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The book of Job has been read by some as a work of historical biography even though it is actually a fictional theological reflection.

To read it as historical fact is genre confusion.

Briefly put, the book argues that, when we suffer a loss, it is not a punishment for displeasing God.

In the narrative, Job's so-called friends keep telling him that he has brought suffering on himself by offending God.

Even his wife counsels Job to curse God and die,

yet Job remains true to God and swears to all who will listen that he has done nothing to warrant his suffering and loss.

In the end, of course, God validates Job.

When we misread the Book of Job as a biography, it allows us to ignore this theological point.

We instead focus on Job's personality, his supposed patience, rather than on the story as a whole.

We focus on Job, in other words, rather than on the Book of Job.

We even get that wrong.

The book does not characterize Job as patient.

It depicts him as arguing vehemently against his accusers and demanding an audience with God.

Missing the point in this manner is not limited to modernity.

Two millennia ago, the pharisees ignored the theology of the Book of Job when they asked Jesus, “Who sinned that this man was born blind, him or his parents?”

Jesus tells them that the man’s blindness is unrelated to sin, but that “he was born blind that God’s works might be revealed in him.”

Of course, there are many examples of people telling others that their suffering is the result of sin.

It happened with HIV, with Hurricane Katrina, with floods in England.

When the south transept of Yorkminster was struck by lightning and burned, some people claimed it was because of the consecration there of the controversial Bishop of Durham.

In response to these unfounded claims, my religion professor quipped, “If that was God’s doing, then God has poor timing and a lousy aim” because the consecration was three days prior and did not occur in the south transept.

Why do we misread Job?

It allows us to take the easy way out.

When someone suffers, instead of being called to compassion, we can join with Job's friends and simply say, "You deserved it."

More fundamentally, why do we misread the Bible, in general?

Why do we treat it as an owner's manual the secrets of which we must mine in order to gain the inside track, rather than as a collection of works calling us into relationships of integrity with God and others?

Well, the more frightened we are, the more we seek simple certainty.

We see evidence of this all around us today.

The problems humanity faces have become great.

Many perils are no longer locally limited, but have worldwide consequences—pandemic, destruction of the natural environment, threats of war—and, like Job's friends, people have responded to these existential threats with denial.

The greater the threat, the more insistent we become.

We think that, the more we tell our story of denial, the more true it will be, but closing our eyes to something that frightens us does not make it go away.

There is a better way.

We can face the big problems if we rest in the knowledge that, whatever happens, God's overall plan for the sacred creation will not be thwarted and God's love for us will never end.

There is a reason that angels always preface the news they bring with "Fear not."

When we are afraid, we no longer hear God's message of profound blessing.

It gets crowded out by other concerns.

I see it happen in churches.

Frightened people begin to shift all that anxious energy to insignificant problems that are controllable, but in doing so, they lose sight of God's blessing.

They forget what we read in Hebrews today.

Not only is Jesus the child of God, but so are we.

"The one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters."

In other words, God pours Godself into the world to create us just as God created Jesus.

We are not made of star stuff, as people like to say, but of God-stuff, and so are the stars.

God blessed us into existence by creating the world.

We are reminded of that original blessing when we enter the narthex and see the

needlepoints of creation, and we recall our connection to God through baptism.

The sacred symbols call us away from the cares of the world and transport us to a deeper awareness of God.

When we accept God's blessing, we have the courage to face what must be faced and need not live in denial.

The friends of Job could have acknowledged that bad things happen to good people, but they were too afraid to admit to themselves that they might be next.

Instead, they chose to see suffering as a sign of God's punishment.

Despite their claims, God is not an abusive parent, one who loves only those who please God all the time.

A parent who says to a child, "I will love you, but only if you do exactly what I want," is not a loving parent at all.

That is emotional blackmail.

Real love is not conditional, but unalterable.

A good parents says, "I will always love you, and because of that, I want to help you to be the you that God created you to be."

A loving parent does not say, "I love you, but I love your sister more."

Favoritism is manipulation, and God does not engage in such practices.

If it is of love, then it is of God.

Conversely, if it is not of love, then it is not of God.

God *is* love, and love is the only thing that is unalterable.

God does not deny love to anyone, ever.

When people suffer, as the writer of Job demonstrated to us, it is not because God is attempting to blackmail us into behaving.

Suffering has a different purpose, one not explored by the author of Job.

That question is, however, addressed in Hebrews, albeit briefly.

We read there that Jesus was made perfect through suffering.

Similarly, we are improved through our own trials.

Our suffering is both an opportunity to let others love us and a demonstration to us of what is truly important.

We can lose a limb, get sick, even die, but nothing is more important than the love we share, than our relationships.

Love is at the foundation of our being because God, who is love, poured Godself into our being to create us.

With love, that is to say, with God, we therefore can face anything.

When you feel that the burdens of the world are too frightening, remember that everything is made from love.