

Honest to God

sermon digest

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Job 7:11-21; 2 Corinthians 1:3-5

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In 1963, about the time I was coming of age as a theology student, English Bishop John A. T. Robinson dropped a bomb on his Church with a controversial book *Honest to God*. Theology books are seldom bestsellers. The market is limited, the interest is usually low, reading requires some theological education, and the content is often predictable. Robinson's book was an exception. On the Sunday before the book was released the Bishop summed up his argument in a newspaper article "Our Image of God Must Go." The *Church Times* captured the spirit of the moment in the comment: "It is not every day that a bishop goes on public record as apparently denying almost every Christian doctrine of the Church in which he holds office." The Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey publicly criticized the Bishop of Woolwich on national television, and *Time* magazine seemed to take delight in observing that the paperback book had "stirred up the Church of England's loudest row in years." In the first three months after the book was published Robinson received over a thousand letters from the reading public.

Honest to God offered nothing new to theological insiders. The Bishop relied largely on the thought of Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, already in publication and under discussion. Tillich challenged our understanding of God by rejecting all absolute human knowledge. Tillich's God is always beyond God, more than we can possibly imagine God to be. From Hitler's prison Bonhoeffer had thoughts about a world of "religionless Christianity." His experience with a Church under Hitler's thumb called for a faith community beyond the establishment. Robinson had a knack for finding the spark of controversy that caught the attention of the secular public. The turbulent sixties provided a ripe audience. It was the age of protest. The Civil Rights Movement was at a peak. A controversial war was escalating in Vietnam. The first wave of the baby boom generation was entering adulthood. Rebellion against authority in families, religion, education, and politics was a growing reality in daily life. Robinson's somewhat irreverent statement about conventional views of God was controversial, but barely shocking to a world already burning with revolution.

Honesty before God flows from the human heart. Bishop Robinson's challenge to conventional views of God, including the Trinity, was guided by radical changes in world view that had come in the wake of modern science, psychology, philosophy, and history; but the call to be "honest to God" was as old as the Bible. The Book of Job also raised questions about the conventional understanding of God and was just as controversial in rebellion against authority. Job's prayer of protest against God "you watcher of humanity" was a direct confrontation with a religion of submission that called for swallowing one's own feelings and repeating the accepted language of theology without question. Somehow orthodox assumptions about God have always managed to overpower questions of the heart. When theology loses touch with the personal human center of religion and falls into a cold orthodoxy, it is no better than the impersonal Greek Stoicism of early Christian history. The Stoics could not abide the idea of a god of passion, god weakened by feelings for humanity, certainly not a god who could enter into human suffering and cry out from a cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The call for blind submission to authority has characterized tyranny. Benito Mussolini's Fascism demanded absolute submission. His soldiers wore the motto "I don't give a damn!" All human value and personal concern was subject to the higher cause of the State. Whatever else the USA may be, we are not a nation of submissive spirits required to accept blindly every war and every cause defined by political leaders. Since the Boston Tea Party, this revolutionary people have defied authority and demanded justice. The U.S. was intended to be an ongoing revolution. In like manner, Robert McAfee Brown defined the Protestant principle as a continuing reformation. The Reformation understanding of an imperfect Church required a continuation of reformation in every generation.

I would observe that most of us are, at one time or another, companions of Job, defiantly challenging authority and demanding an accounting for injustice in this life. We are never prisoners in the Garden of Eden. The Faith of Israel viewed the freedom of human rebellion as a God-given right, even at the risk of the Fall. We need to be warned: anger is a wonderful servant but a terrible master. When we learn to "be angry and sin not," we find the power of truth and justice that no one ever touches through blind submission to authority. Clothed in the redemptive grace of God and the righteous indignation of Christ, people of faith are called to heal on the Sabbath, to overturn the tables of money changers in our temples, and to demand from the cross an accounting from God.

The issue is not anger but honesty. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* registered the wisdom of Polonius, the counsel of a father to a son leaving on a journey: "This above all: to thine ownself be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man." Honesty, like the proverbial nature of charity, begins at home. Dishonesty at the core of our being leads to living a lie. Unless we allow our honest questions to rise to the surface, we are doomed to repeat all of the blunders of our historical forebears. At some point in history, some child of God must cry out, "The Emperor has no clothes!" Out of the child's honest heart comes a recovery of the truth.

Honesty before God defies injustice. Injustice is the object of Job's anger. Job's prayer appears to be a direct attack on

God. It is rather a challenge to Job's understanding of God. His anger, like mine and yours, is leveled at the injustice in life even though the complaint is raised in prayer.

I met Michael when I was in high school. He came out of military service and found a job in the local steel mill where my father was employed. Michael's wife left him, and he found himself in desperate need of community. He was a Yankee in the South. He was a Catholic in the Bible Belt. Michael joined our Baptist church and helped out with the youth. He talked a lot about his days in the Air Force as a world traveler. One day he was having dinner in a small restaurant. One of his buddies was spouting off about religion and denounced belief in any higher power and all respect for the church. About the time he reached the pinnacle of his tirade the candle burning on the table overheated the shield and shattered the glass. One of the guys said that he had never seen that happen before; he was out of there. I was easily impressed and took as gospel that anyone who openly questions God is going to get it. The broken glass was just a warning.

For the past fifty years I have been adding up my own experience with God, and I have come to a new conclusion. Lightening does not strike down people who question God. Far from punishing questions, the God of truth calls us to seek truth wherever it leads.

Elie Wiessel had seen his mother, his sister, and finally his father disappear into the gas chambers and ovens of Auschwitz. In the camp one evening the inmates gathered to celebrate Rosh Hashanah (the Day of Atonement) and the Jewish New Year. Wiessel was in his teens, but on this day he did not kneel. The human creature, outraged and humiliated beyond all that heart and spirit can imagine, defied a divinity who seemed blind and deaf. Wiessel recalled that he did not plea or lament: "I was the accuser, and God the accused. My eyes were open and I was alone—terribly alone in a world without God and without man. Without love or mercy. I had ceased to be anything but ashes, yet I felt myself to be stronger than the Almighty."

A strange thing happened through the valley of the shadow of honesty with God. Wiessel eventually came to a new faith in God—not the old god that demanded absolute conformity to the models of past submission, but the God of redemption who always exists beyond our simple reach.

We wait for lightening to strike and end Job's tale, but it never happens. Some folks would like to rip this book from their Bibles because of the blasphemy. Job may appear to be a quiet, submissive soul at the beginning of this trial, but he has his moments when he lashes out at the heavens and demands that God give an accounting for the injustice of his suffering. Yet, the heavens remain silent. Job's integrity will not allow submission to a faith that does not fit with his understanding of truth and justice, but he is left with his questions to slowly make his way through the mist of a confused world.

The surest sign of an empty life is indifference, not anger. Like children awakening in fear in the middle of the night, we cry out in the darkness and demand that God turn on the lights. Only infants who have been nurtured learn to cry for help with their physical needs and discomforts. We may cry out in anger, but it is the cry of faith that the Heavenly Parent Whom we cannot see is real and present. Anger and defiance is directed at a subject that is real. Only a fool would lash out at nothing or cry out to a vacuum.

The Book of Job is counted among the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. It is heavy with questions and light on answers. The story is episodic. It does not intend to present the whole picture, but it promises that if we continue the struggle to know the real God, we will not be disappointed. When Paul writes to the church in Corinth several centuries later, he does not promise that God will give an immediate answer to suffering. Paul speaks of the God of consolation, the God who shares our suffering in Christ, the God who is working out God's purpose even in times of distress.