

JOB AND THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING

Every once in a great while I chance upon a spiritual book which I not only delight in reading but also want to chew on and ponder prayerfully and save to share with others. One such is Richard Rohr's [*Job and the Mystery of Suffering*](#) (Crossroad Publishing, 2011). I received the book via Amazon.com from someone who comes to see me for spiritual direction. Rohr says of The Book of Job that it is "the perennial ungodly story that must be told whenever God makes no sense and we are tempted to tell stories other than the story of faith."

Job is an unusual book in the bible: no covenant, no law, no clear ten commandments. Job is not even an Israelite but, rather, a God-fearing pagan who seeks the truth and will not compromise on it. Truth is the best ally of God. Job's counselors appeal to tradition and law and common sense. Interestingly, they keep talking about God but only Job wants talk to God. They want to foresee what God will do while Job just wants to see God. The counselors "use every stock phrase we've ever heard from clergy stereotypes or read in pious books. And they are rather intelligent but the conclusion of The Book of Job is that none of these remedies is adequate or even correct."

Job's prayer (which includes anger and complaints to God) can be a kind of compendium of how we might learn to pray. As Job puts it in Chapter 13:12, rebuking the counselors: "Your old maxims are proverbs of ash. Your retorts, retorts of clay. Silence! Now I will do the talking, whatever may befall me. I put my flesh between my teeth. I take my life in my hands."

Job is going to risk everything. He is going to talk back to God. He seeks truth more than the private religious experience of Eliphaz, the orthodoxy of Bildad or the conventional wisdom of Zophar." Let him kill me if he will; I have no other hope than to justify my conduct in his eyes. This very boldness gives promise of my release, since no godless man would dare to appear before him" (13:15-16). Job is wrestling with the mystery of evil and suffering. He knows or assumes that God is a benevolent God, even his friend. He contrasts this to an illogical, inconsistent and unjust world. Which of us has never wrestled with that same conundrum?

Job is not setting any condition on God's answers, only demanding that he might truly talk to God, make his case, have it heard: "O that today I might find him, that I might come to his judgment seat! I would set out my cause before him, and fill my mouth with

arguments; I would learn the words with which he would answer, and understand what he would reply to me." (23:3-5). The key here is less looking to God as some answer or answerer and more seeing what counts is a leap of trusting faith in the presence of God, even if he remains hidden in a cloud of our unknowing. "This I know, that my Avenger (go-el) lives and He, the last, will take his stand on earth. After my awakening, he will set me close to Him, and from my own flesh I shall look on God. He whom I see will take my part, these eyes will look on Him and find no stranger" (19:25-27).

Rohr reminds us that faith also means being willing to live without answers. True friends, unlike Job's counselors who spew out what they learned in the catechism, engage in redemptive listening." One can't ultimately provide the answers for others. All one can do is walk with the other and help others rightly to hear themselves, to be there, to understand. "Job's God is not just looking onto the suffering of the world. He is participating in it." In this way, as Rohr argues it, Job is a foretaste of Jesus. "Jesus becomes the new Job, the one pleading for justice from God, pleading that God will defend his case. When we have studied and prayed our way through The Book of Job we are much more prepared to understand the passion of Jesus."

When finally Elihu embarks on a long hymn to God's wisdom and omnipotence, God effectively intervenes and shuts him up, as God appears out of the whirlwind. Note God does not really answer any of Job's questions but, instead, poses questions to Job. Finally, in chapter 42, we get Job's final answer: "I know that you are all-powerful. What you conceive, you can perform. I am the man who obscured your designs with my empty-headed words. I have been holding forth on matters I cannot understand, on marvels beyond me and my knowledge. I knew you then only by hearsay; but now, having seen you with my own eyes, I retract all I have said." None of Job's questions are answered but he has seen! In the end, God is less an answer than a presence and an encounter!

Ultimately, suffering does have meaning and even, through God's grace, a kind of redemption. Rohr notes: "I believe--if I am to believe Jesus-- that God is suffering love. This God who suffers the most is also the God who saves the most. The wounded one is the redeemer. Thus, many cultures loved to picture Jesus as wounded from head to foot, and we thought the iconography was overdone. But it is exactly the same image that begins *The Book of Job*: "Job was struck down with malignant ulcers from the sole of his foot to the top of his head" (2:8). "He who carries all, understands all, He who has suffered all, has a universal compassion. He who has been afflicted and lived is the bearer of hope. The wounded one is always the gift given."

In the end, God burns with anger at the counselors of Job "for not having spoken correctly about me, as has my servant Job." (42:7). Moreover, Job then prays for his friends (42:9-10). Job's redemption is not complete until he prays for those who caused him such pain.

As Rohr puts it: "No piece of religious literature teaches the way of descent more daringly and effectively than *The Book of Job*. Even the name Job is considered by some linguists to be an acronym for 'Where is the Father?'. The name and the story cry out against a darkness that refuses to reveal itself—and a path that does not, at first, feel like life at all. Surely, no book is less an answer book than *The Book of Job*. No book is less therapeutic or less "helpful," as we ordinarily use the term. It fixes nothing, explains nothing and dismisses those who even try to explain. Surely, it is amazing that anyone dared to write or publish such a book. It shows all the signs of authentic divine revelation but reveals hardly anything that we first hoped for. Yet the story of Job realigns and regenerates the soul in ways that few books can." It shows that when we encounter God as a person our wounds (real though they are) can become sacred.

Finally, Rohr points to an important sub-plot of Job: "The radical critique of religion that emerges from *The Book of Job*. All our usual religious responses are judged worthy of God's anger at his people for not having spoken correctly about me" (42.7). Imagine God saying that about religious ideology, orthodoxy, conventional wisdom and heroic idealism [the varying stances of the counselors of Job]. Yet these are the ever-so-close masquerades and substitutes for authentic faith that characterize the four good friends of Job. They are dangerous precisely because they are "friends"—so close, so common, so connected to "the real thing" but off kilter if they do not bring us to a true encounter with the living and mysterious God."