

## **"God Laughs and Plays"**

Job 38:1-3; 39:5-8,13-18

Luke 15:1-2,11-32

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The heavenly council meets and God sees the satan come in. He has been scouring the earth as God's prosecuting attorney observing how people live. God asks the satan, "have you noticed my servant Job? There is none on earth as righteous." To which the satan immediately answers, "Yes, but would he be righteous for nothing? Or do you suppose Job is worshiping you for what he can get out of it? What about taking away Job's blessings and see what happens." This seems to pique God's curiosity. So they strike a test. Without Job or anyone on earth knowing of the test, God takes away all Job's possessions, all his children die, and Job's health is ruined. Painful sores cover his skin.

Thus begins the story of Job. And the question is set: does obedience reap prosperity, while disobedience reaps adversity? Is this the way life is? Is this the truth that should form our attitudes and shape our daily decisions?

The three friends who come to console Job think so. They sit with Job while he goes through seven days of silent suffering. But then Job begins to rail against God because of his condition. And as the complaints ratchet up the friends begin to berate Job: surely you've done something grievously wrong, else all this bad stuff wouldn't be happening to you. This makes Job even more angry.

The religious position of the three friends represents a theology that we call today, "the law of moral retribution." A belief that everything must balance, that life's scales must be absolutely level, that life is "tit for tat." It means life lived strictly according to law.

And as Job's discourses with each of the three friends progress Job himself gets caught up in essentially the same mode. He begins to press God for a court hearing. He wants to subpoena God, make God present evidence so he can prove his innocence.

So, here we have it: life lived according to legal precedent.

I learned several weeks ago that Joan Didion's book, The Year of Magical Thinking is being made into a stage production. You may remember that the day before New Year's eve of 2003 Didion and her husband, John, had just come home from the hospital where their daughter was in critical condition. They were settling in for the evening when John had a sudden, massive heart attack and died. Joan Didion's grief was so debilitating that it took eight or nine months before she would be able to write of her experience. Later when asked what she meant by "magical thinking" she said, as an example, that in her immediate state of shock and denial she supposed somehow that if just the right words were said in the funeral liturgy, her husband would appear and would not be dead. She explained that it was something like a small child thinking, "If I am a good girl, my parents won't get a divorce." Magical thinking.

This may be familiar to us. There are times when the crunch comes we get caught up in "magical thinking"- backed into a corner, we revert to a bargaining mode: if when I pray, I

bow my head, and close my eyes, and cup my hands, and assume a properly pious feeling, my prayer will be answered. We resort deal-making.

Thinking and living according to law.

We do some crazy things, don't we? We have some weird ideas. I'll let you Presbyterians in on a secret about the Methodists if you promise not to tell them. Some Methodists think that when they receive Holy Communion, the Eucharist, they must come to the chancel, and kneel, and assume the correct spiritual posture. Or it really won't be communion.

But is this the shape we want our faith to take? That life consists of bargaining, that religion is a test? Do we think that life is law, where things must come out right?

We are told in the study of faith-development that at about eleven or twelve years of age children can develop an inflated sense of fairness. I heard two parents tell of an incident while hi a restaurant their ten year old son saw people at the next table start eating without saying a blessing. The ten year old became incensed. "THEY DIDN'T SAY A BLESSING!" Yes, well, ok. "BUT THEY DIDN'T EVEN SAY A BLESSING!" Yeah, too bad. They should have. "BUT THEY ARE EATING!" And his mom and dad almost had to restrain him. Now, that "life must be fan-" stage is good and one a child probably needs to go through. But we don't want to get stuck there, do we?

A counselor once told me that I didn't have many 'laugh lines' in the corners of my eyes. (I didn't tell him that we Freemans don't laugh, we grin.) But it made me think: was I taking myself too seriously? Perhaps I needed to enjoy my own self-righteous indignation a little less.

Life as one big court room. Living according to law. It is interesting that when the test was struck, the satan saw Job's possessions as a protective "hedge" making it easy for Job to be faithful. And later, while Job was contending for an arraignment, he felt himself to be a prisoner to God, that his life was "hedged in" by God. The irony of it is that Job resorted to the same thinking as the three friends.

I have wondered how much Jesus read the Book of Job. He certainly knew the issue involved. He knew how people can live limited strictly to law. When he began to associate with sinners and tax-collectors, he saw the hardness written on the faces of the Pharisees and religious leaders. They grumbled and said, "this man is not a prophet or he wouldn't be eating with these people.

So he told them a parable. A father had two sons. The younger son came to the father and demanded his just share of the inheritance. Give it to me now, no questions asked! Another son, the older brother, was a dutiful person. He stayed at home, always did the right thing. Yet, when the younger brother returned home after squandering all the money, this elder son sullen up with resentment, jealousy, and envy: "This is just not right!"

