

# A Proper Fear of God or Things Not as They Seem

## Job 1:1; 2:1-10

<sup>1</sup> There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil....

<sup>2</sup> One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. <sup>2</sup> The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." <sup>3</sup> The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason." <sup>4</sup> Then Satan answered the LORD, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. <sup>5</sup> But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." <sup>6</sup> The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life."

<sup>7</sup> So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD AND inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. <sup>8</sup> Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

<sup>9</sup> Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die." <sup>10</sup> But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

The book of Job is masterpiece of religious thought, in which the tragic suffering of a righteous individual occasions a probing theological investigation of the divine economy, was apparently written by someone (not necessarily Israelite) in Edom (or Egypt or Mesopotamia) sometime between the tenth and second centuries BCE as a historical account (or an imaginative parable) all wrapped up in a dramatic presentation replete with superb Hebrew poetry.

However, if you think these things don't happen in real life, let me tell you about three people I know:

My friend Richardo is an elder at the church where Leroy and I were married, raised our children, and attended for over 30 years. Ricardo is a banker by profession. He came from humble beginnings. His father was an assembly worker

in the auto plant and his mother worked in food service at a local hospital. His parents worked hard to give him and his brother the things they did not have, including a college education. He was successful and when a major Michigan bank wanted to be inclusive in hiring, Ricardo was one of the fortunate candidates selected and trained. He was able to serve in various bank branches in minority communities. For a few years he would be in Southwest Detroit and then in Northwest Detroit. He was the one sent wherever he was needed. One day Ricardo got up as usual; had breakfast, dressed in his business suit, kissed his wife goodbye as she went off to her teaching job; made sure his two children were dropped off at their schools; and went to the bank branch where he worked. Mid-day he was informed he was needed in the lobby. As he went to see what was needed, he discovered a man with a gun, trying to rob the bank. To protect his staff, Ricardo approached the gunman, hoping to calm the situation and avert the robbery. However, the robber was frightened and shot Ricardo point blank in the stomach! His recovery was long and painful. He has multiple health difficulty that continue today. He has had a stroke, a heart attack and numerous falls. He is retired now, worries about the well-being of his daughter and son, as well as grandchildren. Ricardo continues to struggle but continues to be faithful to God. His wife said God keeps giving us reasons and occasions to be thankful and praise Him for his many blessings and miracles! The last time I saw Ricardo he was singing in the choir and sharing his testimony of walking with God.

Lynda is a dear friend who has had a challenging few years. She is the first born of her parents and has three younger siblings. The whole extended family is extremely close and expands to include neighbors and friends who need to be included in a holiday meal. In the spring of 2016 Lynda lost her father. This was not noteworthy for most people expect to bury their parents. Two years later in

2018, she received the news that her oldest grandson was lost at sea. Following is an article about the loss:

While I mourn every death in service to our country, Asante K. McCalla's strikes me as particularly noteworthy for its sadness and the mystery surrounding it. Most service-related deaths have a clear cause and explanation. It often does take a while to get to the truth of what actually caused the death. Asante's grieving family is left to wonder, perhaps forever, what happened to their beloved son. He was an "excellent child," according to his adoring mother, herself a Marine Corps veteran. He was a proud Morehouse Man who brushed off the naysayers. Servant leader not too proud to hump sandbags to help those in peril. Inspiration to others. Self-professed "Lifer," who stated career goal was command at sea. Driven and dedicated to succeed. Son of the South, where people who looked like him often had obstacles that others did not have to overcome. Patriot. A "bright shining prince," lost at sea.

Asante, whose name means "Thank you," was one of the best citizens ever produced by this country, and I feel compelled to say "Asante" to his grieving family, both biological and extended. He majored in Sociology at Morehouse, I presume because he had a deep interest in how people interacted with each other. I'm sure that, had he lived longer, he could have shared some of those observations for the benefit of all. What he had learned so far was lost at sea with him.

It is tragic that his story had to end at such a young age, but if his family has anything to say about it, his legacy will long endure. His "last full measure of devotion" will not have been in vain. His family plans to start a scholarship in his name. I can't think of a more fitting tribute. I'm hoping that the Morehouse and Navy families step forward to help make that a reality. I look forward to the day that some aspiring sailor smiles at their scholarship fund check and says, "Asante." The best way the Navy can say thank you to his family is to give them as full and

accurate an account of his loss as is possible under the circumstances. His Mother's impassioned plea for information on Facebook was difficult to watch. Let's hope the family receives some answers, and some closure. Each family suffering such a loss deserves no less.

On September 2, 2020, Navy Times has this article: More than two years after Lt. j.g. Asante McCalla's death, the Navy has yet to determine what happened to the only son of Alicia and Howard McCalla. (Courtesy of Howard McCalla)

His parents have received no answers from the Navy on how their only child died. The 24-year-old Atlanta native disappeared Aug. 19, 2018, while the warship was participating in an exercise off San Diego.

