

“Where the Wild Things Are”  
Job 42:10-17  
The Rev. Mary Kathleen Duncan  
October 18, 2020

For our second scripture reading today we turn to the wisdom book of Job, the 42<sup>nd</sup> chapter, verses 10-17 -

*And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. <sup>11</sup>Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring. <sup>12</sup>The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. <sup>13</sup>He also had seven sons and three daughters. <sup>14</sup>He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. <sup>15</sup>In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job’s daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. <sup>16</sup>After this Job lived for one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children’s children, four generations. <sup>17</sup>And Job died, old and full of days.*

The word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

For an entire year of life, from age one to two, our son Teddy’s favorite book was “Where the Wild Things Are”. We would read it daily...multiple times, daily. And for Halloween that year, Teddy was Max, complete with the wolf suit and crown. My enduring memories from our summer vacation that year are reading that book to Teddy while we lounged on the couch of our Airbnb rental. It rained a lot on that vacation, so in my memories rain is gently falling, Teddy’s head rests under my chin and I begin the story – “The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind and another his mother called him '**WILD THING!**' (*here Teddy would take out his pacifier to say his version of “wild thing” and then pop it back in*) and Max said 'I'LL EAT YOU UP!' so he was sent to bed without eating anything.”<sup>1</sup> If you’re not familiar with this children’s story, it follows the nighttime journey of a boy named Max and his emotions. A forest begins to grow in his room, an ocean tumbles by with a little sailboat just for him, and then Max travels to the place of the wild things. While there, Max has adventures, gets to know the wild things intimately, and is even made king of the wild things. Written and illustrated by Maurice Sendak and containing merely 338 words, “Where the Wild Things Are,” was published in 1963. It won the Caldecott Medal in 1964, but was actually banned for its first few years in publication by certain libraries and schools. Sendak used updated images from his own childhood – caricatures of his wide extended family that he sketched as a boy – to speak in an honest and straight-forward manner to children about the reality of life’s ups and downs, emotions, and the steadfast constants of home and care that should be the norm for all children. Some educators thought that it promoted scary and negative themes for children.

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<sup>1</sup> *Where the Wild Things Are*

Those sentiments, however, faded into obscurity and “Where the Wild Things Are” remains a favorite children’s story that is featured near the top of any and all listings of best, beloved, most beautiful children’s stories.

The book of Job from the Hebrew Bible is also, in its own right, a literary masterpiece. Clocking in at just over 18,000 words it is known for its rich storytelling, poetry and prose, innate wisdom, and theological discourse on the question of human suffering. It is most likely the product of several authors who, during the Babylonian exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, finally wrote down an oral folktale that had existed for many generations. The book follows the story of a righteousness man named Job who is blessed with family, land, livestock, and contentment, but has it all taken away as a result of a divine bet. Over the course of 42 chapters Job suffers, converses with his friends, and, ultimately, with God. In chapters 38-41 God answers Job out of the whirlwind with beautiful and haunting poetry that extols God’s mighty creative power in the world. The book of Job has been studied by countless scholars, incorporated into art, literature, film, and music, and brought comfort to many people of faith in times of great suffering and despair. In his brilliant book, *Messengers of God*, Elie Wiesel begins his Biblical portrait of Job in this way –

“Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there lived a man, just and wise, humble and charitable. His riches and his virtues aroused jealousy in heaven and on earth. His name was Job. Through the problems he embodied and the trials he endured, he seems familiar – even contemporary. We know his history for having lived it. In times of stress it is to his words that we turn to express our anger, revolt, or resignation. He belongs to our most intimate landscape, the most vulnerable part of our past. Job: a moment of obsession, a gleam of anguish, a cry contained but not stifled trying to pierce our consciousness, a mirror a thousand times shattered reflecting the image of a solitude bursting with madness. In him come together legend and truth; in him come together silence and the word. His truth is made of legends, his words are nourished by silence. Whenever we attempt to tell our own story, we transmit his.”<sup>2</sup>

The portion of Job’s story that we have before us today is from the very end. Although they didn’t have these designations in the original Hebrew, most of us would call it the epilogue – a concluding section that rounds out the design of a literary work, the last paragraph that gives us one more glimpse into the world of the story and mind of a character, the benediction that wraps things up in a nice little bow. Currently, in the worship and preaching life of Westminster, we are in the midst of a sermon series on stories of challenge and response in the Bible. The book of Job definitely fits this bill. But the epilogue has a specific challenge for us to explore today. I’ll go ahead and admit to you – I both love and hate these verses of Job. On the one hand, I like that the story ends on a high note for Job, with a happy ending and a dinner party that, in my mind, goes late into the night. On the other hand, anger simmers in my heart when I think of the children Job lost and the great physical, mental, and emotional suffering he underwent. How can the restoration of Job’s fortunes make up for the blessings he lost? Duke Divinity professor Ellen Davis voices the challenge much more eloquently – “Job’s epilogue is a portrait of tenacious faith, stunning not so much for its reward as for its cost. For

