

“This just in – Person Forgives God. Film at 11:00”, with David Fu, worship associate

Reading King Lear, Act IV, Scene I

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport.

Reading Job 1:5–11

5: And it was so, when the days of their feasting were gone about, that Job sent and sanctified them, and rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt offerings according to the number of them all: for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts. Thus did Job continually.

6: Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also among them.

7: And the LORD said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the LORD and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.

8: And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?

9: Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, Doth Job fear God for naught?

10: Hast not thou made a hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land.

11: But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face.

Sermon This just in: person forgives God. Film at eleven.

Intro

These days, it seems that most of my sermons are rehashings of previous ones. While I have never been shy about reusing good messages and stories, to be honest, I am also guilty of being a bit lazy and a bit nostalgic. Nonetheless, I do find value in revisiting the ghosts of sermons past. They are a kind of portal into my younger self's soul, and I enjoy the reflections and even insights that sometimes arise whilst pawing through them.

Today's sermon is heavily based upon the book of Job in the Old Testament, and the seeds of its inspiration come from my senior year high school English class, where I read Archibald MacLeish's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *J.B.*, which is a modern-day retelling of Job. In MacLeish's version of the story, Job, (called *J.B.*), who has just about everything taken away from him by God, forgives God. This made quite an impression on me.

It turns out that my sermon also features another story from that same English class, *Moby Dick*, but I have to admit, that I did not actually read it until I was in my 40's. Better late than never. And thank you, and rest in peace, Mrs. Pat Mendijs, you were a better teacher than my younger self gave you credit for.

The Obligatory Warning

As we will be waist deep in the book of Job, I feel obligated to inform you that there will be a lot of "God language" in this sermon.

One of the things I have come to like about Channing Memorial Church is that we don't reject the Christian and Jewish roots of our Unitarian Universalist heritage. There is room for "God language" here, and as always, I encourage you to drop your baggage and to open your mind to new possibilities for meaning.

Tales of forgiving the world – or not

Ok. Storytime. I will start with a retelling of Job/J.B.

[Use the same tone as Frog and Toad]. One morning Job sat in bed. “I have many things to do,” he said. I will write them all down on a list so that I can remember them.” Job wrote on a piece of paper:

A list of things to do today

- Wake up early
- Make offerings in case my kids have sinned
- Be perfect and upright
- Fear God
- Escheweth evil

[do imaginary crossing off items of the list, just like Frog and Toad].

Ok, so I bent over backwards a bit in hopes of getting a laugh. But most of us have our lists, be they written or unwritten. Our lists help us to control the world to the extent that we can, but of course, a great wind can always sweep them out of our lives.

Change scene: God and their angels are having a meeting when Satan barges in:

“Where’d *you* come from?” asks God.

“Oh, you know, *around*,” replies Satan. “To and fro in the earth and walking up and down in it”

“Well,” says God, “did you check out Job? There’s no one quite like him. A perfect and upright person. Not a bad bone in his body!”.

“Says you!” says Satan, “that’s just because you give Job everything and don’t let anything bad happen to him.”

“Oh yeah?” challenges God.

And Satan replies with the classic retort, “Yeah!”

And so it comes to be. Satan bets God that if bad stuff happens to Job, he won’t be singing such a big bunch of hosannas – and God takes them up on it. Few are the churches in which I would be comfortable saying what I am about to say next.

[Pause]

God is missing the mark here.

[Pause] As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport.

Now the Bad Stuff happens to Job. Really Bad Stuff. Job loses his wealth, his children, his health, but he still refuses to curse God. His wife tells him that he’s nuts, that he should curse God, and when he still refuses, she leaves him, sitting on a dunghill, his body covered in sores. Blah.

[pause]

Job doesn't curse God, but he is **not** a happy camper. He has been a perfect and upright person, and he knows it. He curses the day that he was born.

Then Job's "friends" come to comfort him. But it is not real comfort. It's the explanation kind. I have to say that Frog did a much better job of comforting Toad by simply sitting with him. Instead, each of Job's comforters says in one way or another: "You must have done *something* wrong." Job knows this is not the case. And we know it, too, for God itself said that Job was "the perfect and upright person". Job and the comforters go round and round arguing. And when I say round and round, I mean round and round – for 33 out of the 47 chapters in the book of Job.

[pause]

Finally, God, perhaps tiring of the argument, answers Job in the whirlwind. The short version of the answer? "Where were you when I created the world?". The long version is a fabulous rant in glorious King James Version language. I give you a smattering:

Hast thou given the horse strength? Hast thou clothed his neck with thunder? (Job 39:19)

But of course this is no answer to Job's question of "What did I do wrong?". There is no answer to that question. Job did nothing wrong.

[pause]

So what does Job do after God's little tantrum? Job repents. This is where I remember Archibald MacLeish's J.B. The character in the play who plays God (ooh, isn't that a rich turn of phrase!) describes the moment of Job/J.B.'s repentance:

Then, he *calmed* me. Gentled me the way a farmhand Gentes a bulging bulging bull!
Forgave me!... for the world!!! For everything!

