

## **“THE MANLY ART OF SURRENDER”**

**a sermon by Preston Moore  
Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists  
Williamsburg, VA  
June 17, 2007**

### **CALL TO WORSHIP**

I went by Home Depot yesterday, and of course they had various special displays for Father’s Day. In terms of visual impact, nothing could come close to the stainless steel barbecue grills, Vulcan symbols of the father as renderer of meat. They have evolved along a path parallel to that of the auto industry: all of them look like SUVs. Or maybe more aptly, like jet fighter planes, lined up at Langley, waiting for the call to scramble, to roar down the runway and head off to some foreign place where meat is waiting to be rendered.

What do words like intimacy and surrender mean to fathers in our culture? Are these things expected of them? Open to them? Should they be? Do these questions have something to do with religion? Come, let us question ourselves once again. Come, let us worship together.

### **SERMON**

My familiarity with the Bible was pretty limited before I went to seminary. I hadn’t heard of the Book of Job. I had heard of a person called Job, because as a child I often heard my father say: “Preston, you would try the patience of Job!”

The Book of Job begins “Once upon a time, in the land of Uz, there was a man named Job.” We’re told Job is “blameless and upright,” one who “turned away from evil.” He is the richest man in the East, owning 7000 sheep, 3000 camels, and much more. Job also has ten children. He worries that they might have sinned, and performs rituals of purification on their behalf.

God asks one of his lieutenants what he thinks of this virtuous, pious man. “You’ve put a fence around your man Job,” the lieutenant says, “protecting him from misfortune. Let me inside that fence, and I’ll show you a different person. Let me strike at his possessions, and I bet he’ll curse and reject you.”

God accepts this “bet.” Immediately, everything Job has is destroyed, including his children. Told of these calamities, Job arises without a word and performs the ancient rituals of grief, tearing his robe and shaving his head. He falls to the ground in a posture of worship.

God feels he has won, but the lieutenant won’t concede. “Let me under his skin,” he says, “and Job will curse you yet.” God allows this, and the lieutenant afflicts Job with boils and sores.

Job sits down on an ash heap, scraping away his dead skin. His wife ridicules his perseverance, urging him to go ahead and curse God and be struck down. He rebukes her, saying that they must take the bad with the good; but a big storm is brewing inside Job.

Three friends visit him. They are shocked to hear Job declare himself better off dead. The friends lecture him, saying that God rewards goodness and punishes evil; that Job's misfortune shows he must have sinned; that Job must get right with God. Job angrily asserts his innocence, demolishing his friends' logic and complaining bitterly about God. To the friends, the idea that Job might actually be right is terrifying. Job has got to be guilty. Otherwise humanity is living between the thumb and forefinger of a God who judges and punishes but has no sense of justice.

God then suddenly appears to Job and his friends, out of a whirlwind. He offers no explanation for Job's misfortune, but leads him on a spectacular tour of the wonders of creation – wild blessings utterly unearned by Job or anyone else -- beyond all reckonings of justice.

“Do you tell the antelope to calve,” God says to Job, “or ease her when she is in labor? Do you count the months of her fullness and know when her time has come? She kneels; she tightens her womb; she pants, she presses, gives birth. Her little ones grow up; they leave and never return.”

“Do you give the war horse his strength?” he asks rhetorically. “Do you clothe his neck with terror? Do you make him leap like a locust, snort like a blast of thunder? He paws and champs at the bit; he exults as he charges into battle. He laughs at the sight of danger; he does not wince from the sword or the arrows nipping at his ears. With his hooves he swallows the ground; he quivers at the sound of the trumpet. When the trumpet calls, he says ‘Ah!’ From far off he smells the battle, the thunder of the captains and the shouting.”

Job experiences these wonders for what they really are: revelations, emanations from mystery, from a source beyond human reason. He withdraws his complaints, saying that before he had only heard of God but now sees God with his own eyes.

The story of Job is a four thousand year old myth. Some people say a myth is a story that isn't true, but actually, myths are stories that are so true that they happen over and over again.

Job starts out viewing his relationship with God as essentially an employment contract. God is the boss. If the humans comply with the contract, they are rewarded. If they fail, they are punished. This relationship is secure, predictable. Job has honored the contract. He feels punished when he should be rewarded. He is angry, confused, and very afraid.

