

“The Joy of Doubt”
Rev. Barbara H. Gadon
First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, DE
July 12, 2009

Ancient Reading: The Story of Job. Adapted from *Doubt: A History* by Jennifer Michael Hecht

Job was a perfect and upright man. He was pious, generous, and kind, and as a result, he was extremely prosperous. He had a great household: a good wife, seven sons and three daughters, many serving hands, and so much land and cattle that he was “the greatest of all the men of the east.” He fed the hungry, looked after the fatherless, welcomed the stranger and was honored for it.

Gazing upon Job, God bragged to the devil of the good man's piety. “Regard my servant, Job.” The devil made sport of it. “Sure he loves you now. He has everything he wants, why shouldn't he? My cat loves me when I feed him, too.” God insisted that Job would stay righteous even without all his blessings, and the two embarked upon an awful experiment.

God sent a messenger to Job reporting that the Sabeans have stolen his oxen and ass and have slit the throats of the servants in his field. “While he was yet speaking,” another messenger showed up and said that Job's sheep, and those tending them, have been burned to death by fire from the sky. Another messenger arrived, again while the last is still speaking, this time announcing that now the Chaldeans have stolen the camels and killed the remainder of his working hands. And before THAT speaker finished, a final messenger appeared and told Job that a fierce wind has blown out of the mountains, knocking down the house in which his entire brood of children, all adults, were feasting. All are dead. Job ripped his clothes, shaved his head, and fell on his knees, saying, “The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” Job bore his sorrow and trusted God.

God asks the devil if he is convinced. Satan shakes it off. He promises that if he hurts Job right down to his flesh, the righteous man will curse God to his face. God tells Satan to go ahead and do as he pleases, cautioning only that Job must survive the ordeal. Thus invited, Satan covers Job in “sore boils” from head to foot. Job takes a broken piece of pottery to scratch himself and sits in the ash pile. His wife howls at him: “Are you still praying? Curse God and die.” But Job stays righteous, answering that having taken the good he now must not refuse the evil.

Enter Job's friends, who come to console him. When they see him they can hardly

recognize the man they knew. They rip their clothes at the sight of him and put dust on their own heads in sympathy and sadness. Job's sorrow is so great, his loss so inestimable, that for seven days and seven nights they sit with him in silence.

Finally, Job speaks. He can't take it anymore. "Why did I not from the womb? Why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?" The friends attempt to answer. One argues that despite the calamity, the world is still a good and just place, worth living for, and that God is great and wise. In fact, he suggests, Job must have deserved this punishment, that must be all for the best. "Behold," offers the friend, "Happy is the man whom God corrects."

Unkind words from a friend. And they make no sense. Job knows his innocence and will not tolerate this "advice". Nothing, absolutely nothing he could have done would deserve punishment like this.

The other "friends" all chime in, variations on this theme. God is just; you must have done something. Repent. Now Job's critique of God begins in earnest. He lets fly a torrent of challenges and accusations. God is not only unjust, but he is uncaring. "Behold, I cry out of wrong but I am not heard; I cry aloud, but there is no judgment." Hours and hours of cursing and lament. Days of recrimination. God gives no answer. Where are you? Job demands. Give me my day in court.

Finally God shows up, and God answers Job with only questions. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? God says. Have you walked in the depths of the ocean? Have the gates of death been opened to you? Where does light come from? And where darkness? Out of whose womb came the ice? Who can number the clouds in wisdom?" Why is there a bird as useless as an ostrich? Why is there a reptile as vicious as a crocodile? Hours and hours of questions, God asks. Days of them.

For a moment, God stares at Job. And Job stares at God.

Modern Reading "Cherish Your Doubts" by Robert Weston, from *Singing the Living Tradition*

Sermon

It was the summer of 1994, July, right before I left for my internship at the Unitarian Universalist church of Arlington, Virginia. I was consumed with doubt. All the pride I had about being chosen as intern for a large, prestigious church, the excitement I felt for living in a totally new and fascinating part of the country, had vanished. I lived in fear. Fear went with me everywhere, like an imaginary friend. Nothing I did seemed to alleviate it. Asking friends for support, distracting myself,

preparing for the move and learning about the church – nothing. It was paralyzing. Then one day I stepped into the shower and something amazing happened. There were words – I didn't hear them, I didn't read them, but they were clearly, powerfully, *words* that were not my own, I swear it. A message. And it was: “Your life is enough.” “Your life is enough.” Though the words are cryptic, I understood them immediately. They meant: Your life – just as you are now, with what you've learned and experienced, is enough for you to go on to the next thing. It is enough. I was filled with gratitude – I remember the tears mixing with the shower water as I wept, saying, “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” I was deeply encouraged to move ahead.

