

RESPONSIBLE CHOICES

by June Stephenson

Scripture: Job 23:1-9, 16-17 NRSV

When I was a child growing up in Adelaide, I attended Religious Instruction classes in Primary School, led by Anglican Nuns. As I didn't join this church until I was an adult, my Christian education was sporadic at best, but I remember thinking as a child around the age of 8, that God was either dead or had forgotten about humans. I had been taught about all these Biblical triumphs in the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures), and about Jesus' miracles in the New Testament, and I couldn't see them happening anywhere today, so God was apparently now out of the picture.

But I had some later encounters with the Divine that I could not rationalise away, and so began my lifelong quest to understand God and God's yearnings for creation, and engagement with humanity, and hopefully spiritual growth on my part.

I wandered in the wilderness until the age of 28, when I was introduced to the Community of Christ or the Saints Church as it was called in Australia at that time. I chose baptism and began my walk on the path of a disciple of Jesus Christ. I've continued to seek to understand the nature of God, and the Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible also explores this question, so that's where my story is going today.

Some of us are probably old enough to remember a book by Harold Kushner, published in 1981, called "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" – well, the Book of Job is the biblical equivalent of this text, because Job certainly had a lot of bad things happening to him! There was a phrase used in my childhood, about people who had the "patience of Job" – I don't think it's used much today, but it meant a person who could endure way beyond the normal amount of tedium or suffering in life.

Let me give you the short version of Job's story, because otherwise it's 42 chapters long.

Job was an Edomite, which means he came from the kingdom of Edom and so he would claim to be a descendant of Esau, the brother of Jacob, and sons of Abraham. Job is devout man, who loses almost everything he values in his life, including his children and his wealth, and to top it off, he suffers horrible skin diseases. He

gets to keep his wife and his life, but he knows he hasn't done anything wrong. Although he doesn't understand why this has happened to him, he doesn't lose his faith in God and eventually his wealth is restored plus some, and he has more children, as if that is supposed to make everything okay again.

Sandwiched in between the beginning and ending are some conversations with three so-called friends, who come to say he must have done something wrong, he must have sinned against God, for these tragedies to come upon him, and they each have long debates with Job.

Also contained in this large middle section is an even more insidious plot – there is a conversation between God and a figure in heaven called ha-Satan, who serves as "God's Private Investigator" or perhaps we might say a "Devil's Advocate" – just to clarify, this is not the Satan or Devil of later scriptures. I did contact our World Church Theologian in Residence, Tony Chvala-Smith for some advice on interpreting Job, to make sure I was on the right track here! (1)

In this imaginary conversation, God talks about how faithful Job is, and Satan wants to play a game to test Job. So this is where Job loses just about everything, and he really wonders what is the nature of God, because he can't understand what has happened to him.

How many of us have been there at some point in our journey – why is this happening to me? In the Book of Job (NRSV), he cries out in Chapter 23:8:

"If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him."

However, as I mentioned, Job holds strong to his faith in God, even though he cannot fathom any sense in what has happened, and so, Satan loses the bet, and God rewards Job.

What are we to make of this story? And remember it is a story, a folk tale, not historical fact.

Reading the Book of Job as if it was truly a conversation with God, with God choosing to torture Job, is choosing a belief that all Scripture is inerrant and historical fact. But remember it was humans, probably all men, who

transcribed the scriptures from oral stories, and who chose which writings would be included in these Sacred Texts.

Our church does not hold to a position of Scripture as inerrant – Joseph Smith III, church President at the time of our reorganisation, stated in 1894:

- We do not consider.... the Bible infallible.
- We do not consider anything that passes through human hands to be infallible.
- We do not believe in the plenary inspiration of the Bible; we hold that everything which passes through human hands is fallible.

So we do not consider the Book of Job to be factual. However, Job was written in a time when people believed that there were forces in play which could cause good or evil in their lives, and God rewarded righteous behaviour and punished sinful behaviour. When they were good, life was very, very good, and when they were bad, life was very, very bad.

Does this sound familiar? It's an early version of what some churches now preach as the "Prosperity Gospel" – you will be rewarded for what you give. Again, this is not our church's understanding of God's yearnings for creation.

