

Biblical Interpretation #2 or Prosperity Theology #1  
Job 41:1-6, 10-17

Interpreting the Bible is important. Interpreting the Bible carefully is one of the privileges we have as faithful Christians.

While studying the lectionary scriptures this past week, I discovered this thought in the Interpreter's Bible. The Interpreter's Bible and the New Interpreter's Bible, shown on display today (on the cart) are some of the primary sources available to United Methodists for having access to some of the best modern scholarship on the Bible. Each of them is twelve volume series that shares two translations of scripture, with detailed explanation of each verse of the Bible (exegesis) and then some suggestions for preaching the material (exposition). The Interpreter's Bible was my primary source when I first started preaching at the age of 19. I looked on the cover of one volume and this is what I learned: "John Shaffer, November 23, 1957, Birthday present from Grandma Radley". Both of these sets are available in the church library.

[When I was first invited to serve a congregation, it was not through the United Methodist system, but through a college professor: Dr. Leonard. He had been recruited to serve a very, very difficult small church fifteen miles south of my college town. He invited me to assist him. His offer was to split the salary if he would do all the preaching and I would do all the work. The congregation had been very clear that they would not accept a college student as their pastor, even though the salary was something like \$960 per year. He assured me that if we had this arrangement, they would be asking for me to be their pastor in one year. And he was correct. After one year of his lectures (lectures, not sermons), they were eager to have me as their pastor. My only regret is that I didn't have him preach on Easter of his year. His 45- minute sermon was so deadly that it killed Easter for at least my year as the pastor. It had been so bad the year before that there was no bump in attendance during my year.

My focus for that first year was the youth program. That particular local church had not been involved in the district and conference activities and with my background of deep involvement, I was able to built a strong program quickly. But more than that, I visited in homes and build a relationship with the congregation. The professor was correct. They asked the superintendent to appoint me as the pastor one year later.

Unfortunately, while my sermons may have been more pleasing than the professor's lectures, they were heavily dependent upon my set of the Interpreter's Bible.]

Today I am sharing some words from the Interpreter's Bible, written by Alexander C. Purdy, who was Professor of New Testament at Hartford Theological Seminary. Writing about one of the lectionary readings today in Hebrews 7:26-28, we read these words: "We conclude our study of this famous chapter with a mingled sense of ancient, faraway days, and of intricate and antiquated modes of thought, however masterfully handled, and yet with an underlying conviction that a massive, valid, spiritual truth is wrapped up in these outmoded forms."

One could focus on the use of words antiquated or outmoded, but I would call you to focus on his search for a "massive, valid, spiritual truth".

This is true of much of the Bible. We are searching for spiritual truth in the midst of ideas that may be outdated. Certainly the material that speaks to scientific issues in the Bible is not always accurate, in my point of view, so I would not be working for that particular view of science to be taught in our schools to my children or to your children.

The lectionary has given us several readings from the Book of Job. We learned how God and Satan made a bargain about Job and how Job suffered greatly because of that bargain. Throughout his torment, he never gave up his relationship to God. He even tried to challenge God, but God quickly put Job "in his place". What is left out of today's reading, which you have heard, is that God was going to punish Job's friends for their poor advice, but Job intervened and they were spared God's wrath. What we are told is that God restored Job's wealth and added to his family. And they lived happily ever after or at least as happy as one can be living in that part of the world.

So what is the spiritual truth to be found in Job? Job is able to make peace with his situation after his dialogue with God. I don't like the fact that he is rewarded so generously after he makes his peace, but that is the record of the story. And it lends support to those who preach prosperity theology. If you read the item in the bulletin provided for you to read while "preparing for worship", you are aware that prosperity theology teaches that "believers, if they do the right things, will receive from God great gifts of health and wealth in this life".

Wikipedia provides this definition: "Prosperity theology or prosperity doctrine is the doctrine that prosperity and success in business is external

evidence of God's favor. The favor may be preordained, or granted in return for prayer or merit making."

Prosperity theology is commonly a part of televangelist and Pentecostal churches, which claims that God wants Christians to be successful in every way, especially in their finances. Proponents of this dogma claim that its purpose is the funding of preaching throughout the world, and is based largely on a bible verse (Deuteronomy 8:18) which says, "But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today." Another important verse might be John 10:10: "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." This is a clear example of taking scripture out-of-context. Counterpoint might be made with Luke 9:25 "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" That doesn't slow them down, for proponents might say: "Why not gain the whole world plus my soul?"

Critics, on the other hand, claim that the doctrine is used by its proponents to become wealthy at the expense of persons who give or that the doctrine's focus on material wealth is misguided. Pat Robertson calls this theory the "Law of Reciprocity" on his show, the 700 Club.

One prominent critic of this theology is quoted in Time magazine as saying "This idea that God wants everybody to be wealthy?" ... "There is a word for that: baloney. It's creating a false idol. You don't measure your self-worth by your net worth. I can show you millions of faithful followers of Christ who live in poverty. Why isn't everyone in the church a millionaire?"

"Baloney!" – I couldn't have said it better. But this is what I do say about it.

Prosperity theology does not fit my life experience.

In my lifetime some of the happiest and most content individuals are not those with lots of money. They have been individuals who were focused on serving others unselfishly with little reference to how much they did or did not have in terms of wealth.

Using that same principle for the book of Job, I must confess that I don't like the ending of the book of Job. It is almost a fairy tale in that we could write at the ending "and they lived happily ever after". This is not true to my experience of life. Relationships do break down without any possibility of restoration.

When parents die, much of our personal history dies with them. As life goes on, we can enjoy other relationships, but they are never quite the same.

When families lose children, having more children does not replace the loss. The pain of loss sticks forever.

One of the greatest tragedies I observed occurred during the Great Alaskan Earthquake. A woman lost all of her children in the tidal wave that hit Whittier, Alaska. In the midst of providing the memorial service, I didn't suggest to her that she could remarry and have three more children to replace the three that were lost at the age of 5, 4 and 2. The pain was real.

[Of the 100+ who died in that 1964 disaster, I conducted memorial services for six persons.]

As I focus on the “message” of Job, it is the message that “God stands with us in our pain” that resonates with my soul. It is not the message that God will make everything turn out okay in this life. And if not in this life, perhaps in the next one. What resonates with my soul is the message that God feels our pain, that God cries with us when we experience loss.

And fortunately, we can look at the story of Job through a different set of lens, lens that are touched by the life and message of Jesus Christ, who also felt sorrow over the loss of friends (Lazarus) and the unfaithfulness of a culture (Jerusalem, O Jerusalem).

One of the best-loved hymns in many hymnals is George Matheson's “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go.” This hymn first appeared in the official paper of the Church of Scotland in 1882. The third stanza of the hymn focuses on the theme of the rainbow. In the original version, Matheson wrote, “I climb the rainbow in the rain.” Somewhere along the way this was changed to the line we know: “I trace the rainbow through the rain.” But first the poet was climbing the rainbow!

This may be shades of Judy Garland, “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”! But Matheson's “pot of gold” at the end of the rainbow was his faith that “the promise is not vain, that morn shall tearless be.” This is a far cry from the easy optimism that at the end of the rainbow is some human hope. At the end of Matheson's rainbow was the biblical hope, and this was the “joy that seekest through pain.” Just as important, I hope that you are actively working to bring joy into other people's pain. And I would hope that, like others before us, including Job, you have found strength in your relationship with God. Amen.