Yes, Jesus knew how easily we get caught up in tight bargaining. He portrayed it in the older brother. Is this the way we want it? Why let a "tit-for-tat... it's not right.... I've been done wrong" attitude get in the way of enjoying life? Do we want to settle for this when there is so much of life to relish?

I read last week about a man watching his twin two year old sons in the garden. He's sitting there with his daughter in his lap watching the boys eat dirt. He describes the scene hi an

essay: "They were seized with dirt-fever an instant ago, and as admirably direct and forceful young men, quick to act, true sons of the West, they are *going to eat some dirt*, boy, and you'd better step aside....

"The boys are eating so much dirt so fast that much of it is missing their maws and sliding muddily down their chicken chests.... I watch a handful as it travels. It's rich brown stuff, almost black, crumbly. In a moment I will pull the boy over and issue a ticket, but right now I watch with interest as he inserts the dirt, chews meditatively, emits a wriggly worm, stares at it - and eats it, too.

The man observes how the whole earth has its commonality, its origin in dirt- mixed with sun. The man writes: "My daughter and I discuss this process. His little daughter says, 'Maybe there are dirt fairies.... or maybe dirt can read.'

"Maybe my daughter is right. Consider this essay, made by dirt worked in wondrous ways into bone, blood, protein, water, synaptic electricity and words. So why couldn't dirt read and write? Why couldn't dirt lean against a fence with smaller lovelier dirt in his lap, and watch twin dirt demons devour dirt while the world spins in its miraculous mysterious circles, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, without end?" (Duncan)

Makes me wonder, why not make a TV advertisement: EAT MORE DIRT. In the parable the father goes out to the older brother, " Son, the world is God's giant sandbox! Why not enjoy it? After all, there's a party going on."

David James Duncan tells about a white girl at school wondering what it would be like to be that black girl sitting four rows in front of her. Her imagination begins to work. In her mind she becomes the black girl. She puts on her clothes, her skin, her accent, joins her friends after school, goes home to her family, lives that life. Duncan comments, "No firsthand experience is taking place. Nothing newsworthy is happening." Yet a white-girl-turned-fictiously-black is linking skin hue to hue, skin hue to choice of friends and neighborhood, skin hue to opportunity and history. Words she has used without thinking -African, color, white - feel suddenly different. And when the little girl's imaginary game is over these words sound different. Through playful imagination, empathy enters a human heart. In this parable Jesus is trying to get the Pharisees to use their playful imagination. Perhaps then empathy will enter their hearts.

This parable ends without us knowing. Does the older brother lighten up and join the party? We hope so. If only he'll go into the party! What a difference it might make with little brother.

Interestingly enough God has the same problem with Job. Having gotten caught up in this "fair is fair" business, he begins to press hard for litigation. Get God into court. Straighten out God about justice. But God doesn't come to Job in the courtroom. God comes to Job in a whirlwind. In fact, in two whirlwinds.

God wants somehow to capture Job's imagination. To stretch his vistas, to transform his thinking. So God comes in whirlwind.

In the whirlwind God asks Job, where were you when the pillars of creation were laid? Were you present when

the morning stars sang together,  
and all the heavenly beings  
shouted for joy?

And God begins to play with Job. God starts talking about wild animals. Tells Job about the wild ass who roams freely in the desolate wastes, "free at God's hand from the domesticating bonds and driver's shout, free to search steppe, salt land, and mountain for greenery." (*Janzeri*) Then God laughs and tells Job about the stupid ostrich, land locked, his stubby wings flapping wildly. Yet it laughs at the horse and its rider.

God comes in a whirlwind to stretch Job's imagination and—like with the sullen elder brother—to challenge his way of thinking.

In the whirlwind God invites Job and the elder brother to jump the hedge set around them, to turn away from the "give to me and then I'll give to you" mentality.... and to run free in the fields of God's love.... to breathe an unrestricted air like the wild animals. (*Brueggemann*) Because outside the hedge of narrow confining law is a world of overflowing generosity.

God is a partying God. A God who plays. Who laughs. In whose image we are created. A God who delights when we participate in God's laughter. And my friends, when we join in with that laughter -

- + we become more kind
- + when we laugh with God we will never turn away a little child
- + we will heal the rift in our family
- + we will begin to loosen the grip on our dogged preconceptions
- + we will 'learn war no more'
- + we'll listen to the alien and the stranger
- + we will realize that "its not about me"
- + we will certainly tell more jokes
- + and even through our pain we may glimpse God's goodness.

Glory be to God for dappled things-  
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
Landscape plotted and pieced-bold, fallow, and plough;  
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.  
All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: Praise Him.  
"Pied Beauty"  
Gerard Manley Hopkins

\* Title borrowed from the book by David James Duncan

Brueggemann, *Introduction to the OT*

Duncan, David James. *God Laughs and Plays*, Triad Books, 2006

Janzen, J. Gerald. *Job (Interpretation Bible Commentary)*