

## The Discomfort of Job Job 1:1, 2:1-10

The book of Job is not a comfortable book. For that matter, not many books of the Bible are. But the book of Job causes unease on several levels. Take today's passage for instance. We enter this well-known story at the point that Satan and God are "considering" Job for a second time. Here Satan is not the devil of later imagination, but rather the *hassatan*, the Accuser, a member of God's own heavenly court, charged with the task of seeking out people who are disloyal to God.<sup>1</sup> The story starts by taking up the question of the relationship between piety and blessing.<sup>2</sup> God points out Job as "blameless and upright," but Satan questions whether one who has been so blessed by God can really be said to *fear God*, in that biblical way of naming piety. So God gives Satan permission to test Job.

In the first round of testing, which comes just before our passage today, God gives Satan power over everything Job possesses. And in wave upon wave of unrelenting loss, Job discovers in the span of one afternoon that his 500 oxen and 500 donkeys have been stolen, his 7000 sheep killed by fire, his 3000 camels stolen, countless servants killed and finally that his ten children have died when their house collapses on them. Now in round two, he is attacked, flesh and bone.

Now, in another sermon, on another day, there would be much to explore about the wisdom this story might offer about how to understand blessing in connection to faith. But today, I want to stay with the discomfort. The fact that, forty chapters later, the end of the book of Job sees some apparent resolution to the question of Job's piety, along with 10 new replacement children, does not seem to *answer* the discomfort that has arisen for many readers, but rather to *deepen* it.

Old Testament scholar Carol Newsom, in her most recent book on Job, draws on work in narrative ethics to explore the ethical discomfort many of us have to the devastation that happens to Job and his family. Compelled by the work of Adam Zachary Newton and Emmanuel Levinas, Newsom explores the idea that "in the act of storytelling ... the character whose story is told confronts the reader as a 'face.' And a face always makes a claim upon another face."<sup>3</sup>

If there is some truth in that understanding of how we read, then perhaps our discomfort comes not only from the physical suffering Job endures, but from the very way in which Job is spoken about in this opening story, as someone who is thoroughly narrated. That is, Job is reduced to an example, an illustration used to answer a question about piety. He is no longer a person but an object, and there is already an element of injustice and violence done to him at this level that anticipates the later physical violence he will endure.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Newsom, Carol A. "The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 4, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 347.

<sup>2</sup> Newsom, Carol A. *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 55-56.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

In May of 2008, Trinity-St. Paul's was approached by the Anglican United Refugee Alliance and the Canadian Council for Refugees to consider submitting a refugee sponsorship application for a detainee at the U.S. Guantanamo Bay prison. An international effort has begun to bring resolution to the situation of a subgroup of detainees who have never been charged with a crime, and who cannot be returned to their home countries for fear of persecution. In February TSP moved forward in support of this work, joining four other congregations in Canada who are each sponsoring a detainee.

The man we are sponsoring is a Syrian Kurd named Maasoum Abdah Mouhammad, who goes by the nickname of Bilal. He has been imprisoned at Guantanamo without charge since 2002 and cannot return to Syria for fear of persecution. Bilal is a single man in his 30's.

We don't know how long it will take Citizenship and Immigration Canada to consider Bilal's application nor what his chances are of being accepted. But as we have heard from Bilal's U.S.-based lawyer, there have been incremental steps of progress and small seeds of hope in this active process. Just this summer, Bilal, with the help of his lawyer, completed and submitted his portion of the sponsorship application. It might seem like a routine step but in Bilal's case, it took two visits to Guantanamo by his lawyer, hours of translation assistance, and a great deal of trust on Bilal's part, to see that completed application through.

There are many unknowns and few guarantees in this process, yet we have chosen to act, not naively but relying on the good work of our partners, taking care to ask important questions, and trusting in the Spirit's guidance.

Much like with the Job story, we as a congregation, through this sponsorship invitation, have been confronted by a face who has made a claim on us. Our lives have been interrupted, perhaps discomforted, by a request, an encounter, and in that encounter we have been presented an ethical moment, perhaps even a holy moment. We have responded initially with our application to sponsor Bilal, and at some point down the road, we may be asked to respond in person, face to face, to receive him into our city, our community, our lives.

