

# Persist in Integrity

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Psalm 26  
Job 23:1-9, 16-17

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I once heard a clip from the show "This American Life" on PBS, about a comedian named Tigg Navaro, who did a stand up routine in Chicago that began, "Hi. I'm Tigg. I've got cancer. Yea, cancer! Hi! How ya doing?" She goes on from there to do what is now a famous comedy routine around the fact that two days prior she had just been diagnosed with stage 2 cancer, meaning that the cancer had spread throughout her body. A week prior to that her mother had died suddenly and tragically. A week before that she had been in the hospital with a deadly infection that almost killed her. And in the midst of all this, she went through a break-up with her partner, who was not able to deal with the cancer. And she told all this to the audience, who were laughing like crazy. She's a good comedian, huh?

She went to get an X-ray and the woman technician said, "My God, you have such a flat stomach. What is your secret?" "I'm dying!" she replied.

At one point she said, *"Yea, they say that God doesn't give you more than you can handle. Well, maybe. I can just see God up in heaven going, 'You know, I think she can handle one more; yea, one more. Here goes.' And the angels are saying, 'Uh, God, I don't think that's a good idea. Look at her. She's a mess. We really think it's time to stop, you know.' But God says, 'No, I'm just sending one more...'"*

In the routine Tigg keeps saying to the audience, "Aren't you glad you came out tonight?" Oddly enough, the fact that she was able to be so honest and so straightforward about it was refreshing, and weirdly funny. (It helped that she is a professional and made it work.) But it also meant that she is not ashamed or hidden about it.

Tigg sounds as if she went through the trials of Job. Job faced wave after wave of horrible loss and tragedy and grief – suddenly losing his farm and great wealth to warfare and theft, and then horribly his children are crushed when a storm collapses a house upon them. Then his health falls apart and he has painful sores and wounds on his body. And yet Job remains honest and without shame. He retreats to a garbage heap, scaping his sores. His wife comes to him and cries, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die!" Why keep your stupid faith in God? Just give up! But Job replies, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?"

Job holds onto his self-worth, his trust in God, and his own goodness and self-esteem. In Psalm 26 we hear: *But as for me, I walk in my integrity; redeem me and be gracious to me.* (Psalm 26:10)

"I walk in my integrity." That is what Job did when faced with terrible loss, grief and tragedy; and worse, the accusations of his friends that it was his own damn fault. They tried to convince him that some-how he was responsible; he must have done some secret sin that caused God to punish him so severely. It had to be his own fault, because God would never cause such suffering for no reason. His friend's simple formula that Job rebelled against was one that is parroted in our own day: "If you are just and good, then you will be blessed by God. If you do wrong and sin, then you will be punished." Sounds reasonable, right? It's common sense. But wait, what if like Job it wasn't your fault? What if you get a pink slip in the mail, not because you are underperforming, but because your division was being phased out? What if your spouse suddenly falls for an old high school sweetheart and takes the night train for Chicago? What if a lump is found in an X-ray, and the doctor enters the room with a gloomy expression and shaking her head, holding the film.

The oncologist, Bernie Siegel wrote extensively about his practice of caring for cancer patients, and he once wrote about doing an experiment in which he asked his patients why they thought they got their cancer. He was amazed that virtually all of his patients had a quick and heartfelt answer. "It had to do with my anger at my mother-in-law." "I just lost my job," said one. "It's about my relationship with my son." "It's because I

never thanked my boss." "I should have moved years ago." "I am too stressed out." On and on the answers came: the cancer was related to a personal failure or moral lapse or some other personal issue. Siegel was quick to say that no research points to this; virtually all research says that it is largely genetic or random and has little to do with mental states or emotional stress. But still, people hold onto feeling that it is their own fault; and they internalize the blame and shame.

