

One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them. ⁷ The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?"

Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it."

⁸ Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil."

⁹ "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. ¹⁰ "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. ¹¹ But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face."

¹² The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger."

Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.

¹³ One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, ¹⁴ a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, ¹⁵ and the Sabecans attacked and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

¹⁶ While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The fire of God fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

¹⁷ While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

¹⁸ While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, "Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, ¹⁹ when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

²⁰ At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship ²¹ and said:

*"Naked I came from my mother's womb,
and naked I will depart.*

*The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;
may the name of the LORD be praised."*

²² In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing. (Job 1:6-22)

Faith is Greater than Suffering

You may have noticed that it's the Christmas season. Every mall in America has lights and trees up. One of the radio stations I have programmed in my car has gone to all Christmas songs all the time. Charlie Brown was on TV a couple of days ago. So even though here in church, it's still Advent, most of us probably include these last couple of weeks before Christmas when we hear, "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year." But does that mean that suffering and sadness and poverty come to a screeching halt at the end of December? Obviously not. If you were hungry on December 23rd, chances are you'll struggle to put food on the table on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. If you were sad or lonely or worried about the losing your job or your house, the arrival of the Christmas holidays probably won't change the situation that's causing you to feel that way. But the message of these holidays can give you strength to face whatever hurts in your life. Advent and Christmas are all about faith. And **faith is greater than suffering.**

I.

Job teaches us that. What do you know about Job? He's famous for suffering, right? But I think that most of us have a limited knowledge of Job's life and his faith. People who read the whole book of Job sometimes find the things he says difficult and even disturbing. Job was a real man whose real faith rose and fell and finally triumphed. **Faith is greater than suffering. It's greater than everything the devil attacks us with.**

The devil or Satan is mentioned 14 times in the first two chapters of Job. In Hebrew, all fourteen times, he's called "the Satan" – because Satan means adversary. 14 times, God calls him our adversary, our enemy. In this chapter, the angels of God present themselves before the Lord. And Satan comes with him. The Bible is very clear – Satan is an angel, but no longer an angel of God. Satan has rebelled and God cast him out of heaven. Yet on this occasion and in the next chapter, God allows him to come because God already knows what he plans for Job. The horrors that the devil inflicted on him could never have happened if God didn't determine that they were what was best for him and his faith.

When Satan comes in, God asks what he's been doing. He says he's been roaming the earth. 1 Peter calls him a roaring lion seeking whom he can devour. God calls his attention to Job because God intends to test and purify Job's faith. God points out how faithful Job is. The devil scoffs and says, "**Does Job fear God for nothing?**" God has protected and prospered Job. But Satan tells God that if hardship comes, "**he will surely curse you to your face.**" The devil does not understand the way faith works. He does not understand the gift God has given us that can stand firm in the face of the most horrible sorrows.

So God lets him test the faith of Job. God does this because our faith is always imperfect here. God uses hardship and pain purify it. Those things force us to let go of things that don't matter and focus on God and his love. They force us to admit that we cannot solve our problems or rescue ourselves from death or hell. We have to rely on God. So just like he did with Job, God sometimes lets the devil attack us. He may even call his attention to us because he wants to purify our faith. The devil hits Job hard. In one day, Job goes from being a very rich man to having nothing. And in that same day all of his children die. In chapter 2, when he hits him again, he destroys his health. Did you notice that the devil doesn't do anything really different from what he does to us? In the years that I've been a pastor, almost every issue I've ever dealt falls into the broad categories of what Job faced.

The way he responds teaches us a great deal about our faith. When this terrible tragedy first happens, Job stands firm. I've seen that many times. On the stunning day when a loss hits, believers take refuge in God's promises. And then the other shoe drops. For Job, it's in chapter two when Satan ruins his health. At that point, Job's wife mocks his faith. But still he clings to God. And again and again, I've watched believers cling to God as the troubles pile up. The next step in Job's faith reflects ours as well: he wrestles with his hurt. After the initial loss, he thinks about it and it becomes harder and harder for him to stand firm because his pain goes on. He begins to question God and his love. Then his friends come and they do such a horrible job of talking about God that by the time they're done, Job is actually accusing God of being unfair.

Only at that point does God do something unusual: he appears to Job and rebukes him. But the thing Job has in common with us is that even when he is weak and wrestling and even when he smarts off to God, his faith never completely dies. Job is an excellent example of the way our faith really works. You see, each one of us is a believer and an unbeliever at the same time. As long as we live in this sinful world, we'll have that Old Adam, the sinful nature we were born with. That sinful nature always attacks our faith. So when hardship comes, it questions. It leads us to say things that we don't completely believe. It gets emotional and lashes out. Yet, even when the Old Adam is strongest, the believer that God planted in us is still there. When confronted with God's law and his gospel, the believer fights back. He repents of all the unbeliever's pride and self pity. The believer takes comfort in the gospel and he trusts in God no matter how hard life gets here.

