

Job 1:1-12

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt-offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, 'It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.' This is what Job always did.

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?' Satan answered the Lord, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.' Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!' So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

“Fighting the Forces of Non-Being”

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An old story has been around for years, based on what the Scripture might have recorded had Paul Tillich been on the road with the disciples in Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asked the disciples the question, "Who do men and women say that I am?" and they answered, "Some say that you are the prophet Elijah come back from the dead. Some say that you're John the Baptist." And Jesus said, "Who do you say that I am?" And in the actual text, Peter is the one who said, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." Had Paul Tillich been in the group, he would have said, "You are the ultimate power of self-affirmation, and a living symbol of the ground of all being." And Jesus would have said, "I'm what?"

Theologians like Paul Tillich have a way of saying what they mean that obscures the meaning of what they say, and today I'd like to have us think about one of the most profound ideas Paul Tillich ever thought, so that as we look at it, we can begin to realize that what he is asking, the questions he is posing, the issue he is looking at is an important issue, and one that we look at as well, and his solution is helpful. Paul Tillich said a great deal about something called non-being. At one point in his book *The Courage to Be*, which was lectures he gave at Yale, he said, "Non-being belongs to being. It cannot be separated from it. We would not even think of being without the double negation. Being must be thought of as the negation of the negation of being." And Jesus

said, "What?" Non-being. Is non-being something? Is it anything? The question we ask is, is there that which puts us down, is there something that makes us feel small, is there something which tells us we are less, not more? That we are guilty as charged? That we have no chance? That we are losers in the game, that we should quit and not even start? That we must deny our happiness? That we are unworthy, that we are sinners, that we deserve what we get, even when what we get isn't good? No, you are nothing, being something, don't even think it. Are these powers saying these things to us - you are nothing, not a being, non-being? Tillich said it's a factor, and he said let's confront it. And today we will

Here's what we're going to do with non-being. First of all, we're going to get it right. If we look at life, at non-being and its power, let's get it right. Job thought that the devil did it. He thought it was some kind of thing that God had caused. God makes bad things happen, and if you read the narrative, and he lost virtually everything - his children were killed, he had a skin disease, and he was an unhappy man, and the worst of all was, he had friends, one of which was Bildad the Shuhite, who came and told him, "Look, bad things happen to bad people. You must have done something bad wrong."

Got any friends like Bildad the Shuhite? About the height of a shoe? They deserve no more attention than that if you do. Or relatives? It was Kierkegaard who said, "Something true when whispered becomes false when shouted." When a small thing becomes a big thing, we need to shrink-wrap it back to a whisper. Some of the things we hear are like that. Let's get it right. John Ed Mathison in his book *Treasures of the Transformed Life* tells a story. It's a story I know you've heard, thought the people at 8:00 seemed not to have heard it. But you people are way ahead of those people at 8:00. It's a battleship, they're looking ahead at these flashing lights that are sending a message- "Change your course ten degrees south" and the response, "You change your course ten degrees north." The captain of the ship sent a message, "I'm the captain. This is a U.S. battleship. Change ten degrees south." The response - "I'm Seaman First Class. You must change your course ten degrees north." The captain was furious. "We are a battleship. We are coming through. Change ten degrees south." The reply - "You change ten degrees north. I am a lighthouse. We're staying put." My goodness.

Let's get it right. What moves and what doesn't? Let's name the power over us. Pharaoh's problem wasn't the Israelites. It was the economy that was failing, and he was using slave labor. That was the problem. Herod's problem was not the baby born in Bethlehem, but fear born in the depth of his heart. Let's get it right. What doesn't move? I remember the day Ken came to my office. It was in another church. It was twenty years ago. Ken had been the chair of the Board of Trustees of the church, and we were talking about building a fellowship center, and he became belligerent and rude, and he was a tough man anyway. He was a construction man. But he was acting odd, and one day he came into my office, he sat down and looked at me and he said, "I want to apologize to you and the church. I haven't been acting right. Sometimes I find myself angry at you, and I don't even know why. And sometimes I find that I say things at the church, and I'm surprised I even say them. Last night I figured out the problem. It's not you and it's not the church. I realize that I'm not going to live very much longer, and I realize that I'm not going to be

able to see this project to the end. I'm a construction man, Chuck. I always see things to the end. But I'm not going to be able to see this one to the end. I know that." And he left with tears in his eyes and a new sense of himself, and he didn't live to see the fellowship center built. But he saw the foundation set. And when the building was complete, when we dedicated the building, there were many people who were talking about Ken, and the good that he had done, and the encouragement that he had given.