This experience, among others, has helped shape my faith. It has helped to teach me that I am not alone in the universe, I am not without help. I know some of you have described similar experiences to me. It's not something we advertise. People might think we're nutcases. We also know this experience is not transferrable. My message in the shower is not something I could give you as evidence for God; it is not a formula to find God, to end doubt. If it were, I would simply urge you all to take more showers. For that matter, I would just take more of them, myself. Later that stressful year, I could have spent entire days in the shower (and believe me, I considered it) without a peep from the almighty. Why not? I wondered. Was the first one a fluke? Was there some kind of rule about these things, like “one per customer”? No answers were forthcoming. One moment there was the “blessed assurance” of the old Gospel hymn, and the next minute, there was not.

The experience of doubt is seldom easy, often painful. Doubt that is worthy of our attention in a spiritual sense, usually has to do with questioning something on a deep level – something that we have relied on, something we thought we needed to survive, or to have life make any sense at all. And yet I have called this sermon “The JOY of Doubt.” It sounds like an oxymoron. Doubt is a big part of our faith as Unitarian Universalists. We see doubt as a necessary and nourishing part of the spiritual journey, not something to be feared but embraced. And this is not easy.

Sometimes we doubt things that are given to us, like the faith we were born into. We no longer believe in the God or the Christ our parents presented us. And doubt can also go in the other direction. There are children raised by atheist parents who doubt the certainty of there being NO God. A friend and colleague of mine was raised by proud, secular parents. “God is a crutch,” she would snidely say. And then, she said, “I had a crisis of faith. I got some.” There are some great lions of skepticism that can coolly question what our parents have taught us about God and walk away, bearing no marks, but for most of us it's a car wreck.

Doubt is the questioning of any certainty. And I don't care how level-headed and

reasonable you are, there are some things you want to be certain about. If nothing else, the effectiveness of being level-headed and reasonable. And doubt shatters this. There are many things we rely upon and don't know it. Whether it's the existence or the goodness of God, or the durability of your marriage, or the skills of your child's oncologist, doubt is a shatterer, a disrupter of the order of your universe.

Jennifer Michael Hecht, on whose summary of Job I based our reading this morning, wrote a marvelous book about this topic: *Doubt: A History*, which I wholeheartedly recommend to you. She was also interviewed a few years ago on NPR's "Speaking of Faith", and you can find the interview online in their archived episodes. Hecht is a champion of doubt's benefits, a chronicler of doubt's history, an advocate for doubt's dignity. In other words, people, she's one of ours.

I don't think she's a UU, actually, but she has heard of us, and we're in her book, which covers "great doubters and their legacy of innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson". I appreciated her sincere respect of both doubt and faith, considering them to be not opponents, but friends. In fact, she insists, that it's only been in modern times that doubt has been thought of as a rejection of faith. In many times and places, doubt has been what's spurred people to greater understanding in their faith. Now, doubt and belief are in what she calls a "partisan rut", with both thinking that to listen to the other is to give points away to the enemy camp. Believers, she says, can't accept the reasonableness of doubt, which ignores the feelings of faith. Doubters are hard put to accept the feelings of faith – which can provide none of the evidence they desire. Both must be forgiven their failings, she advises. And both are part of the same conversation.

And sometimes we're closer together than you'd think. My husband Robert and I both took her "Scale of Doubt" quiz which is also online at the Speaking of Faith website. I think of him as the agnostic, and of myself as the mystic – but our "doubt scores" were only a few points apart. I doubted more than he thought; he felt more faith than I thought.

We all experience the same "contradictory information" Hecht says, about the nature of the universe. Great believers and great doubters (and I love that notion that both believers and doubters can be great) – but both great believers and great doubters live between two divergent realities: One reality is what she calls the world of in our heads and in our lives. This is a meaningful, human world of reason and plans, love and purpose. The other reality is the world beyond human life – an equally real world with no sign of caring or value, planning, judgment, love or joy. We don't have clear evidence which one is more "real". In other words, is there any ultimate meaning or purpose? Or is everything random, indifferent and incoherent? We have evidence of

both realities all the time, we have contradictory evidence for both views. “We live in a meaning rupture”, she says, “because we are human and the universe is not.”

Great believers and great doubters are people who care about this rupture. We like wrestling with the questions. We are not the ones who have decided it's not worth bothering about, and hit the mall.