He didn't show up for his 6 a.m. watch shift that morning, and man overboard was sounded about 40 minutes later, according to a line of duty investigation into the junior officer's death obtained by Navy Times.

A massive search of the sea ensued but was eventually called off when the search proved fruitless. Not knowing whether her son accidentally fell, or killed himself, or if something more nefarious took place, haunts Alicia McCalla. She and her husband fear that the long time taken in finding out what happened to their son could mean that foul play was involved. They also wonder how someone could disappear aboard a modern warship.

"That was my only child," Alicia McCalla, a Marine Corps veteran and educator, told Navy Times. "And I could not return to my life as normal. "For whatever reason, it's just taking them an incredibly long time to come to a conclusion," Alicia McCalla said. "And it shouldn't take this long. Two years is just too long." Naturally, this affects the life of his grandmother Lynda. We don't expect to bury our grandchildren!

In the midst of her wait for answers about Asante's death, COVID-19 happened. Lynda's mother and stepfather were living in an assisted living

community, and you remember what happened in senior communities! First came the news that her stepfather Art was in the hospital with COVID, then her mother Connie went to the hospital with COVID...on April 14<sup>th</sup> Art died and his body was misplaced as the hospital staff were overwhelmed by the pandemic. While they were trying to find him, Lynda received a call that her mother was not doing well. The nurses broke the hospital rules and let Lynda visit. Connie died on May 7<sup>th</sup>. The family gathered for their double funeral on June 1<sup>st</sup>.

Lynda serves as a prayer chaplain for her faith community and when I asked her how she was coping she said she finds strength in serving other and helping them through their times of crisis.

Belinda is a friend and coworker. She just published a book about her experience when she and her siblings were taken from their mother and placed in foster care. She relates the abuse and dysfunction; subsequent poor choices in relationships, mental health challenges, and substance abuse. She also relates the generational struggle of her siblings, her children, and her nieces and nephews. When I asked how she managed in the midst of the struggles she said she held on to God's Word, sometimes by a mere thread! It has not been easy but she reminds herself that God has His hands on her, and her change will come. When she falls down, she get back up, always remembering how she cannot do it on her own but will have success with God's help.

My friends remind us the issues of Job are real; whether it is losing wealth because of thieves, war or natural disasters, losing loved ones, or the stresses and strains of life, we know all too well the pain and suffering of our own lives. The book of Job tells of these and actually scores three main points: first, while some suffering is brought upon ourselves through our own sin and foolishness, at least some, perhaps even most suffering is undeserved; second, to argue contrariwise misconstrues the character of the person who suffers unjustly as well as that of

God; and third, how God can be affirmed as good and just in the light of such innocent suffering is a mystery beyond our finite human comprehension.

According to Israel's wisdom tradition, "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7). But what is meant by "the fear of God"? John Calvin distinguished between two kinds of religious fear: servile fear and proper fear. Whereas most people fear God's punishment, true believers "fear offending God more than punishment." Servile fear is fear for oneself. Proper fear, by contrast, is respect and reverence for God. James M. Gustafson has written of the contrast between a "utilitarian" religion that justifies religious faith by its benefits for human persons and a genuinely "theocentric" piety and fidelity focused on serving God and God's purposes without reference to the self. Job himself articulates the question in slightly different terms when his wife suggests he curse God on account of his misfortune: "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" (2:10). Underlying these various formulations, the issue is the same: why be religious at all? Can we truly serve God for God's sake alone, apart from reference to the self?

Christianity has historically been a religion of redemption focused on the salvation of human beings. There is a proper concern with human well-being that motivates us to work toward the eradication of disease and oppression, as well as to find solutions to the devastating effects upon persons of hurricanes and other natural disasters. But, theologically considered, the issue is how we understand our place in the universe in relation to the rest of God's creation. Do we see ourselves as being in the center of things? Did God make the world for the sake of humanity? Has God designed the world in such a fashion that persons always get what they deserve? If not, then human happiness is not the end for which God created the world. Does this not suggest that our concern for salvation, however conceived,

needs to be subordinated to that of discerning our appropriate place within the whole of creation?

Job is depicted as a model of godly piety and fidelity. In spite of everything he suffers, Job "persists in his integrity" (2:3). He serves God without expecting reward or complaining about misfortune. He does not put himself in the center of things. There comes a point, however, when even Job has to call into question the justice of God, in light of the enormous suffering inflicted upon him. Such lamentation is legitimate, even for a person of faith. We thus learn that, in the world as designed by God, suffering is not always the consequence of one's sin and virtue does not always entail happiness. Someone who was in the middle of a deep personal crisis remarked, "God doesn't owe me anything." Like Job, this person understood that true service of God is not motivated by hope of reward for oneself. That is the kind of fidelity exemplified by Job. Such is the wisdom born of a proper fear of God. **Paul E. Capetz**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).