We've got to get it right. Non-being that denies our being most often is in ourselves, not outside us. Otherwise we fool ourselves and we confront the wrong thing and become like those people for whom it is said, the only thing they give up in Lent is the resolution they made in January. Let's get it right. What is it within us? Some people try to blame the first part of their lives on their parents, and the last part of their lives on their children. But if we blame any part of our unhappiness on anyone else, we won't get it right, and we can't face it and fix it.

In the early part of the century, the *London Times* sent out a question to all the famous writers that lived in London, asking them to write an essay on the theme, "What's wrong with the world?" G. K. Chesterton wrote in response to the request, what's wrong with the world? He wrote, "Dear Sirs: I am. Sincerely yours, G. K. Chesterton." Forces of non-being are within us, not outside us, and if we get it right we'll see it. It's not what they do to us, it's what we let them do. It's not who puts us down, but why we stayed where they put us. It's not "why has this happened?" but "who is to blame for it?" It's now that this happened and what will we do to change it, and who will we become through it?

I was called this past Friday to teach a class at Poudre High School on marriage in March. I've done this for another high school. I guess I'm making a name for myself. And I've been thinking. You know, one of the biggest problems for married couples happens when people expect their spouse to be in charge of their happiness, and therefore, when they're not happy they blame her or him. Bill Cosby said, "At every wedding the groom ought to have his mother escort his wife-to-be down the aisle. Because then he can look at those two women, and he can see the woman who collected all his trophies and high school papers, his report cards, his award certificates, and at the same time he can see the other woman who will find a way to throw all that stuff out." And I'm thinking of that wedding in which the bride was asked by the minister, and I never say this, "Do you promise to honor and love and obey till death do you part?" and she looked at the minister sternly and said, "Love, honor, yes; obey, no." And the groom looked back at her and said, "Well, I guess two out of three isn't bad."

When there's something wrong in our lives, it isn't because our loved ones won't obey us. It's because we need to come to terms with what's within us. Let's not blame them. Let's own it. Let's get it right. The forces of non-being, it's a battleship, it will move. If it's a lighthouse, it will stay put. And mostly, the unmovable things that are within us are the ones that are causing us the problems, and they are the ones, because they stay put, that we can deal with. Let's get it right.

Secondly, let's give it to God. The hardest thing Job faced was the idea that God had something to do with his bad luck. There was something of a wager between God and the devil. That's what the text says. But I don't think God gives us bad things. Our lives are not God's test upon us. It was Ireneaus one of the early Christians, who said, "The glory of God is a human life fully alive." The God we worship is a God who wants us to be whole, not broken. Harold Kushner in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, it's based on the story of Job. The death of his son Adam. And Harold Kushner's premise is that God doesn't cause bad things or test us with adversity because God is the answer to the problem, not the problem. God is the power of being that can defeat the power of non-being. Give it to God. Look for a sign.

It was August of 1963, the one hundredth anniversary of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, signed by Abraham Lincoln, August of 1963 in front of the Lincoln Memorial. Martin Luther King was given eight minutes to speak, no more. Eight minutes. What would he say? How would he say it? He wrote his speech. He rewrote it. When it was competed on that morning, and he was working through the night, copies were given to the press. He ascended to the platform. A hundred and fifty thousand people were there. The nation paused to hear him. After a few short paragraphs, reading the speech he wrote, he realized those words were not adequate. He pushed his manuscript aside. So the people who got the originally printed speech didn't have the speech. And if you read the speech as it was, and Coretta King said, "At that moment, it seemed as if the kingdom of God appeared, because Martin spoke from the heart." This is what he said, pushing the manuscript aside. "Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. And so I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. And we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." And you know where that goes. "I have a dream." That was his speech. That's what's remembered. Give it to God. Lift up your eyes. Look for something bigger.

Last week was a hard week for me, a hard decision to make, difficult questions, tough issues, painful choices. Very painful choices, and last week it happened. These are the kinds of weeks where it always happens, something like that, a rock hit my windshield, came from a truck. Came from a Coors beer truck, to be honest with you. A rock put a star in my windshield, and I said to myself, "Well, that's all I need. A rock from a truck hit my windshield, and the line began to grow from the middle of the windshield, a line began to grow from the lower part of the windshield, a line began to grow. Both sides of it, a line began to grow, and I got it fixed, but I wished I hadn't. Because the line was a sign, a reminder of the truth. It started in the lower part of the windshield, and the line began to grow. And it was a smile. I looked out through that windshield of that car through a smile. And the week began to look a little better, and I could give it to God, which I did. Get it right. Give it to God, and finally, non-being, being what it is, let it go. Give it up.

