

Blessed by God at All Times

(Job 1:1; 2:1-10)

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

From the very beginning of this morning's Old Testament passage, one thing is made abundantly clear to us. *Job ... was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.*¹ That important point is not just one to help set the back story for all that is to come, and it is not just offered as the opinion of those among humanity. We also learn it is a view shared and made clear by God: *You've heard about Job, of course, he says to his heavenly council; he is blameless and upright, one who fears God and turns away from evil.*

Anything in the Scriptures that is written or spoken twice is something to which we definitely need to pay attention. And notice that this is not the way Job acted in the past; it ***was*** and ***is*** the way he ***lives***. He feared God and turned away from evil before, and he fears God and turns away from evil still. But like any good news, bad news situation, the other shoe is about to drop. We have learned about the strength of Job's faithfulness and character; now we are about to see it put to the test.

What is surprising is from where the challenge comes: a member of God's own group of heavenly advisers. "Satan" as referred to in this passage is not the opponent we traditionally think of in the New Testament; the original Hebrew phrase is translated as "***the*** Satan" – "the adversary." In many respects, he is "a sort of prosecutor."² And in that advisory, adversarial role he convinces God to allow him to prosecute the claim just made, that Job is faithful and without sin. Satan certainly goes into this with confidence, a certainty that Job will curse God under the right circumstances.

It does not start off well for Job. From the beginning, he is covered from head to toe with sores, sitting among the ashes. Whenever I read this verse, I think of the novel *The Great Gatsby* and the scene in which F. Scott Fitzgerald describes the so-called valley of the ashes: "[A] fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air."³ So among these ashes, among the landscape that I envision as similar to the grotesque gardens and ridges

¹ Job 1:1 (NRSV).

² Paul E. Capetz, "Job 1:1; 2:1-10: Theological Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 122.

³ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Kindle edition), p. 23.

and hills of Fitzgerald's imagination, Job sits. He sits enduring his misery. He sits with his questions. And he sits enduring the pleas of his wife to give in and curse God.

As we see, Satan is wrong. Job does not curse God. In this passage, and throughout the remaining 40 chapters of this book, his faith and loyalty to God do not waver. Again, it was and is the way he lives. Because of his inner strength and his trust, he does not yield. In a moment when any other person might have collapsed from the stress and cried out to God "Why me?" Job does not. He simply responds, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?"⁴

It is easy to express thanks when we are blessed, when we receive the rewards that God scatters into our lives like seeds upon rich soil. But to be thankful for the difficulties in life? How difficult is it for any of us to get down on our knees and offer thanks for getting those things that we may think are mistakes, or punishment, or simply God being unfair when we have done nothing but be faithful to him? Would anyone suffering in mind, body or spirit instinctively want to express gratitude when most likely all we would want to do is what Job's wife asks of him and curse God?

Quite often in recent months during our services of Morning Prayer, we have prayed not the traditional Great Thanksgiving but rather A General Thanksgiving found further back in the prayer book. During our adult forum last week, one of those around the table said that they particularly appreciated one line from this particular prayer. *We thank you also for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone.*⁵ That is a very good reminder; even in the midst of the most difficult times of our lives, we should remember our dependence on God.

As part of that, however, and what I do not think we always remember is that God does not reinforce that thought by necessarily acting directly – or alone. Often God does his most powerful work through the lives of others. Many times those who are suffering look for God to intervene directly in their lives and may feel disappointed when he does not – only to discover that God did act in their lives. But the action was through a telephone call from a friend, or through an act of kindness by a family member.

God acts through those friends that drive each other to medical appointments and show love to the clients of the food pantry. God acts through the warm greetings at the front door of this sacred place for those who may be feeling cold because of loneliness. God acts through the love and respect you show for one another. God acts through the prayers you offer for those who do not have the strength to pray for themselves.

For Jay Gatsby, Nick Carraway was the friend who stood by him through both the joy of the Long Island summertime parties and the pain of the time when the world began falling down

⁴ Job 2:10 (NRSV).

⁵ "A General Thanksgiving," from *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 836.

around him. Nick was steadfast in his defense of Gatsby and his refusal to turn his back on him. In the same way, you are a parish – you are a family – in which each of you is steadfast in your love and support of one another. And throughout it all, despite all of the trials he endured to test his faith, Job was the obedient servant who stood by God – steadfast in his faith and in his refusal to turn his back on the Lord.

Job was correct in his question: *Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?* For in both the good and the bad, we can see God at work in the world and in the lives of all members of this earthly family. And in every one of those times, let us give thanks for **all** that God gives us.

Amen.