

Devotion on Job 2:1-10 (LTS in Tshwane, 2015-09-16, Werner Klän)

This is a very strange scene to our eyes: Satan standing before the throne of God, challenging the Lord over Job. The devil has access to God's heavenly palace, and is received in audience. He does not shy away from telling the Lord of Lords what he has been doing since the last time they had met: "roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it". That is his way of pastime: to sneak around everywhere looking for human beings he may get hold of, get a grip on, searching for people he might entrap and get under his control. And Satan is very successful in this regard. He is crafty and sly, mighty and powerful, wily and wicked. He knows a thousand tricks, he is acquainted with ten thousands of snares, and he understands a million ways to catch, to tie, to bind, to fix someone. He will promise you riches, he will attract you with golden perspectives, and he will fascinate you with endless opportunities.

Yes, the devil is after souls to conquer them. He is after hearts to occupy them. He is after pious minds to reverse them away from God. But, you know, Satan is a liar. He is a deceiver. He is a cheater. His words – nothing but fraud. His promises – nothing but lies. His allegations – nothing but deceit. And in the end, all of his strategies, actions, and deeds will be harmful, destructive, and finally lethal to those who are in his captivity. For his ultimate goal is to take captive those who are meant to be God's beloved people, and, by taking them away from the source of their lives, namely God, to eventually murder and kill them.

What is surprising in the book of Job, what is astonishing, and moreover, striking, is that God permits Satan to tempt, to afflict and to nearly reduce Job to despair. It is like a bet, and it is a test for Job: Will Job only stick to the Lord and be faithful to Him because he feels gifted, blessed and secured by God? Or will he turn away from God when times get harder and fortune is fading away? This is the second time Satan is allowed to do so. God had given Job over to the devil before already that he might do whatever he could to break, to crack, and to crush Job, but for one thing: Satan is not allowed to kill the pious man, nor is he permitted to take his life. And in a first attempt, the devil had bereaved Job of his animals, the oxen, and donkeys, and camels, and sheep; he had killed Job's servants at the same time, and finally made the house collapse where Job's sons and daughters were partying, so they were struck dead.

A catastrophe, a disaster, both in terms of economic life and family life. Greater losses could hardly be thought of than losing any resources you and your family live on. Much bigger a harm could scarcely be experienced than losing your children at a young age, the hopes of their future dying before the parents pass away. But all the brutal efforts Satan makes are of no avail. All the cruel strategies he tries are futile. All the inhuman attempts he makes are in vain: Job does not lose faith in God, nor does he cast away his trust in God. Quite the opposite: right in the middle of his mourning, he glorifies the Lord: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (1:21). There seems to be no way to make Job curse go to His face.

Now is the second time Satan is allowed to try, to test, and to tempt Job. But this permission, given to him by God, is by no means limitless. Again, the devil is commanded to spare Job's life (2:6). This time, Satan attacks Job personally: He is struck with an evil disease, and he suffers from pain the festering sores cause him. Elsewhere we read that he was suffering fever, thinness, and pain day and night. His health is dwindling, and the only thing to wait for seems to be death. Again, the devil was convinced that by these mean means, he would succeed in driving Job away from God.

And of course, the devil is experienced. Dozens and dozens of times, hundreds, thousands of times he was successful with plaguing people, causing them harm, torturing them with all kinds of misfortune. People, who feel abandoned by God, or by their “luck”, as they usually would say, turn to lamenting, and accusing God. They are wallowing in self-pity, drowning in tears, and abandoning themselves to despair. Job’s wife is a striking example to this reality: Her advice is to take leave of his faith and trust in God, to forget about God, and even to curse God. The only alternative, the sole perspective that will remain then is to die. When people feel and react like this then Satan has got them where wants to get them. “Why me? Why this to me? Why always me?” Satan’s snares are highly effective. For with these questions, people are revolving around themselves. They are already disconnected from God; they have lost the connection with Him. Consciously, or unconsciously, they have renounced God. And that is precisely what the devil wants to achieve.

How come, then, that God allows Job to be tested and tried this way? For sure, God knows that Job is blameless and upright (1:8), and indeed, Job has proven to be, in the first trial, that he is. Therefore God may rely on the fact that Job, beyond his blamelessness and uprightness, has maintained integrity, in spite of all the accidents and calamities that have befallen him. At first sight, and on the surface, it may seem so. Job shows an admirable serenity, even when hit by the disease. He displays an incredible calmness in dealing with the malady that has taken hold of him. But if we look at him a bit more thoroughly, we can see that he is in no way unaffected by what is happening to him. He shows feelings of grief and sorrow, and he reveals sadness, like the saying indicates: “as he sat among the ashes” (2:8).

