

Homily for Friday in the Eighteenth Week after Pentecost October 2, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year 2, Proper 21: Job 38:1, 12–21; 40:1–5; Psalm 139:1–9; Luke 10:13–16*

The book of Job is not a short book in the Hebrew Bible. In *The Jerome Bible Commentary*, the late Jesuit scholar Robert MacKenzie, wrote, “The greater part of [Job] is in poetic form; in fact, it is the longest ancient [Hebrew] poem that has survived (perhaps that was ever composed).¹ Its subject is the suffering of a person who is morally and religiously faithful.

“Theodicy,” from the Greek words for God and justice, is often the term name given to this discussion, a discussion that has occupied philosophy and theology since ancient times and across different faith traditions.²

We would have heard a little more of the book this week if there had been no commemorations of Saint Michael, Jerome, and Remigius. My sense of hearing the greater part of Job at the Daily Office for many years now, is that there should be more than six days

¹ R.A.F. MacKenzie, “Job,” *The Jerome Biblical Commentary: Volume I: The Old Testament*, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 511.

² *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. “Theodicy,” 1358.

when we could dwell on this, to use Father MacKenzie's words, "profound theological problem"³ as we find it presented in this book of the Hebrew Bible.

While I was in seminary, Conservative Rabbi Harold Kushner published *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.⁴ It was a New York Times non-fiction bestseller.⁵ Kushner dedicated it to the memory of his son Aaron who died at the age of 14 from a rare, incurable genetic disorder. The book is still in print; over four million copies have been sold. The problem has not gone away.

As appointed, we heard the first verse of chapter 38, "Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind." We skip then to the twelfth verse, "Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it?" I wish that instead of verses 12 through 21, we had heard just verses 1 through 11:

³ Ibid.

⁴ Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981).

⁵ <https://www.tiofnatick.org/who-we-are/clergy/rabbi-laureate-harold-kushner/>, (accessed 2 October 2020).

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. ‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Or who shut in the sea with doors, when it burst forth from the womb; when I made clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed?’⁶

Professor Robert Alter, who is Emeritus Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California at Berkeley, points out that Job never questions God’s omnipotence, but whether God’s actions are just.⁷ Finally, it is from Job that we hear these words from the Prayer Book at the Burial of the Dead:

⁶ Job 38:1–11.

⁷ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), III:577, n.2.

I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth; and though this body be destroyed, yet shall I see God; whom I shall see for myself and mine eyes shall behold, and not as a stranger.⁸

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁸ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 469.