomy and, thus, should be reaping good and not evil. His complaint, until now, has been a legal one. He has, in essence, bought the *Prayer of Jabez*, not only to no avail but to his own detriment, and now he wants his money back. Job maintains his customer complaint even when God finally responds to him. However, God does not answer his questions about justice. Instead, God appears to beg them off by squishing Job rhetorically like a bug: "Where were you when I separated the waters and hammered out the firmament?"; "Do you share the pain of a doe when she looses her fawn?" In essence, God turns the questions back upon Job: "who do you think that you are?" What the hell kind of answer is that?

Gutiérrez is quick to point out the irony and sarcasm in God's speech to Job, however he appears to miss, I think, the reciprocated sarcasm on the part of Job in his reply to God here in 42. By hearing irony in Job's reply we can note better that Job still wants to hold God to account: "oh, I'm so sorry; you're so big and I'm so small what could I possibly know about promises kept and promises broken?" Job's questions still stand and he says so by not avoiding the unsaid but ensuring unpronounceable room for it. You see, on one hand, if Job surrenders his argument, even under divine intimidation, he sides with is friends who tried in previous chapters to convince him of his fault, his lack of innocence, and therefore any right to a claim for justice. He does *not*, in his last sentence, *recant* his claim nor *despise* himself. On the other hand, if he presses his grievance further, directly now before God's face, by denouncing God by name Job would follow his wife's advice to "just curse God and die." Instead, Job presses his case for justice before God but, rather than despising and recanting God by name, he does so by leaving the space blank, a void, a silence for the unspeakable, for the only thing that cannot be truly said, God's sacred name revealed

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[4] While I agree with most of Gutiérrez's take on the Book of Job I disagree with how he fills in these gaps even though his reasons are more justified based on the Hebrew text than those translations which merely insert the reflexive pronoun "myself." Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, Matthew J. O'Connell, trans. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 86-87.

[5] `p `rp,ae(w" rp"ï['-l[; yTim.x;_nIw> sa;äm.a, !Keâ-l[; WTT Job 42:6

to Moses on Mt. Sinai, the sacred personal name of that God of true justice – hence, the lack of an explicit reference after these two ambiguous verbs.

But more importantly, this second and final claim for justice in 42 where Job speaks contemplatively after God's reply marks a transformation from a mere legal demand for justice when, before, Job spoke only prophetically. Job's encounter with God forces him to see the cosmos anew. Job now understands, as Gutiérrez explains it, that his previous legal understanding of justice was limited to the world of causes and effects: you do good to receive good; you do evil, you suffer evil. But God has now shown Job that divine justice, even in the world of causes and effects, must emerge from and rest upon a wider scope of radical freedom and gracious love. Job moves beyond his mere customer complaint because he realizes that his claim is no longer about legal justice but justice and graciousness. God, has not apparently broken any promise or contract, but rather Job, like a parent in mourning throwing rocks at a holy image, can now recognize that God has broken Job's heart.

It is with this understanding of Job's final words that we can better hear Jesus' words to the blind man in Mark. Job is not, as many Christians would understand him, a type of suffering Christ. Instead, with us reading our Hebrew scripture into the gospels, we should understand the blind man as a type of Job, with Job most fully wrestling with one of humanity's most enduring gripes. And Job provides for us a description of the problem of wanting to see true justice and right relationships in obtuse terms of cause and effect, in terms of contractible obligation or "deserve." Jesus' words to the blind man, telling him that his "faith has made him well," announces that any proscription or solution must be based on faith. But "faith in or on what?" as the blind man's faith according to Jesus – now the final key to understanding these scriptures – appears as ambiguous as Job's final words, as it too leaves its reference silent.

Spelling out what Gutiérrez might mean by "contemplative" might help fill in this silence of faith "in what." A medieval contemplative monk once taught a four-stage path for the assent of the Christian's soul toward God.

1. In the first stage we love ourselves for the love and sake of ourselves, like the selfishness of children.

2. Next, as we learn of the world of causes and effects with the blessings and wrath of God, we shift to love God for the love and sake of ourselves, to reap reward and avoid punishment.
3. At the third stage, like activists who sacrifice their family lives for "the cause" or parents who live an unfilled personal lives because they give everything of themselves to their spouse and children, we try to love God for the love and sake of God, an attempt to completely empty out one's self to God.
4. However, even though many might mistakenly think that the third stage is the last and highest stage, in the fourth stage we, in fact, learn to love ourselves not for ourselves as in the first stage but for the love and sake of God; we love, trust, and have faith in ourselves as God loves, trusts, and has faith in us.[6] This is the faithful justice realized by a contemplative Job and the restorative faith seen in the blind man by Jesus.

As Christians we live in a world of causes and effects, of contractible relationships which we may enter into in good faith and leave in good faith. This may be as delightful as raising and weaning children or as painful as marriage and divorce, or calling and dismissing a minister. However, as people of God in particular, we are called to ensure that the waxing and waning of these relationships rest within a wider attitude of gracious love.

I would imagine that, regardless of where you emotionally are or what you think about the calling and dismissing of Clair, everyone invested in this congregation is probably saying the exact same thing. And even though I have never spoken to her either directly or indirectly, I would imagine she is saying the same thing to herself: "I didn't deserve this."

[6] Bernard of Clairvaux, "On Loving God," *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, G.R. Evans, trans. (New York, New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 173-205.

You spent over two years searching, discerning, envisioning, and praying all along the way, abiding by the process proscribed by the Illinois conference, and probably genuinely felt lead by the Spirit to call her as your pastor.
"We did everything right; we didn't deserve this."

And you have probably, understandably, lost more than a little faith, if not in God or in the conference or the process itself then, at the very least, in yourselves. And it is precisely this faith that you need to take the time and aim to restore before and as you begin to search and call a new minister. It is this faith that sustains you as contemplative activists and prophetic voices in Chicago irrespective of who you call and whether or not you get what you feel that you deserve. Because "deserve," well,...

Benediction
May God disturb you and trouble you;
May God set an impossible task before you and dare you to meet it.
May God give you strength to do your best; and then, but only then,
May God give you peace. Amen. (Anonymous)