... In spite of everything he'd suffered! In spite of all he'd lost and loved. *He* understood and forgave it!...

... He'd heard of God and now he saw Him! Who's the judge in judgment there? Who plays the hero, God or him? Is God to be *forgiven*?

J.B. turns Alexander Pope on his head: To err is divine. To forgive is human.

[pause]

And so Job forgives God, and he gets a new life. His wife comes back, his wealth is restored, he has more children, and he lives to a ripe old age. Happily ever after. Many people find this ending of the book of Job to be unsatisfying. I have to say that the ending of J.B. is a heck of a lot better. It's the same, and yet it's different, and I'm not going to give it away, for I would be stealing MacLeish's thunder, and I don't think I could share it without weeping profusely.

Moby Dick

So, in Job, Person forgives God. I now want to visit a story in which a tragic figure refuses to forgive God – God as the world and life and all that happens to us: Captain Ahab from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. As I mentioned before, I didn't discover this story until I was in my 40s. If you haven't yet read it, it's not too late! But for the less patient, here's my take on *Moby Dick* in five minutes or less.

Captain Ahab loses his leg to *Moby Dick*, the White Whale, and he dedicates the remainder of his life to vengeance. Throughout the novel, Melville makes sure to tell us that *Moby Dick*, the White Whale, is just a whale (see, for instance, Chapter 100). That is, *Moby Dick* is not a malicious creature, but rather a part of nature, part of the world and life and all that can happen to us. In Chapter CXXVIII (that's chapter 128 for you non-Romans), Ahab's ship,

the Pequod, meets a ship named the Rachel. As usual, Ahab hails “Hast seen the White Whale?” The answer: “Aye, yesterday. Have ye seen a whale-boat adrift?”. Ahab can hardly contain himself, after 127 chapters his nemesis is so close! The captain of the Rachel boards the Pequod, and it turns out that Ahab knows him from his hometown of Nantucket, but he doesn’t exchange any kind of greeting.

In the Rachel’s encounter with Moby Dick, two of that captain’s sons, one of whom is but 12 years old, have gone missing. The captain of the Rachel beseeches Ahab to help him search for his children, “I will not go”, says the captain of the Rachel, “till you say *aye* to me. Do to me as you would have me do to you in the like case. For *you* too have a boy, Captain Ahab – though but a child, and nestling safely at home now – a child of your old age too–.”

... and Ahab stood like an anvil, receiving every shock, but without the least quivering of his own.

Addressing his neighbor by name for the first time, Ahab refuses: “Captain Gardiner, I will not do it. Even now I lose time. Good-bye, goodbye. God bless ye, man, and may I forgive myself, but I must go.”

This. This is where my heart breaks. This is where Ahab irretrievably loses his soul. He does not put down his revenge, even when his neighbor calls upon him and invokes the golden rule.

You should read the book to find out what happens, but I don’t think it’s much of a spoiler to say that Ahab does not repent, does not forgive God. Just before he meets his final fate he curses the whale, he curses his misfortune, he curses God – and what a curse it is! “To the end, I grapple with thee; from hell’s heart, I stab at thee; for hate’s sake, I spit my last breath at thee.”

[pause]

And it is a curious coincidence that the Epilogue of Moby Dick is headed by a quotation from the Book of Job. (“And I only am escaped alone to tell thee.”).

Beethoven

First Job from the Bible, then Ahab from Moby Dick; for our third little story this morning I would like to talk about an actual person.

One of my favorite pieces of music is the enigmatic second movement of Beethoven's 7th symphony. It is generally considered to be a funeral march, but there is nothing notated, on the score or otherwise, about funerals, death, or even sadness. The movement is simply notated with the marking: Allegretto, a diminutive of Allegro, which most musicians take to mean "fast", but, as I learned at some point, Allegro actually means "happy". So, Allegretto is "a little bit happy".

I've never found Beethoven's Allegretto to be a despairing sort of piece. Sad, noble, and hauntingly beautiful, it is sandwiched between what I feel are some of the most joyous pieces ever. If you haven't listened to this symphony for a while, or at all, I encourage you, that is, I give you the courage, to go home this afternoon and listen to it. It is a glorious sermon in its own right.

From what little I've read about him, Beethoven was a troubled soul, and an angry one at times. How unjust his deafness must have been to him! And yet, he did not curl up and stop composing. Indeed, arguably his greatest and most affirmative work, the 9th symphony, was written when he was completely deaf. Did Beethoven forgive God his deafness? I like to think that he did, and then went on to do what was for him God's work.

Conclusion

If there's a message I'd like you to take home this morning, it is this: We need to forgive God so that we can do God's work. And what is God's work? Aside from a topic for another sermon? I'm hoping you know what I mean. After all, why did you come here this morning? One of the reasons I come back, week after week, month after month, year after year, is to

be reminded of what God's work is, and how to do it, in spite of all that happens to us, and in spite of all that is beyond our control.

But for starters, it is God's work to be a more perfect and upright person. To eschew evil. To be joyful. To sit and comfort a friend. To take care of our neighbors, and, the world.

Amen.