

## HOW DO WE KNOW?

Mary Hall

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Job 1:1; 2:1-10

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Mark 10: 2-16

This was supposed to be Tim Foote's morning in the pulpit and he had told me, when we talked about this earlier, that he wanted to speak about the Devil. We had quite a long conversation about this and he had a very good story worked out, as you might expect. But I'm sorry to say that he called on Tuesday to say that he wasn't feeling well. He had given me some intimations that this might be the case and I had looked up a sermon from 2009 that I had given at the United Church in Roscoe. It actually does talk a bit about Satan, and, of course, that is why we had the reading from Job today. So nice to get to autumnal readings in August.

And why is Job so stimulating? Because it poses primary questions about faith. What kind of God is this that plays games with his most faithful follower? And, indeed, what kind of faith is this that requires one to endure suffering of this sort, simply for the demonstration of that faith's strength? In the text that we read for today, we see that God and Satan are really gambling for Job's soul. The word "Satan" we are told by scholars was used at this time to refer to something akin to "accuser" or prosecutor, in the trial lawyer sense, and not as the epitome of evil that the word has come to mean. Nevertheless, God seems to give Job over to Satan to do with him as he will, regardless of the suffering involved. And, it is God who initiates this conversation and it is Satan who is doing God's business. God asks Satan what he is doing, and Satan seems to be doing not much - "... going to and fro on the earth, and ... walking up and down on it." And God as much as tells him to get busy... "have you thought of my servant, Job," asks God. And so begins Job's long travail. The lesson is that we are in God's hands and that all is in His control, whatever the torments and miseries we suffer.

Bob Grant had sent me his meditation on struggling with faith before I wrote this for the church in Roscoe. In it he talks about how inescapably our faith is based, at least in part, on our conception of God, which may be based on our own thoughts and desires and may not, indeed, stem from an exterior spirit. But, in essence, the nature of faith includes uncertainty, for otherwise we would know, we would not need faith.

The story of Job is, in part, an illustration of this. Job believes despite his torments, indeed, even because of his torments. His faith is not in the pursuit of the protection that God provides, but rather in spite of the lack of protection. God makes it possible for him to demonstrate his integrity.

This story of Job hurts. How can it be, I think, that we can trust that all our possible sufferings are because of a God that chooses to test or punish us? I want to tell Job to start taking care of himself, go to a doctor, get some exercise, discuss these issues with his family. I'm angry on his behalf, and many of you will probably share these feelings.

Then, in our new testament reading, Jesus says that only the attitude of a little child will allow us to live in grace or "receive the Kingdom of Heaven." But does that mean that we are meant to live passively without fixing wrongs? I don't think so.

There are, we know, lots of different ways of looking at scripture. Some people take it literally, and then there are metaphorical, anthropological, and historical interpretations. Some political theorists see it, especially a story like that of Job, as a mythology that is useful for oppressors so as to keep the people in a state of dumb acceptance.

The group of people whom I call "fundamentalist atheists," people like the now deceased Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, have lately written about the logical contradictions into which Scripture leads us. If for example, everything that God does is for good, how is it that we get to Job's suffering and the endless wars in which religion is involved? Are we to believe that all that happens is for the good? If we are

to think as a “little child”, does that mean that we should neglect education, experience, and analytical endeavor?

Many people believe that the more we learn about the way our brain operates, the more we can see that faith, or religious belief, is an evolutionary capacity that allows for developmental advantages. Religion provides a structure for community so that groups of people can work together and further their interests, and it is documented that faith provides much strength and endurance that might otherwise desert us. Some argue that God is, therefore, a concept that humankind has developed but that doesn't exist independently.

A book called “The Third Man Factor” tells the story of people in extreme situations - mountain climbers, Antarctic explorers, a man who walked out of the South Tower of the World Trade Center at the time of 9/11, even children - who describe being aware of a phantom presence, a companion or guardian, during these challenging and life-threatening situations. This presence is physically absent, but the sensation is powerful. Often it is felt to be that of an angel or benevolent spirit, though others provide a more biochemical explanation. Some scientists have shown that electrical stimulation of certain areas of the brain can produce a sensation similar to what is described in “The Third Man Factor.”

Certainly science and faith provide different explanations for observable phenomena. A famous example used in discussions of relativism and constructivism is that our best scientific “evidence says that Native Americans arrived on this continent from the Eurasian landmass by crossing over the Bering Strait; but according to some Native American accounts, they are the descendants from the Buffalo people, and they came from inside the earth after supernatural spirits prepared this world for habitation by humans.”\* That leads us to conclude that one or the other of these theories is wrong, or that we have to look at them relative to the historical and societal situations in which they arose. That is, they are basically describing origins from different perspectives. And, that of course is the case. Everyone is always looking at things from different perspectives - the fundamentalist atheists and those who pursue faith; the scientists who examine brain waves and those who sense a benevolent presence; the

archeologists and geologists who describe the passage over the Bering Strait and the Native Americans who know they come from the earth.

But does that mean that everything just depends on your point of view and that we can just let things slop along together on parallel paths? In a certain way we have to do so, just so as not to have a war. I don't want to get into a watering match every time a discussion of brain chemistry or historical anthropology arises. But I think that we can add something additional to this conversation.

As Rev. Grant has pointed out, what makes faith different from fact is that it requires doubt, a lack of certitude, a leap beyond the logical framework with which we approach much of our activity. And this leap and acceptance of doubt is something that we must grapple with not just once and for all, but every day. Every new situation may require a new examination, a new struggle and commitment to live without the support of proven fact, but holding fast to our sense of the mystery beyond us. This is what Jesus means when he tells us that "...whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." We receive it not through the security of our knowledge and experience, but through our capacity for participation in mystery, in what we cannot hold within our brain or comprehend.

I have thought for a long time that one of the things that leads us to faith is simply the conception of how much we don't know. Every new piece of information - everything that we learn about the brain, about the universe, about how long and what sort of life has been on this planet, about activities of the stars and the tiniest elements of existence - makes me gape open-mouthed at how much more there must be to know about. Consider only Einstein's conception, which may or may not mirror reality, of the universe curved and folded by time. That is something that it is difficult to hold in our brain. If these structures exist even such that our brains struggle to encompass them, how then can we say that we are the be all and end all of existence? How can we say that existence is limited to that which our logic accepts? Surely, there are worlds beyond our minds, and the much that we know simply underlines all that we don't know.

Only go out on one of our gorgeous, clear Catskill nights and gaze at the stars. Forget about what we have named the constellations and individual stellar bodies for a moment and think about the vast depth of that sky and the layers upon layers of stars beyond the reach of telescopes. That experience surely gives us the sense of cosmos beyond our ken, that ability to view existence as a child that Jesus tells us is the gateway to the Kingdom.

The great preacher and minister, Forrest Church, who died recently, said, “The essence of a truly living faith is awe and humility. We must be awestruck by the fact that we are here and by the cosmos itself, and we must be humbled. The most beautiful of all etymologies is human, humane, humility, humble, humus. It’s dust to dust, ashes to ashes. That brings us humility but also the awe to even comprehend that or to embrace it.”\*\*

The journey from Job, said to be the oldest story in the Bible, to Jesus is long, and the sense of God that Jesus brings to us is broader and deeper than the one that Job had. But still for us all, when we ask the question, “how do we know?”, the answer is “because we don’t.” That is the essence of faith - we either embrace it or be stuck with ourselves, and that is a prison we learn to reject over and over.

\*John R. Searle in NY Review of Books, 9/24/09 on “Fear of Knowledge”

\*\*Forrest Church in “Religion and Ethics Newsweekly,” 2/27/09