When we look at Job we see ourselves. So in this chapter, God reveals the spiritual realities behind the physical things that we experience. We can only see the Job side of our lives. We can only see the sufferings and the blessings. We can't see the devil's efforts to destroy our faith or how God is working even in those sorrows to build faith so that we live with him forever. But he is. Sometimes, he tells the devil no – probably more times than we imagine. When he says yes and allows the devil to attack, he turns Satan's hatred into a spiritual blessing. He purifies our faith so that it is a source of power and comfort that brings us to heaven.

II.

Financials problems. The loss of people we love. Family problems. Health issues. Depression as we keep on hurting. Friends who do us more harm than good spiritually. Did I leave anything out? Like Job, we face all that in our lives here. It all challenges our trust in God. But in the end, Job's faith won. Why? Because of who Job trusted. **Faith is greater than suffering. It's greater because it clings to Jesus.**

When Job lost everything, he said, "**Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.**" Now,

when he said this, he was not being cold or unfeeling. He was on his knees in pain and loss. But he confessed his faith in God. We don't bring anything with us when we come into this world. And no matter how much stuff people put into our coffins, we don't take that stuff with us, because we aren't there in that coffin. We depart this life and we go to heaven. So while we are here, God decides what blessings we have and God decides what losses we must suffer. And the Christian continues to trust in him.

I've seen many Christians who've suffered losses like Job's confess their faith in God's love while hurting just as much as he did. What makes faith so powerful? Perhaps an even more important question this: is your faith this strong? Could your faith withstand the blows that Job suffered? Would you confess God's love after losing all that he lost?

Faith is powerful because it's something God does in us. That's perhaps the most important thing we can take from Job. He wasn't this strong because he was a better person than we are. He wasn't this strong because he reached down deep inside himself and found reserves he didn't know he had. He was this strong because God gave him a faith like this. God made him a new creation. God put the power of that new man inside him. Since it's God's power that creates that new man, it's God's power that works in our faith.

So how does our faith become a Job-like strong faith rather than a weak faith that whines even about little things? Go back to Job's confession. Who did he focus on? Not on himself, but on God. We think about ourselves constantly. We seem to believe that the whole world revolves around us and God should be at our beck and call. That's pride and sin. And it makes us weak. The more I focus on me and how much this hurts me, the weaker I am in my faith. The more I'm doomed to whining and complaining. The more comfort I miss.

Job's faith clung to God's promises. Although he was an Old Testament believer, Job was clinging to Jesus. A strong faith clings to Jesus even when life gets hard. A strong faith recognizes that this life is temporary. The best that I will ever have here only lasts a short time. Then it's gone. Likewise the worst can only last until I reach heaven. So my goal in this life is not to amass as much money and stuff as I can or to be as popular as possible. My goal is not happiness here, because that goal is unattainable. In a sinful world, we will all suffer. My goal is eternal life. And I only reach eternal life through Christ.

Jesus knew the sufferings we face. He faced them, too. He didn't have to. Jesus could've stayed in heaven and left us to suffer whatever the devil could throw at us down here. But he chose to enter this world with all its pain and sorrow. He chose to live a life of poverty and loss and hurt. He did that all for us. He experienced everything that sin does to us here. That suffering reached its climax on the cross. Jesus was abandoned there by his Father. There Jesus suffered the reality of hell. He suffered the punishment that's waiting for every sinner when we die. He suffered everything that sin and the devil can possibly do to us. Then he died as we all will have to do.

But in doing all that, he freed us from the horrors of life in a sinful world. When he died, he defeated the devil. He showed that when he rose. So now, no matter what the devil has up his sleeve, he's already lost and we've already won. Faith clings to what Jesus did as the only way to rescue us from the hurts and sorrows of this life. And those very promises that faith clings to are the source of our faith. Those promises keep our faith alive, so that when the disaster strikes, like Job we can focus on God and his love. Those promises bury themselves deep in our hearts, so that when we struggle like Job did, when we feel hurt and confused and lost, when we feel sorry for ourselves and get smart with God and let the unbeliever inside us have the upper hand – our faith is still there. When it hears God rebuke us for our pride, it repents. When it hears God forgive us, it clings with joy to what God has done for us. The gospel, the power of God, leads us to cling to Jesus.

Job's story underlines all that. When did Job get into trouble? When he stopped focusing on God's love and he started listening to and arguing with his friends. Whether it's your friends or your therapist or websites you turn to for "self-help", this world is full of allies of the devil. All their answers to your hurt – even when they mean well – are a poor substitute for the gospel. There is only one cure for the hurts and sorrows of this life: Jesus. His gospel is medicine for your soul. When the sinner inside you wants you to wrap yourself up into a ball of self-pity, that's when you need to cling to your Savior who went through the worst that this life can throw at us, who endured the greatest attacks the devil could ever muster, who passed through hell itself to save you. Cling to him and your faith will carry you through.

I could preach this sermon at any time of the year. It's not just a Christmas or an Advent message. But during Advent, as we focus on Christ coming into this world in Bethlehem and on his return, we are focusing on Christ coming into our hearts through the gospel. Advent is a season of faith. Faith is God's gift to you. It is a

power that God has put into our hearts through the message about Jesus. And it is stronger than all suffering.
Amen.