

Happily Ever After

sermon digest

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Job 42; Revelation 21:1-7

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When Carolyn and I were approaching marriage, our discussion of children and parenting was about two real children involved in real life in what was to become our home. Some of our conversations revolved around the storybook psychology planted in popular children's literature. We concluded that our children did not need the message of "Hansel and Gretel" and the other stories that link "wicked" to "stepmother." We found that apparently innocent stories designed to entertain or to put children to sleep contain subtle messages about people and life that should not go unquestioned. Have you noticed that most children's stories end with some version of "they all lived happily ever after." Even with frightening characters like three bears, a bad wolf, a wicked witch, and a wicked stepmother, crises get resolved, life returns to normal, and in the end good characters live in heavenly bliss. Storybook philosophy is not pure fantasy. The stories do not attempt to avoid bad people, terrifying experiences, and painful moments; but they do come around to a hopeful expectation that good people live happily ever after. With apologies to Rabbi Kushner, bad things happen to good people, but in the end everything turns out OK.

Throughout life the storybook ending continues to entertain and suggest a positive outcome. Movies, TV episodes, and novels often project "happily ever after" endings on terrifying experiences in the real world, so we have come to expect happy endings on real life. Drama that leaves the characters hanging in limbo in unresolved crisis evokes discomfort and complaint. We are supposed to leave the theater feeling good with a hopeful outlook on life. The unorthodox playwright or novelist committed to realism dares to present life as a tragedy with the careful observation that life does not always have a happy ending. In real life, tragic events often do end in tragedy.

A likely theory about the Book of Job suggests that the story about Job, a good man who experienced devastating loss, may have had a foreign, perhaps Persian, origin. Because the story raised critical questions about the nature of God, it took on a new life in Hebrew literature. Discomfort with Job's cynical view of divine justice led to numerous additions to the story. Neither the lengthy theological debates of Job and his friends nor the concluding epiphany, the voice of God from the whirlwind, leave us with the desired storybook ending. So, we eventually get an epilogue. Like the prologue (chapters 1-2), the final verses (42:7-17) are prose, while the speeches are in verse. The epilogue suggests the message of the children's story, "they all [at least Job] lived happily ever after." The villains are punished; divine "wrath is kindled" against the friends. The hero is rewarded; the fortunes of Job are restored. Yet, we are left like Job to live out our lives in relative ignorance about the most critical issue at stake—the nature of God and the place and role of God in establishing justice. I suspect that had Job left us with simple answers that do not conform to our experience of life, the story would have little or no appeal today. Job dares to question God. He survives to accept God without answers, and in the end his integrity is rewarded.

The character of God is at stake. The child's prayer, "God is great; God is good," is the most basic and most profound statement that we can make about God. The child's prayer is also the philosopher's question. Following clear logic and the abundant evidence of human suffering, E. S. Brightman was among a class of philosophers who declared that you can't have it both ways. God cannot be both great and good, all powerful and all loving. Either God is able to relieve human suffering but won't, or God cares and can't. Given the choice, Brightman concluded that God must be limited in power and knowledge. Rabbi Kushner agrees: "God can't do everything." In *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, the chapter on God's limits focuses on the teachings of the Talmud about improper prayers, the sort of things we should not ask of God—like changing the rules of nature or doing for us what we are capable of doing for ourselves.

J. B., a "play in verse" by Archibald MacLeish, is cynical and irreverent set in the dark corner of a circus tent. The roles of God and Satan are played by Mr. Zuss and Nickles, two circus vendors, and sometimes the roles seem reversed. After the scene introducing *J. B.*, Mr. Zuss offers a Satanic quip, "Well, that's our pigeon." Zuss observes that someone is always playing Job in the world. Nickles, the Satan, seems almost compassionate in his response: "Millions and millions of mankind Burned, crushed, broken, mutilated, Slaughtered, and for what? For thinking! For walking round the world in the wrong skin, the wrong-shaped noses, eyelids: Sleeping the wrong night wrong city—London, Dresden, Hiroshima." He then chants the little jingle that defines our conflict, the dilemma of a sleepless humanity: "If God is God He is not good, If God is good He is not God."