The person who has confronted us is one who has certainly experienced his share of objectification. In the hands of his captors, perhaps his guards, in the eyes of many in the world, his person has been *reduced* to a label of suspected terrorist. He has become an *example* of an enemy. We who may try to help have to be careful also not to fall into a similar temptation. Bilal cannot become for his advocates a narrated illustration, used to represent the injustice of an administration or the wrongness of a war. If so, then he becomes just as used by his advocates, as by his captors. Perhaps one of our greatest tasks, challenges and gifts we have to offer, if we get the chance, is to ensure that Bilal is able to reclaim his full personhood, with all the unknowns and surprises, delights and challenges that come with encountering another person face to face.

Such a return to personhood is, in fact, the way the *book of Job* seems to respond to this initial story. The book of Job is a crazy quilt of a book, with multiple genres butting up against, even interrupting, one another. The text we have read today is part of the "Once upon a time" folktale-like introduction to the book of Job. What follows are portions of Job as varied as a debate about the nature of world, a wisdom poem, a speech by Job, a piece of commentary possibly added by a later reader of the book who was eager

to insert his two cents, then a stunning and withering tirade by God, and finally a return to the first folktale where everything seems to happily, suspiciously, uneasily wrap up.

Imagine a book about the United States that began with the iconic, if much idealized, tale of the first Thanksgiving between pilgrims and Native Americans, then got interrupted by a script of the most recent presidential debates between Obama and McCain, which was then followed by the rap lyrics of Rage Against the Machine, and then concluded with several of Ansel Adams majestic and breathtaking photographs of American landscapes. The various parts of such a book, the diverse genres, would each say *something* about a country, but they might each answer different questions and in vastly different ways. What would such a book mean? And how would it mean?

Carol Newsom, drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, finds that something is revealed by holding genre beside genre, genre against genre, bringing them into conversation, dialogue, even argument, one with another, where the goal is not to harmonize the distinct voices but to pay attention to what can emerge in the creative spaces and tensions between such disparate kinds of language. Each genre reveals its own unique insights, but also obscures some things. And what can emerge in the space between them is a kind of truth.

Newsom believes that the very structure of the book of Job can be seen to advocate a dialogic understanding of truth – that is, the belief that “truth is born *between people* collectively searching for truth.”<sup>5</sup> It is a new understanding of truth for me, I must admit, but one I find very compelling. Newsom writes that in this understanding of truth as dialogue, it is critical that those engaged in the dialogue “[do] not have to give up holding passionately to claims of truth”<sup>6</sup> because the goal is not to arrive at some form of unified truth. Rather, one is invited to hold one’s own position with humility, “engaging in the discipline of seeing how one’s position appears from the perspective of another, listening to the objections that one must answer, seeing what one’s own position hides from itself.”<sup>7</sup>

So, in one example of how such a dialogue of genres works, the initial folktale we read today offers one understanding of the world, one moral imagination, as Carol Newsom would say. Its way of storytelling, which necessarily narrates and therefore objectifies Job, is responded to and critiqued by the genre that immediately follows it, which is a debate between Job and his three friends. In debating back and forth with his friends, Job’s own personhood is returned to him as he regains his own voice, unnarrated. And just as the debate has critiqued the folktale, so too will a poem enter the book to offer its own critique of the debate that has come before. And so on and so on. A truth is revealed by holding each of those pieces of the Job story apart, not trying to harmonize them, but letting them dialogue with and comment on one another.

One reason I find such an understanding of truth to be compelling is that it offers a model for how a congregation like TSP might continue on a journey such as we have begun with our sponsorship of Bilal. This journey has so far raised all sorts of good and important questions and concerns, maybe only some of which have been voiced. Each of us comes to it with our own reservations and fears, commitments and passions, which have to do with such sweeping and foundational questions as the nature of security within

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 86, 25. (Newsom quoting Bakhtin)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

our community and within the world, the nature of welcome and sanctuary, the place of military engagement, to name just a few.

These varied voices are not only held amongst us at TSP, but within the wider community we have engaged by our involvement in this work. How do we bring these varied voices into dialogue, not for the purpose of convincing each other toward a single truth but trusting that when passionately held yet distinct views of the world are brought into dialogue, truth will be revealed in what emerges between us?

It is an invitation for us as people of faith to hold our truths and speak our truths, with conviction, with humility, trusting that in the conversation, perhaps in surprising ways, God will reveal Godself in that space between us. And our welcome of Bilal will be all the richer for it.

Thanks be to God.

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