Nonetheless he does not give in to his wife’s suggestions and insinuations: “Shall we accept (only) good from God, and not trouble (as well)?” (2:10). This is a statement of remarkable trust in God. And it is, in addition, a noteworthy insight into the way, God acts and operates. God is not limited by our wishful thinking how He ought to be, or how to act. God is not dependent on our imagination of how He were to demean Himself over against us. God is sovereign in His doing. He is unaccountable. There is no one to give Him instruction how to behave. There is no one to dictate, in which way He should rule the world, or steer our lives. He is the almighty, everlasting God, unlimited in His power, beyond all our understanding, like St. Paul puts it (Rom 11:33): “Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgements, and His paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counsellor?” And then, Paul quotes from the book of Job (40:13) “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?” This is the devout and pious attitude towards God, our Creator, and Redeemer, and Sanctifier. It is us, who in every regard are dependent on Him, not vice versa. Job has learned this lesson well and persevered in this understanding of God’s glory.

There is one more thing we have to take into consideration. Although God had given Satan a wide range of opportunities to challenge Job and his piety, this permission is not limitless, as we have seen. In the first trial the devil was forbidden “to lay a finger” on Job (1:12), but even now that he is allowed to attack Job personally, he is commanded to at least spare his life (2:6). That is to say: In spite of God’s admittance of many kinds of evil, as they happened to Job, God is determined not to loose His hold on Job’s fate. Although God’s people may be afflicted by many a mishap, be it personally, be it family problems, be it economic disadvantages, be it sickness and disease, – and even if we would have to admit that God Himself has to do with these afflictions –, in spite of all such difficulties, we are assured that God will not forsake us. In Job, we can see that a human being is delivered to tests and temptations to the utmost we can imagine in terms of losses, harm, and ill fate. God, however,

has not abandoned him, rather has He held him in His hand, and finally has saved him and kept him from getting lost.

Job can be seen as an Old Testament saint. He relied on God unwaveringly. He did not fall away from faith and trust in God. For he was prevented from losing faith by God and was eventually convinced by God Himself that God is the sovereign Lord over all and everything; so Job, in the end has to admit and to confess: “I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted” (42:2). The Augsburg Confession then teaches “that the history of saints may be set before us so that we may follow the example of their faith and good works, according to our calling” (AC XXI).

We have been called to be God’s beloved children on the day we were baptised into the body of Christ. In this way and at the same time, we have been called to share our heavenly Brother’s fate. And Christ, indeed, suffered a fate of being despised, being driven to the margin, being cast out, and finally being put to death. It is therefore no wonder if we as Christians are confronted with similar challenges and threats: “The disciple is not above the Master” (Lk 6:40), as the Lord Himself teaches us.

Again, like last Wednesday in Confession and Absolution, I would like to ask you some simple questions: Where do you find yourselves in this bible passage? Do you see yourselves closer to Job, or closer to Job’s wife? Do you tend to lament, and complain, and accuse God, if things in your lives do not go as smoothly as you wish? Or do you, even in the hours of dejection and faint-heartedness, turn to God to implore Him to help you, support you, stand by you, save you, and rescue you? Oh, I know all too well that we doubting, sceptical people easily lose heart instead of taking courage, because we are confident that God is on our side and at our side.

There are parts of Job and parts of his wife linked to one another within us, I guess, according to the “*simul iustus ac peccator*” (sinner – saint) paradigm of Lutheran theology and piety. This service of Confession and Absolution provides us with the opportunity to examine ourselves: Which are the tendencies deep down in our souls that we empower to steer us? Which are the enticements that we are inclined to give in to, instead of casting all our anxiety on God because He cares for us? Which kind of seduction tends to lead us astray so that we do not put our trust in the Almighty God?

It is good to know, and moreover to take to heart that our Lord Jesus Christ is the prototype of those afflicted. In an exemplary manner He carried all the burdens of all our human lives. In Jesus Christ, God Himself has experienced the sorrows, the grief, the sadness, and the losses that His beloved human beings may suffer from. His soul, even our Saviour’s soul, was “overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” in Gethsemane (Mt 26:38). He, according to His human nature has an intense and intrinsic understanding of temptation and affliction, like us. Nothing in the human hearts and minds is alien to Him. That is not to say that Christ will approve our faintheartedness or applaud to unbelief. But He will tell us that he has taken even our doubts and insecurities, our unsteadiness and disbelief up to His cross in order to extinguish them there, to cross them out. Therefore we are allowed and empowered to lay down all these inner tensions, those internal struggles between trust in God and despair, between confidence and hopelessness, to lay them down at the steps of this altar. And Christ, our heavenly Brother, Saviour, Advocate, Counsellor, and Intercessor, will pick them up and carry them away in that very moment He says to you: I forgive you all your sins. Amen