The story of Job is one of the great moments in the history of doubt. And it's a great moment in the Bible. Job really disturbs a lot of notions people have about the Bible. It's hard to understand how the Book of Job made it into the Bible, in the first place. If you think of the Bible as a source of comfort in your troubles, don't read Job. If you think of the Bible as providing consistent moral instruction, and “answers to life's persistent questions”, don't read Job. And if you want clear and persuasive evidence for believing in an all-powerful, straightforward and uncomplicated God, one that jumps in the shower with you any time you need him, you really don't want to read Job.

The Book of Job is a definite departure from the standard Old Testament view of the divine, and the world. Before Job, the show belonged strictly to God. God decided whether human beings were living up to God's standards, how they stacked up against his purpose. G.K. Chesterton imagines Job asking: “But what is the purpose of God? Is it worth the sacrifice even of our miserable humanity? It is easy enough to wipe out our own paltry wills for the sake of a will that is grander and kinder. But is it grander and kinder? Let God use his tools; let God break his tools. But what is he doing, and what are they being broken for?” (GK Chesterton, *Introduction to The Book of Job*)

Job is a story for doubters. It is the doubter's handbook, it is our vindication, our full permission to question God, and give God a piece of our minds. So why is it in the Bible? “The great religious texts,” writes Jennifer Hecht, “are all a terrific jumble of affirmation and denial, and the greatest of them record valiant efforts to reconcile these impulses.” The Job story is simply more obvious about it than most.

He was a pious and upright man, rewarded for his goodness, it was thought, by his God. That's how things were believed to have worked at that time. God didn't give away blessings for free. And proof that you were a good man or woman was in your prosperity, your reward from God. The ancient Hebrews invented the prosperity gospel. And as the story shows, Joel Osteen and his cottage religious industry of prosperity gospel churches have nothing on the ancient Hebrews. In their view, not only would God make you rich if you were good, they argued, if you weren't rich, if you weren't successful, it was proof that you must have done something pretty bad.

This sounds cruel to our ears, but it actually provided a lot of meaning for people

at this time. For awhile, the ancient Hebrews were winning wars and attributing their victories to God. Then they started losing, their temples were destroyed, and they were forced to live in exile. Now if their pagan neighbors experienced defeat, they would assume that they had simply attached themselves to the wrong god, and chose another one, hoping for better treatment. The Jews were different. By ascribing meaning to suffering as punishment from a just and powerful God, they assumed the universe was made of moral forces, and not just clever alliances. The human, meaning-rich universe view of reality won over the indifferent, random universe. (Hecht, *Doubt, a History*) There was just one hitch. It didn't always add up.

Job is a pious man. He played fair. God and Satan did not. And I don't think we are ever that far from this sort of thinking, even now, even with our variety of beliefs about God and the nature of the universe. How many of us believe that if we eat well, exercise regularly, don't drink or smoke, that we will live to a ripe old age, with all our faculties? Getting cancer, or developing Alzheimers does not figure into this belief. How many of us believe that if we are kind to others, if we are good to our spouses and our children, our marriages will be long-lasting, our children will always seek our company? Divorce and estrangement do not figure into this belief. Life can seem surprisingly capricious and – dare I say it – unfair. The forces of the universe can feel like God and the Devil placing their malicious bets.

In the beginning of the Job story, God and the Devil acted more like the gods in the Greek tales, who were fairly indifferent to us humans, except when we could provide amusement. All those who present Job as a story of God's justice and God's reward for loyalty, must just blip over this part. And yet, during even the worst of all these plagues, when Job's wife urges him to curse God and die, he won't. “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away”, he says. “Blessed be the name of the Lord”. I'll have to admit, that as much as I think Job's acceptance is a spiritually mature one, I also don't like him very much at this point. If I were Job's wife, I would wonder where Job the human being was, where his human emotions were. I would wonder how much he really loved his children.

The expression, “the patience of Job” obviously doesn't take into account the next part of the story. Job's three friends come to comfort him. At first they do what friends really ought to do at a time like this. Just show up. Listen. Don't try to come up with wise, wonderful words. Who knows, if their support of him gives him the courage to say the first real, human thing we've heard from him – *I curse the day I was born. Why did I have a mother to nurse me? Why did I have to enter this world, if only to suffer?*

They get a little spooked when he says this. They try to “reassure” him by telling him that God was punishing him for his sins. And then doubt hits the stage in full force.

He tells them no. He tells them he is innocent. He does what great doubt does throughout the ages, it questions the world as it is. That is where we find meaning. Not necessarily in understanding why something is so. But in breaking apart what no longer is true to see what is.