J. B. was first produced in New York in 1958. The world was still emerging from World War II. The full impact of the Jewish Holocaust was just sinking in, and the U.S. Civil Rights Movement was under way. No one really mistook the uneasy truce in Korea for world peace. The cold war and the nuclear arms race were on, and another war in Southeast Asia was in the making. The hard realities of history raised serious questions about an evolutionary progress in human morality. It seems that every corner of the globe in every age is involved in meaningless, futile suffering. So, the children's storybook ending along with the children's prayer, "God is great; God is good," leaves us in a limbo of uncertainty. What about it? Does life ultimately end in justice? Is God both powerful and good?

Theology comes from below. Probably the most important discovery I have made about theology is that theology deals in human beliefs and opinions about God. One of my professors had the audacity actually to say, "there is no revealed theology." That means we do not stop with Helwys, Luther, Calvin, Pope Benedict XVI, or Billy Graham. We also cannot stop with Job, Moses, or Paul. People of God in every age have responded to God in life experience and left behind a legacy of their thought about God. In spite of our effort to enshrine, codify, and sanctify various theologies, we cannot escape the reality of our human condition. We mortals are fallible and limited. We make serious mistakes, gross errors. We are prone to do radically evil acts. We humans are, thus, the cause of much of the injustice in this world about which we complain and which we attribute to a passive, weak, or uncaring God.

Perhaps you remember the TV commercial of a few years back. The football game on the DVD player has come down to a deciding field goal. The ball is placed and kicked in the air on the way to the goal posts. Suddenly the guy watching the game pauses the action, runs out of the house, drives to the church, kneels at the altar and prays, makes the sign of the cross, then drives back home to hit the "play" button.

The ball goes through the uprights, the game is won, and a celebration ensues. I confess to getting a chuckle out of the scene, and I have asked myself why I am not offended with the ridiculous sacrilegious and distortion of prayer. The whole picture is less about prayer than it is about the way technology has changed our ways of thinking—even about prayer. I do not recall praying for God to change the course of a ball game. I doubt that God has a favorite in the Superbowl. Why then do I pray for and with people who are dealing with cancer?

If God is God, God is Good. I live by a theology, an assumption about the loving nature of God. I believe that God cares about human suffering. God cares that we are dust. I cannot really separate the goodness from the greatness of God. I have been Job. I have sat with Job in the ashes, and I have prayed with Job, and I have sometimes felt with Job abandoned to fate by a god who either does not care or cannot help. “If God is God,” I live by the faith assumption that the eternal God is greater than every passing crisis. So, I pray for change in the course of events that I perceive to be in contradiction to the loving nature of God.

The final chapter of Job may be a disconnected addition to the story, a fairytale ending where “they all lived happily ever after.” I see an essential correction to the course of faith. This story began with a capricious deity making deals in heaven with the Satan to test Job as one would kick the tires on a used car. The God we meet in the whirlwind is the God of creation, who transcends all human understanding including the crass picture of God in the first two chapters. Finally, it seems that Job bows before the revelation of God and acknowledges, God’s greatness, but translators are not sure whether he resigns to mortality or repents of being dust, determined, defiant to the end.

Extend the story of Job to the covers of our Bible, and you witness struggle and uncertainty between the creation in Genesis and the consummation in Revelation. From the beginning, God is the one who lays the foundations of the world. In the conclusion, with Christ on the cross, we hear the voice of Job again, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” The epilogue comes not at the resurrection and ascension of Christ, but in the eschatology, the end time, the conclusion of history. No claim is made for immediate justice in this life or for any particular person. Indeed, the rain falls on the just and unjust. But Revelation, the epilogue, declares a theology: God is good, and in the end God’s good and loving will is done.

“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”