

## GOD ON TRIAL

Job 2:1-11

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the First Sunday in Lent, March 1, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### Focus Text

*One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. The LORD said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?' Satan answered the LORD, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.' The LORD said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.' Then Satan answered the LORD, 'Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.' The LORD said to Satan, 'Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.'*

*So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.*

*Then his wife said to him, 'Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.' But he said to her, 'You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips.*

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Two weeks ago in one of the series of public conversations that Rabbi Jack Moline and I have held each year, Jack drew a distinction between the words "covenant" and "contract."

"A contract," he said (and I am paraphrasing), "is an agreement between two parties. If one party violates the terms of the agreement, the contract is null and void."

"A covenant," he said, "is different. It is binding forever. Thus, if one party violates the covenant, the other party continues to honor the covenant."

Jack went on to say that this distinction lies at the heart of the story of three men who decide to put God on trial at Auschwitz. They conduct the trial and find God guilty of violating the covenant. Then one of them says: "What do we do next?" Another says, "It's time for our prayers."<sup>1</sup>

Even though these victims of the Holocaust find that God has violated covenant, God's violation does not lead them to discard God, to discard their belief in God, to discard their commitment to God. Having found God guilty, they go on with their prayers. They keep the terms of the covenant, even though God has not.

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<sup>1</sup> This plot was made famous by Elie Wiesel in his play *The Trial of God* (New York: Random House, 1979), translated by Marion Wiesel. It was the basis of a PBS television drama, *God on Trial*, written by Frank Cottrell Boyce, which aired November 9, 2008, and which is the subject of an excellent review by Anthony Sacramone in *First Things* 11/2/08, available at <http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/?p=1213>.

Jack's story blew me away. In most Christian preaching, teaching, and scholarship, it is assumed that when the covenant is violated, humanity is the culprit. Most Christian writing about the covenant emphasizes God's fidelity and human infidelity or sinfulness. When in Christian writing the covenant is broken, it is usually humanity that does the breaking.<sup>2</sup>

But centuries of Jewish suffering – from slavery in Egypt to exile in Babylonia to the Holocaust in Nazi Germany – have left Jews particularly free and open to acknowledge that there are times when God either appears to be absent or is in fact absent, when all evidence leads to the conclusion that God has not fulfilled his covenant promises. The Jewish ability to be honest about the reality of suffering and the absence of God resonates with our experience, even if struggles to find voice in our theology or liturgy. Christians are simply more constitutionally wired to try to defend God than to place God on trial.

Yet our experience reminds us that our Jewish brothers and sisters are onto something. Think of what we have faced in our church alone the past twelve months:

- Twenty-four deaths of members, among them long term, beloved members known to nearly all of us.
- The sudden and unexpected death of our longtime Associate Pastor – Karen Blomberg
- The death of two people in their early thirties near many of us.
- In addition, the dozens of struggles that go on daily in the lives of our members and friends: addiction, depression, infants struggling for health, couples struggling to experience the promise of pregnancy, marriage tensions, financial reversals, work and study disappointments, aging, sudden strokes, cancer, and other unnamed maladies.
- Even these personal sufferings, which affect who sits at our table or shares our bed, pale in number if not in intensity before the rising death tolls from natural disasters, wars, accidents, and refugee crises; and they pale before terrorist attacks from which we have been thankfully free but against whose wise preparation we are not yet free.

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In Elie Wiesel's play, *God on Trial*, the lone survivor of a pogrom in 17<sup>th</sup> century Ukraine rails:

Men and women are being beaten, tortured, and killed—how can one not be afraid of [God]? True, they are victims of men. But the killers kill in [God's] name. Not all? True, but numbers are unimportant. Let one killer kill for [God's] glory, and [God] is guilty. Every man who suffers or causes suffering, every woman is raped, every child who is tormented implicates [God]...Listen: either [God] is responsible or [God] is not. If [God] is, let's judge Him; if He is not, let Him stop judging us.<sup>3</sup>

Whether we are Christian or Jewish, as human beings we cannot help but resonate with these words. We cannot help at times but place God on trial.

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Yet the beauty of the story Jack told, and the reason it so infused me with energy, is the reality I took from it that just because God lets us down, we do not have to let God down. Just because God does not seem to keep, or in fact does not keep, his promises to us, does not mean that we are better off not keeping our promises to him.

“Guilty as charged,” comes the verdict.

“So what do we do next?” comes the question.

“It's time to go to prayer,” is the answer. “It's time to go to prayer.”

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<sup>2</sup> Articles on “covenant” in most theological dictionaries I consulted simply focus on violations being from the human side.

<sup>3</sup> Wiesel 54.

In one interpretation of the Book of Job,<sup>4</sup> Job is a righteous man who becomes trapped in a misguided effort on the part of God to prove wrong *Ha Satan* – better known as “Satan.”

God places his full trust in Job’s ability to remain faithful – to keep covenant, to keep saying his prayers – even when all goes wrong.

Sure enough, Job loses his children and his possessions.

His response: “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”<sup>5</sup>

Next, Satan attacks Job’s health, inflicting him with sores from head to foot.

Job’s response: “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?”<sup>6</sup>

For the next thirty-six chapters Job rails at God, placing God on trial, demanding an answer, demanding vindication, demanding restoration. But through all his railing at God, Job remains in relationship with God, lifting his laments to the Holy One, never backing down in his anger or demands, never backing down from his own commitments to God. In the end, Job is vindicated, his health, children, and possessions restored.<sup>7</sup>

Though God has broken covenant with Job, Job has not broken covenant with God.

“Guilty as charged,” comes the verdict.

“So what do we do next?”

“It’s time to go to prayer.”

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The African-American scholar Renita Weems says: “We live our lives between the last time God showed up and the next time God will show up.”<sup>8</sup>

A covenant between God and humanity is a precious and holy thing. When we suffer, we can never be sure if our suffering occurs because God has broken covenant or because we have, but we can be sure there are times when our senses and feelings tell us that God is the one who has taken a leave of absence.

Yet just because God has broken covenant does not mean that we have to do so as well. When we have put God on trial and found God guilty, it is precisely time to say our prayers. At such times, it is keeping covenant, praying, worshipping, serving God with all our heart, soul, and might, that just might move us a little closer in time and closer in experience to “the next time that God will show up.”

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> See “Excursus: The Portrayal of God in Job,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version With The Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 748.

<sup>5</sup> Job 1:21.

<sup>6</sup> Job 2:11.

<sup>7</sup> Job 42:7-17.

<sup>8</sup> This statement comes from a lecture she gave on the character Rispah at the Harry Emerson Fosdick Preaching Convocation, The Riverside Church, New York, New York, April 1997, which I attended of which I have a CD.