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<sup>2</sup> *Messengers of God*, 211

what must it have cost Job, who had been stripped to the bone and borne it...to ‘reinvest’ in family and community life, with its obligations, ethical ambiguities, and terrible risks?”<sup>3</sup>

The losses that Job experiences are almost unimaginable. The magnitude of his suffering is immense. But, we know of examples of this in the world, situations not too far removed from our lives today, where modern-day Jobs suffer in horrifying and overwhelming ways – the Holocaust, the enslavement of Black people in America, the Rwandan Genocide of the 1990’s, the Syrian refugee crisis today, the poor of Latin America who are at the mercy of climate change. Suffering is a reality of human life and for some – especially the vulnerable in our societies – it is immense and unjust and heartbreaking. But what one of us hasn’t lost something – maybe not equal to the magnitude of Job’s loss, but similar to the manner of Job’s loss – unexpected, sudden, gut-wrenching, life altering, faith-challenging? Like Wiesel claims in his portrait of Job, don’t we know his history from having lived some portion of it? Can’t we crawl into the story and attempt to understand? Can’t we put ourselves in his shoes? And if we did, could our faith in the divine come out intact? Could we accept a restoration of fortunes without drowning in the anger of our losses?

In the story, “Where the Wild Things Are,” we observe a little boy who is much like Job. In a way that is developmentally appropriate for his age, Max is introduced to the reality of life – that it is full of wonder, adventure, confusing realizations, and even suffering and pain. Max’s story, like Job’s, is a journey seeking understanding. Both encounter the wild things of life and come out intact. Both Max and Job dig into the depths of their humanity and gain insight. Each story ends around a table and a meal.

There is a word from both of our scripture passages today that jumps out at me. I wonder if it jumps out at you, too. It is the word upon which the challenge this passage presents is centered – RESTORED. “And the Lord RESTORED the fortunes of Job when he prayed for his friends.” “When the Lord RESTORED the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.” God wouldn’t have had to restore anything if he hadn’t taken it in the first place. Wouldn’t that have been better...easier...less painful? Restored in Job 42 and Psalm 126 is the Hebrew word *shub*, whose primary meaning is actually RETURN. God *returned* Job’s fortunes in the epilogue. God *returned* the fortunes of his people when they left exile in Babylon. Maybe God didn’t take anything from Job in the first place. Maybe life did. Because that’s what it is to be created in the image of God and to live freely upon this earth. And maybe it is something to be in awe over, not to stew in anger about. For out of goodness, God returns that which we did not even deserve in the first place and what God did not take. In English, return can be a verb or a noun. In the Hebrew of this passage, return is a verb. But let’s massage it a bit and examine an English definition of the NOUN return. Return as a noun is defined as a recurrence...as in the return of the moon each month. God returns to us again and again and again with grace. For all of our days. But there is also a sense in which Job himself returns. Even after unimaginable losses, Job returns to the simple joy of gathering with loved ones around the table. Job returns to his roots, extending hospitality to those who visit his home. He even gives his daughters an inheritance alongside his sons, something that was unheard of in the culture of his time! Job also returns to a renewed and deeper relationship with God, openly and honestly praying to God twice in chapter 42.

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<sup>3</sup> *Job and Jacob: The Integrity of Faith*, 219

In my wrestling's with this passage, in exploring the challenge I feel when I read the word's of Job's epilogue, I found some insights from other pastors and scholars that helped me to see Job's epilogue in a new way. One of the most profound was from Rabbi Harold Kushner who ends his thoughts on Job in this way – "Having heard God say to Job, It will not be a perfect world, but it will be a world marked by great natural beauty, inspiring human creativity, and astonishing human resilience, and I will be with you in all of those times, I, like Job respond: I repudiate my past accusations, my doubts, even my anger. I have experienced the reality of God. I know that I am not alone, and vulnerable mortal that I am, I am comforted."<sup>4</sup> The opening sentence of John Calvin's theological life's work says, "Nearly all wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of knowledge of God and of ourselves."<sup>5</sup> Along his journey, Job most certainly got to know himself and God. Whether we know the intricacies and characters of Job's story well, or whether we just know them because we are human, the epilogue tells us all that we need to know. All of life is a gift. Every blessing, joy, privilege we enjoy is undeserved and points to the goodness of God. Suffering is a part of all life. We can't escape it. It is part of the world in which we live. Regardless of our righteousness, accomplishments, backgrounds, or hard work. We can strive to relieve it for others when we can. We can rail against God and ask questions of the divine to try and better understand. But ultimately, we must rest in the divine mystery that is life and God. And having emerged from a season of suffering, we can return to a renewed sense of relationship with God with more knowledge of self and more knowledge of the divine.

In the children's story, Max also returns from the place of the wild things – "Max stepped into his private boat and waved good-bye  
and sailed back over a year  
and in and out of weeks  
and through a day  
and into the night of his very own room  
where he found his supper waiting for him  
and it was still hot."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *When Bad Things Happened to a Good Person*, 202

<sup>5</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume 1*, 35

<sup>6</sup> *Where the Wild Things Are*