Job longs to take God to court. “If only I knew where to meet him and could find my way to his court,” Job frets. “I would argue my case before him; I would counter all his arguments and disprove his accusations.” But he doubts God's fairness, so he reaches even higher. “I have a witness in Heaven,” he declares. “May he judge between mortal and God as he would between man and neighbor.” So this God is no grander than a local magistrate.

In their long argument, Job and his friends keep both God and themselves woefully small. It is the smallness of manipulative relationships based on power, rather than the spaciousness of intimate relationships based on love. This lack of intimacy pervades Job's life: it is missing

(1) with his wife, to whom he offers no consolation when their children are killed, and who urged him to end his misery and hers by cursing God and dying;

(2) with his children, whom he treats like domestic animals to be kept in line, lest they sin;

(3) with his friends, with whom he exchanges bitter denunciations;

(4) with the community, who stand outside the fence around his insulated life;

(5) with nature, which he either fences out when it is wild or fences in when it could be domesticated;

(6) with himself, in his focus on outward accomplishment rather than inward reflection; and

(7) with God, in his treatment of God as a mere employer.

When God appears to Job, it is not to offer him reasons for his woes. Rather, it is to invite him into an utterly new kind of relationship – one of love, based on intimacy. For literary purposes, God is personified so that we can hear him speak. In real life, there is no personified God, but there is the world, and it is wondrous. God is reflected to us in the world we wake up to every morning, and the wonder of it includes ALL of it – beauty and ugliness, creation and destruction, sadness and bliss, wounding and healing.

In offering the world to Job, God is speaking the language of a lover: “take me as I am,” he asks of Job, “– good and bad, impossible to disassemble, surprising, and all wrapped up in ultimate mystery.” God is ready to take Job on the same unconditional basis: just as he is – spiritually way off course, deeply stuck in vanity and egotism, foolishly trying to litigate with God. And God's invitation is repeated open-endedly, from moment to moment, one opportunity after another to begin again in love.

In bringing forth this new relationship between God and humans, the Book of Job represented a great leap forward in religion. It answered, thunderously, the question, can humans be good without divine rewards and punishments? “Good” meaning not merely behaving well, but rather, being loving, compassionate, awake, authentic, and open to the largest possible life. The answer given is, not only is this possible without divine rewards and punishments, in fact it can only happen if we abandon the whole idea of such rewards and punishments, which are inimical to all of these goodnesses.

So. God is a lover, not a mere judge. Sounds good, but we shouldn't gloss over the disturbance caused by this great leap forward. The poet who wrote Job did not make God a lover

in the image of movies and romance magazines. His God is reflected to us in vivid, arresting verses painting a world that is both delicately beautiful and red in tooth and claw. A world of warhorses and calving antelopes, of soft rain and torrential floods -- not a retouched photograph conveying somebody's idyllic fantasies. This is an unpredictable world, and thus an unpredictable God, that does not operate according to human principles of justice and morality.

Peter Mayer, a marvelous songwriter who has performed in this sanctuary, has a song about the hazards of our longing for a God to be our predictable "rock of ages." "God is a river," goes the song, "not just a stone. God is a wild and raging rapids, and a slow meandering flow. God is a river, swimmer, so let go." An invitation to surrender.

But what are we frail mortals to hang onto in this swift current? Where is the hope? I say the Book of Job offers the hope of aliveness and joy. This hope is stirred in the human heart because in that place there lives a beast, as the poet Mary Oliver says, "shouting that the earth is exactly what it wanted" – the redness in tooth and claw as well as the delicate beauty.

That animal part of us, unencumbered by our wall of rationalizations, can sense a divine message in the vividness of the world. In the scent of aftershave, artifact of a departed father, sweet and painful even a year later, as recalled by Mary DeLara in her poem this morning; in the "filtered light, splinters of fire, strains of music heard then lost then heard again," as Denise Levertov said in one of this morning's readings. In such things, the animal part of us feels the presence of the God from whom we are cut off, receives God's intimation of goodness "through the slit where the barrier doesn't quite touch ground."

When we read the message of the world the way Job shows us, life is transformed. As Stephen Mitchell has said of this message,

"It is as if the world we perceive through our senses, that whole gorgeous and terrible pageant, were the breath-thin surface of a bubble, and everything else, inside and outside, is pure radiance. Both suffering and joy come then like a brief reflection, and death like a pin."