Even for Job, this understanding of a God of reward or punishment didn't make sense, as he knew he hadn't sinned against God and he couldn't believe his friends' arguments that he must have done something very bad. Where was the justice in all of this?

Perhaps some of us can relate to this sense of "isolation and abandonment humans experience when a disaster overwhelms them. Where is God in the chaos?" (2). For people who want to read the Bible as literal history or fact, surely this must be distressing, potentially even leading to a crisis of faith.

So why put the Book of Job in the Bible – what does it say about the nature of God – as one who gives and then takes away without compassion? Job is classified as part of the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, because it considers the meaning of life. (3)

Many Jewish and Biblical scholars consider that it is there to challenge us to think about the nature of God, and to provoke debate, questioning this idea of reward and punishment. Tony Chvala-Smith wrote: Job "disputes the view that there must be some reason we can figure out why there is suffering and evil in the world. It rejects the ideas that there are neat tidy formulas to make sense of suffering. It also rejects the belief that God fits into our little theories, moral boxes and categories." (1)

We believe that we are called to listen and work with God in creating our future. As individuals, we are called to live with our church's Enduring Principle of responsible choices - making good choices in life not because we will be rewarded but because we want to bring about communities of joy, hope, love and peace. I love our church!

I think we've endured probably the most stressful time of my lifetime with COVID, and who knows what our children are dealing with now or into the future, as a result. As a child and then an adult, I spent a lot of time worrying about what disasters might happen. I remember thinking as a young mother that I should write a letter to my children, in case I died before they became adults.... After more life experience and learnings, I began to realise it was a waste of time and energy – most of what I worried

about didn't happen.

It's true that there is suffering in life: "Because we're human, we hurt. Because we're human, we have tears to cry. Because we're human, our hearts are broken. Because we're human, we understand that loss is a universal language. Everybody grieves. All of humanity grieves. All of us have setbacks, broken dreams. All of us have broken relationships or unrealized possibilities. All of us have bodies that just don't do what they used to do. Though grief is personal, every person grieves." [4]

But does worrying help? I've appreciated the work of Brené Brown on courage, vulnerability, shame and empathy. Brené is an American professor, social worker, lecturer, author, and podcast host. I've been listening to her workshop on The Power of Vulnerability. She talked about her research into what makes a whole-hearted person, and how these people survive trauma. She learnt that survivors said there was no way to prepare for the suffering they experienced – worrying about it beforehand would not have helped them cope any better. The grief had to be worked through. Remember the Bear Hunt song – "You can't go over it, you can't go under it, you can't go around it, you've got to go through it...." Grief has to be worked through. King Solomon is first credited in a Jewish folk tale with saying "This too shall pass" and sometimes that's all we can hang on to in difficult times.

Brené's research also showed that "Whole-hearted men and women are spiritual people". These are people who have "a deeply held belief that we are inextricably connected to each other by something greater than us." For her and probably for most of us, that is God. For me, God is the nurturer, the comforter, the encourager, the inspiring presence, and yes, like Job, I've had my times of questioning. Brené also mentioned cultivating gratitude and joy in our lives – do you have a gratitude practice – can you do this every day?

My Kenyan friend, Robert Wanga posted this quote on Facebook recently: "Those that died yesterday, had plans for this morning. And those who died this morning, had plans for tonight. Don't take life for granted. In the blink of an eye, everything can change. So forgive often and love with all your heart. You may never get to have that chance again."

Life is precious and God gives us the ability to make choices about whom or what we will serve. We are called to make responsible choices within the circumstances of our lives that support God's yearning for wholeness for all of humankind.

Remember the promise from Hebrews 13:5 in the New Testament: "I will never leave you or forsake you." Where is God – God is here, always. The call for each of us is to open our minds, our hearts, our ears, our whole being, to be awake and respond to the Spirit of our loving God. May it be so....

Resources:

- (1) Tony Chvala Smith – "Job: A Canonical Counterpoint to Wisdom Theology"
- (2) Worship Notes from Community of Christ
- (3) Fant, Musser and Reddish – "An Introduction to the Bible"
- (4) Rev Dr. Jacqui Lewis, "Good Grief," sermon at Middle Church, July 9, 2017.
- (5) Brené Brown – "The Power of Vulnerability"