Job was able to do that. He lost his health, his family, lost his job, everything that was important. He gave it to God. He was able to let it go, and while we had the reading form

the beginning of Job, we might well have read from the end of Job. Scholars kind of think that actually, Job was really written by two people, that one person wrote the beginning and the end, and then somebody else wrote the middle and they just separated the beginning and the end. I think that's right. If you look at the writing style, I think that's true. Look at it some time and see if that isn't right.

Anyway, the last chapter, Job with all his trouble in his life, the Scripture says he lived a long time. He saw his children and his children's children, and he died an old man, and he died, this is a quote, "full of days." That's what we see. To live our lives in such a way that we die full of days. That our days are full, that our time on earth has mattered, that we got it right, that we gave it to God, and then we got on with it, when non-being hit. Robert Fulghum in his book, *What on Earth Have I Done?* wrote this, what he calls a sock epiphany. He wrote, "The washer ate one of my socks. Or maybe there's a miniature black hole in the dryer. Or maybe one of my socks escaped during the night. Or there's another way to look at it. A friend visiting transferred my laundry from my dryer onto the folding table, sorting my clothes. She found one sock left over, and she said, 'Look, the dryer made you an extra sock. And when it makes you another, you'll have a brand new pair. You're not behind, you're ahead.'" We haven't lost, we've won. We haven't been neglected, we found solitude. We haven't been tricked, we've been challenged. We haven't been fired from an old job, wasn't any good anyway. We've been given an opportunity to look at a new horizon and all the things we could do that we maybe have wanted to do but couldn't.

There comes a time in every life when we look at the past as history and we understand it, but we don't really live it, because there comes a time in every life when we archive it and get on with it. Stronger than we would have been, wiser because of what has been. No longer haunted by the ghost, but healed from the hurt. Tested, but passed with flying colors. Not letter by it, but more ourselves because of it.

Nancy was a member of one of the churches that I served, it was Boulder, it was a number of years ago. Nancy wanted the church to use drama in worship, and she was a natural actress. I remember having her read a section from Lorraine Hansberry's book *A Raisin in the Sun*. She was just wonderful. But Nancy fell on hard times. Her husband, who was abusive and violent, left her and her two children. Her financial situation became desperate. Bill collectors would call, and she would just hang up the telephone. She would get letters from them, and she wouldn't even open them. She was a few days from being evicted, and that's when Bulah stepped in. Bulah was a church member who was one of those people who took on projects, like Nancy. She went to her home and she saw the condition of things, a home that was in disarray. Filth, dog feces, roaches, spiders, dirt, confusion - you can imagine. And Bulah organized a church clean-up day, and took Nancy aside and worked with her on her finances, and called the creditors and put off the eviction, and Nancy and her family got put on a budget, and Nancy got a job, and Nancy was just kind of getting back on her feet when I left that church in 1989, and I always wondered what happened to her, because I never heard.

One Sunday, it was the first year I was in this church, as a matter of fact, in this sanctuary. A beautiful young woman grabbed my arm and asked me if I knew who she was. And with her were her two grown children and their stepfather, her new husband. She works in a bank. Her children are in college, and I thought of what someone said, it's so true. Though we cannot go back and make a brand new start, we can start from now and make a brand new ending. Happy endings happen when we learn to get on with life, when life has gotten us down. Any of us who have ever had to stare down our biggest fear, or stand up to our strongest destructive passion, have found a way to face the power of non-being. Any of us who have found ourselves alive in spirit after we've been given up for dead in spirit, or walked into a problem that we really would rather have run away from, or we got over what was done to us so that it couldn't continue to do us and undo us, any of us who have ever faced non-being, however it came, and got on with our lives, have touched the power of being itself, have experienced the ground of our being, which we call God. Paul Tillich one day was talking to the risen Christ, and he said, "Non-being opens up the divine self seclusion and reveals God as power and love. Non-being makes God a living God." And Jesus said, "What does that mean?" And Paul Tillich said, "It means face non-being, it's in you, get it right, grace non-being, give it to God, erase non-being, get on with your life." And Jesus and Lonnie said "Amen."