Now, this may sound fine when the river you're swimming in feels like radiance, but what about when it feels like you're drowning in the dark? There are people sitting here this morning who are in such a place – people who are facing great trials, have suffered great pain and loss, grievous wounds. If you are one of those people, the hopeful message of this ancient poem is even more precious.

Job's experience shows us that when your friends come to console you in your grief – and friends would mean, or should mean, the rest of us here this morning -- they had better at least have their own hope with them, rather than quivering in fear. They had better not stand there and try to tell you it's not so bad; or that you must have done something to deserve your calamity; or that the one you love who is now dead is in a better place. They had better pull their own hair out with you and say yes, this is an agonizing loss, a terrible wound. We will support you in being with the wound and loss in a way that will make hope visible again, make audible once more the sweet music that fades in and out of hearing.

When God invites him into a new relationship of love, Job is free to choose. God makes no threats. No punishment or reward is mentioned or implied. Job spends most of the 42 chapters of his story in deep uncertainty. He wants to die. He thinks maybe evil people who go unpunished are clever. He begs to be left alone. But finally, he chooses to accept God's invitation. He doesn't curse God by turning away from the world, but rather, blesses him by embracing it, the comic and tragic whole of it.

By this, Job is transformed. The pious good boy has become a mature man, capable of real love. He has surrendered. Spiritual surrender means to open oneself, to allow oneself to be vulnerable, to risk, to receive rather than take, to offer rather than command. This is very different from submission.

This transformation is captured in William Blake's series of engravings of the Book of Job, the first and last of which are on your order of service today. In the first, the family sits and kneels piously. The animals are dozing. Musical instruments hang in the tree behind them. Job has his finger on an important line in the holy text – making sure not to lose his place. In the last engraving, the animals are awake, music is being made. Everyone is standing instead of kneeling, with their arms raised in celebration.

The transformation of Job, however, is but half of the great leap forward. Just as God gives Job the world, day after day, Job gives it back to God the same way: new and surprising, reflecting the choices made in Job's own life, which, like the life of every human, changes the world forever. This is mutual love between God and humans, each saying "take me as I am," and each responding, "I will." By this mutual love, by the new and surprising way Job has chosen to live his life, God too is transformed.

Until Job chose to reject the old, small conception of God as a mere judge of contract compliance, there hung in the universe this question: will humans choose to accept God's complicated gift of an unpredictable world, and thus to love God, if the props of their belief in a divine system of rewards and punishments are kicked away? Or will they reject the world, curse God and choose death – either literally or by taking up the many ways available to numb oneself to life's tragedies? The so-called "bet" between God and his special prosecutor is a literary representation of that unanswered question, that doubt. The "bet" itself is present in the very structure of the situation: the uncertainty over what humans will do. Once Job chooses, the doubt that hung in the universe is dispelled. If one human can choose mutual love over contractual subservience, so can every other human. Everything is different now – including God.

And Job is the perfect character for this story of transformation through surrender, because he is the hardest case. His life has been all good fortune and no misfortune, leaving him unprepared to cope with misfortune when it comes. He is the quintessential man's man. The cultural training of men has always been to fight rather than surrender, to control, enclose, and defend. That he can transcend this training and transform his life, even in the face of grievous loss, is a message of great hope. If Job can do this, anyone can. No more standing around at cocktail parties in the Land of Uz, jingling his change in his pocket and playing one-upmanship

games about who has more sheep and camels. A guy who'd be ready for that real conversation David wants to have – man-to-man in a whole new way.

Everyone who reads this story can see himself or herself in it. We have all sat on the ash heap, all suffered great losses, all agonized over why bad things happen. A myth, as we said when we started, is so true that it happens over and over again. When Job triumphs, when he loves life despite loss, we all take heart.

The Book of Job was the first Biblical text I studied in seminary. It had a big impact on me, because I saw myself in the personality of the main character. I returned to this story again and again. Eventually I realized I would never be through reading it.

If Job were standing here with me today, he would know the important questions to ask me. Am I willing to be surprised by unlikely possibilities in life? Will I forsake power for intimacy, reason for sensuality? Am I willing to surrender? Will I keep choosing to begin again in love?

After God speaks, Job's surrender is expressed not in prostration or self-abasement, but rather, in awestruck silence. "I am speechless," he says. "I put my hand on my mouth. I have said too much already; now I will speak no more." No more in the story, true enough; but even today, a voice that cannot be ignored, ringing in our ears.

AMEN.