

Sunday, July 6, 2014
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Judge Not, Lest You Be Judged”

I find it particularly challenging to discern how to move us through Job’s 42 chapters before Labor Day.

Last week we tackled chapter one and this week, I expanded our reach, but found so much of importance in these three chapters, that I felt it best to include them verbatim.

Perhaps paraphrasing will become easier as we delve into the story and become familiar with the characters.

The first intriguing aspect of today’s reading is the reintroduction of the Heavenly Council convened in chapter one.

Do you imagine God working in a committee?

Does God, the creator of all that is have consultants to whom he turns for advice on interacting with the world?

Who is Satan?

Commentator Cynthia Ozick tells us that “Satan appears in the story of Job not as that demonic figure of later traditions who we meet in our translation but as *ha-Satan*, meaning “the adversary” – the *counterarguer* among the angels, who is himself one of the ‘sons of God.’ The presence of this character, she contends, establishes ties to the Persian root of the fable – the age-old tale of a battle between supernatural powers of good and equally dynamic powers of evil.”

We only encounter Satan in these first few chapters.

As the story moves from fable to poetry, Satan disappears.

At no point in the ensuing saga does Job, or his friends, refer to this powerful force.

We are left with the lingering question of whether evil exists as something distinct or whether it is an absence, or turning away from God.

With this first passage, we now know more than Job about his suffering.

While his experience is intensified by his search for a cause, we know that he did nothing to bring on this calamity.

As we listen to his friends employing conventional wisdom to explain his dilemma, although we know the cause we can still empathize with Job in his distress at not knowing.

The imagery our writer employs paints a vivid picture of a suffering Job sitting among the ashes scratching at his sores with a pottery shard.

Into this scene comes his wife who admonishes him to dismiss his God and his three friends who initially sit quietly with him for seven days.

When we encounter someone who has suffered hardships or is ill our natural inclinations vary – sometimes we talk incessantly offering advice, admonition or platitudes – other times we are able to embrace the silence and be a companion.

How do you respond to friends in need?

People often seek explanations for other's misfortune to assure them that they are not potential victims.

I find this often in situations of interpersonal violence, addiction, mental illness or tragedy.

People look for ways to define the story so as to convince themselves that this could never happen to them.

As Job's friends sit quietly among the ashes with him, what do you think is going through their minds?

What would be going through your mind?

Is your first inclination compassion or judgment?

Chapter 3 brings a cry of anguish from the not-so-patient Job. Why has this happened to him?

Again, a familiar response to tragedy.

Job laments that his worst fears have come true.

He admits that his piety and righteousness were meant to protect him from such misfortune.

Commentator Stephen Mitchell contends that Job's virtue lacks a certain generosity and wholeheartedness.

Echoed in the voice of the psalmists and the prophets – Why God? Why me?

Chapter 4 provides the first response from Job's friends.

The friend's ability to comfort Job conveys little understanding. Mitchell says:

"They don't understand that Job's curses and blasphemies are really cries of pain. They can't understand, because they won't risk giving up their moral certainties. Their rigid orthodoxy surrounds an interior of mush, like the exoskeleton of an insect. Unconsciously they know that they have no experience of God. Hence their acute discomfort and rage."

As I read Mitchell's description I couldn't help but think of the political climate in our country.

Doctrine has replaced diplomacy.

The news is full of examples of judgment and bigotry based on personal beliefs that allow no room for difference or discussion.

This week alone, the Israel-Palestine conflict claimed the lives of young children.

Our own country – during this Independence Day week, is embroiled in controversy over the situation in Iraq.

Name calling and belittling have become common language in the public sphere.

Rather than seeking peace – as God calls us to do – too often we are simply seeking validation for our own agenda.

My friends, the book of Job is timeless.

With only these first four chapters we have seen a reflection of ourselves.

We must look deeply into our own souls to discern what our faith means to us and what role we allow God to play in our lives.

Let's look at a few of the questions raised in today's readings.

Does God, the creator of all that is have consultants to whom he turns for advice on interacting with the world?

Who is Satan? What is evil?

How do you respond to friends in need?

How do you respond to strangers?

As Job's friends sit quietly among the ashes with him, what do you think is going through their minds?

What would be going through your mind?

Is your first inclination compassion or judgment?