Suffering and illness and awful luck and disability do not have to be associated with shame; even though they often are. In the end, we don't have pat answers about why God does everything, there are no simple formulas that cover all the bases. But Job's friends wanted him to swallow the oversimplification that if you are good, good things happen; if you have sinned then awful things happen. In other words, they're implying that Job was damaged goods, a moral failure, a poor excuse for a human being – and the proof was his own suffering.

We'd like to say, "oh no, we would never do that!" We would never judge someone just because of their suffering – calling them morally deficient. But wait. Consider how our society treats the addicted, women dealing with difficult pregnancies, or the poor these days – calling them morally suspicious, losers, parasites, deficient, failures. We have certain politicians nowadays labeling immigrants, the disabled, certain nationalities, the poor as repulsive, violent, dependent, looking to government to solve their problems. It's called blaming the victim. It still goes on. Simple formulas can be dangerous and bigoted.

Job's message is about removing the shame, untying the connection between suffering and blame. Suffering is just suffering – terrible stuff – but without the stigma of blame or shame. Our response should be compassion and support, and not judgment and condemnation. Out of great sorrow and suffering can come transformation, a deepening of our spirit, a strengthening of our hearts. But this can happen only if it is not undercut by shame. Shame causes a double sorrow, it creates pain on top of pain. It subverts our ability to develop endurance, character and hope. It keeps us trapped in our sorrows. This is what Job's friends tried to do to him after his terrible turn of events.

I read an article about a number of Jewish dental students in the 1950's, who were told that they flunked out of dental school at Emory University; even though they were fine students. They left quietly, not knowing what else to do, and swallowed their shame. One of these students, Perry Brickman recalled, *"'Why didn't you work harder,' my mother said. 'What have you done to me?' It was almost like being a rape victim. No one believed us. It couldn't be this one-sided story. Emory was a great university, right? So, we went off with our tails between our legs."* 60 years later, the truth has come out. The Emory dental school president was toxically anti-Semitic and unjustly flunked many Jewish students to be rid of them.

So how can we persist in our integrity in the midst of the swirling confusions and the tremendous hardships of this life? Like Job we can be honest about our feelings, trust in our inner sight, and let go of our embarrassment. We can hold onto the grace of a strong moral center - center where the divinity of Christ resides - shining with the light of God's love. We can preserve this center by not giving it away to other people's blame, even when they call themselves our friends.

This is what Jesus did as he shouldered the splintered beams of the cross, blood dripping from his wounds, while crowds lined up along the way scoffing and spitting at him, jeering his downfall. This is what Martin Luther King and John Lewis did when facing snarling the German Shepherds, water hoses and batons of the Selma police. They persisted in integrity. Job was indignant not crushed. He argued with God and asked to be judged fairly, his moral core was offended by false accusations. He was not crushed by shame.

A young woman once walked into the office of a church pastor and said, "Pastor, I'd like to ask that you pray that I have endurance." She went on about how she was facing tremendous difficulty in her work and her boss's accusations, and with her boyfriend in his studies. The minister turned to her and said, "Yes, I will pray that you might have more suffering." "Suffering!" the young woman exclaimed. "I didn't ask for suffering, I asked for endurance." The minister then showed her a passage from Romans 5:2, *"Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us."*

In spite of his suffering Job's integrity was intact because he kept his moral center. He cultivated a deep inner garden of faith and hope in God that sustained him in his trials.

At the end of the book of Job, after wrestling with God and God's justice, Job acknowledges his lack of easy solutions: *"I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted... Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."* (42:2,3) We are left not with pat answers or simple formulas, but with mystery, with a God beyond our simple efforts to explain it all away. It's a mystery why terrible things happen; they just do, like hurricanes, freak accidents, or awful illnesses. But we can respond with caring and love, we can be healers and offer hope and not judgment.

Persist in integrity. Endure in the midst of suffering. Trust your own center. Believe in your moral vision and don't give in to either despair or other people's criticism. As we remember Christ's suffering and participate in our own, we move closer to the truth of God's eternal mystery. Let us carry on without shame. *"Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us."* Amen.