Job rails at God. He shakes his fist at God. He curses God, argues with God, demands justice. *I believed what you said about “the righteous man” and the “blessings of God”. Where did it get me? And what do I base my life on, now?*

Facing our serious doubts takes tremendous courage. Taking our doubt seriously is going to cost us something. Sometimes it involves years of warning signs, or inklings, some sense that something is not right. And for as long as we can possibly ignore these feelings, we do. Sometimes we give in to doubt because we must. We have no other choice. And we face the cost. We face losing the approval of our family, or even the immediate world in which we live. We face losing the notion that things work out, there is a just universe, if I do what I'm supposed to, I will be blessed. And yet somehow, we cannot give up on our human side, the side of us that knows there is love in the world, there are blessings, there are wonders. I know this is a strange word to use to describe cosmic doubters, but it takes *faith* that those things still exist. It takes faith to know that there is more beyond what we previously believed to be true.

And that is the joy of doubt. When we learn that there *is* something more than what we once believed. The world is grander and more complex and sometimes even more wonderful than we imagined.

In the story of Job, God does finally make an appearance. God answers Job's accusations – after a fashion. God doesn't answer his questions about meaning and justice, God does not defend himself. He just asks more questions. “Have you walked in the depths of the oceans? Have the gates of death been opened to you? Where does light come from? And where darkness? Have you entered into the treasures of the snow? Does the rain have a father?” He gives no answers, just piles on the mystery and paradox of the universe, the “weird glory” of the world.

Here's how the story ends in the text, what happens after the stare-down between God and Job. Job caves. He says, “You are God – and you are right. I just didn't understand. Please forgive me.” Accepting that you can't change your fate is one thing, but Job grovels. He plays ball. And he gets all the property back, gets a whole new family, and lives to 140 years. It just doesn't jibe with most human experience. It smacks of propaganda. God-touting, doubt-squashing propaganda.

Some scholars believe this ending is tacked on. Job probably comes from at least

two sources. There is a folktale that is possibly older than the Hebrew story, sometimes attributed to the Mesopotamians. This folktale is placed in a “framework” that complies with the Jewish theology of the times, which needed to tie everything up in a neat bow. “God really is in charge. We really do suffer for a reason. Get in line.” In this framework, you simply put away your questions, recognized yourself as part of God's purpose, and begged for God's mercy. This is what Job does, and it doesn't seem to jibe with the rest of the story.

And yet what remains most vividly are the questions and honest accusations of God. What remains is the cryptic, humbling answers to these questions, the weird glory, the paradox of the universe. The contradictory evidence, the feelings of faith. The unanswered questions.

This past week, I visited my family in Minnesota. I went to see my father, now 86, and living alone for the first time. My stepmother, Marilyn, is in what my father stubbornly calls “the old folks home”, refusing to use the term “care facility” that makes his children feel better about it. My father was thinner than I can ever remember, slower, his eyes sad and dull. He can't take care of her anymore, he simply can't give her what she needs. He misses her. She is more alert with better care, better groomed, better fed, and much, much safer. But she is also confused and frightened, sometimes, about where she is. This was not the deal they signed up for, when they saved their money, took care of their home, and promised to be together forever. It is not fair. And it was hard to witness. Answers to a question like, “How did this happen?” doesn't come.

There are only small moments. It's really all we have. We sit in the lobby with Marilyn, and the sing-along lady comes. Since we're approaching the Fourth of July, she plays and sings patriotic songs, “You're a Grand Old Flag” and “The Star-Spangled Banner.” She moves into her repertoire of old hymns. “Blessed Assurance,” “Abide with Me.” And my stepmother is singing. Serenely, with obvious pleasure. In some mysterious region of her mind there is some protected spot that remember the words. She closes her eyes and sings.

My father and I play cribbage. We are a card-playing family, it is our easiest form of being together, going back to my earliest memories. I watched him play gin rummy with my mother; he taught us kids card games and played with us. He cannot shuffle as well, his hand strength has deteriorated. But he can count points – counts the points in my hand faster than I can. We can utter the familiar, silly patter of cribbage. Counting your points, you say, “15-2, 15-4, and there ain't no more.” Or “15-2, 15-4, 15-6, and the rest don't mix.” He has tremendous card sense, which I never quite got, and is a keen competitor. I lament the paltry two points in my hand, and he says, “Still too

many.” He wins by a landslide, skunking me in one game and double-skunking me in the next. And I like it.

Why is there suffering? Does the universe make sense? Is there a God directing it all for some good purpose? Like Job, like all great doubters and believers, we wrestle with these questions, and the wrestling – not the answers - gives us a larger sense of the world, a truer idea of God. Sometimes we wrestle. And sometimes we sing old songs and we play cards. May our lives be enough. Amen.