

# “Trusting God Together” by Deborah Sokolove

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Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

Today’s Hebrew Scripture reading comes near the end of the Book of Job. For nearly 37 chapters, Job has been in physical and spiritual anguish. He has lost his fortune, all of his children are dead, his wife is so wrapped up in her own grief and bitterness that she is unable to offer any comfort, and his friends keep telling him that he must have done something awful to deserve such punishment.

Job continually protests his innocence, pointing out his piety, his compassion and charitable giving, the honesty and integrity of his business dealings. God, he argues, is in the wrong, not just for the calamities visited on him, but even more for not living up to the Holy One’s promises to protect and care for those who are in need. For instance, in chapter 24, Job asks,

*Why doesn’t the Almighty One set up a schedule?*

*Why do those closer to God wait in vain? . . . [24:1]*

*Orphaned children have their property stolen,*

*and the poor lose their clothing through extortion. .  
.[24:9]*

*The groans of the dying rise from the cities;*

*the pleas of the wounded fill the air.*

*Yet God charges no one with any wrongdoing.[24:12]*

Not much seems to have changed in 3000 years! Right along with Job, we might also ask,

*What is our agreement with God above?*

*What are we promised from Shaddai, from on high?*

*Isn't it that calamity will fall on the wicked?*

*Isn't it that disaster comes only to evildoers? [31:2-3]*

Like his would-be comforters, and most of us, I'm guessing, Job wants to believe that God rewards us for our good deeds and any trials or disasters must be punishment for doing something terribly wrong. Job, however, cannot figure out what he has done to deserve such awful calamities, demanding to know,

*Doesn't God observe my behavior,*

*and take note of my coming and going?[3:4]*

Job, like us, wrestles with what theologians call the problem of theodicy: the easily observable reality that bad things happen to good people. It is notable, however, that despite his pain, despite his frustration with his would-be comforters, Job never gives up on God. He never says that he hates God, or that he doesn't believe, or changes his allegiance to another deity. Instead, he wants to hold God accountable, to haul God into court to explain what Job has done to deserve everything that has happened to him. In a wonderfully comic image, Job imagines God presenting him with a long list of supposed sins:

*Who then can arrange a hearing with God for me?*

*Look—here’s my signature on my defense!*

*Now let Shaddai answer me;*

*get my accuser to draw up a bill of particulars!*

*I would carry it around for all to see;*

*wrap it around my head like a turban! [31:35-37]*

Wanting to remain in relationship with God no matter what the cost, Job declares that he would give the Almighty a step-by-step account of his life if only God would tell him what he has done wrong.

As anyone who is familiar with the story already knows, God does no such thing. After all, as the beginning of the story tells us, Job hasn’t done anything to bring on the death of his children, the loss of his health and wealth. Quite the contrary, the Holy One had already declared that Job is honest and upright, revering God and turning away from evil.[1:8] So when God shows up in our reading today, he doesn’t even address Job’s complaints. Rather, he roars out of the storm,

Who is this obscuring my plans with such ignorant words?

*Hitch up your belt like the fighter you are;*

*now I will ask the questions and you will answer me!*

*Where were you when I created the earth?*

*If you know the answer, tell me! [38:2-3]*

Now, I have always seen God in these verses as a cosmic bully, daring puny, little, whining Job to fight back. Job has been trusting God to do the right thing, and instead gets punched again when he is already down.

But this time, somehow I hear a different tone of voice. A

couple of weeks ago, as I sat in this room pondering my commitments, I read beyond the few lines we are given in the lectionary, taking in as if for the first time the glowing poetry in which God describes an astonishing world, filled with ostriches and horses that run like the wind, wild oxen and donkeys that no one can bridle, soaring hawks and hulking hippos, and a Leviathan with breath that could set coals on fire and eyes shining like the dawn. Who held back the sea behind partitions, asks God,

*when it burst from my womb,*

*when I created clouds as the earth's raiment*

*and thick darkness as its swaddling clothes—[38:8-9]*

*Do you comprehend the breadth of the earth?*

*If so, address the following:*

*How does one get to the source of light?*

*And where does darkness come from?*

*Could you walk them home?*

*Do you know where they live?...[38:18-20]*

*Have you seen my warehouses of snow?*

*Do you know where I store all the hail*

*that I keep in reserve for troubled times—*

*for times of international conflict?[38:22-23]*

*Now look at . . . the great beast Behemoth—  
which I made just as I made you;  
it eats grass like an ox.  
Notice the strength of its thighs,  
the power of its stomach muscles. . .  
Its ribs are bars of bronze;  
its limbs are iron beams.  
It is the crown jewel of my creation,  
created to be my plaything.[38:15-19]*

As the pictures swirled in my mind's eye, God seemed less like a cosmic bully than an elemental, incomprehensible force, holding the universe together with love. This time, I saw God not browbeating Job, but rather inviting him to widen his perspective beyond the particulars of his own, little life, to enter into a wider vision of the universe that would somehow, mysteriously, give him the courage and strength to bear his pain. This doesn't sound like it should work, but my own life tells me that it can.

Many years ago, when I lived in Venice Beach, my life was often in shambles. Not unlike Job, I felt that I had lost everything. On my own after a divorce, I had no money, no education, no resources to fall back on. When one of my children had gone at the age of 9 to live with her father in France, it felt to me as though a piece of my heart had been cut out. My other two children, ages 16 and 7, lived with me, all of us in a cramped, one-bedroom apartment. I worked at

whatever job I could find – waitress, studio assistant to a weaver, data entry clerk, part-time book-keeper at a food co-op. When there was no work, I made do with a meager unemployment check and the generosity of friends.

When I was in despair – which was often – I would go down to the water's edge and sit in the sand, watching the waves breaking and flowing back out to sea, letting my eyes relax out to the horizon. There was something about the great power of the ocean that allowed me to step back from the hardness of my life, to become aware that my troubles were very small in the vastness of the universe. In the presence of the ultimate wildness of creation, I would stop expecting God to come to my personal rescue. Instead, I came to trust that God was with and in me, as God is with and in all things. Like Job when he was faced with the grandeur and wonder of creation, I was finally able to acknowledge God's immediate, immanent presence. As Job puts it,

*I know that you can do all things:*

*you have only to think of something, and it is done. . .*

*I've been spouting off about things I can't understand  
about wonders beyond my experience and my knowledge. . .*

*Formerly I knew you only by word of mouth,*

*but now I see you with my own eyes.[42:2,3,5]*

Job does not get the answer that he wants, but he gets a glimpse of something that far outweighs his troubles – he sees the grandeur and glory of God.

But, you may be muttering to yourself, once this wondrous vision is over, Job will still be sick and in pain, still mourn his children, still have a terrible relationship with his wife. And that is true – I had to keep on going back to the beach to find God, because my immediate, material circumstances did not change, and I repeatedly fell back into despair. But, just like Job, I did keep turning back towards God. And, as with Job, God remained in relationship with me. God did not give Job the answer that he wanted, but Job did get an answer!

So did I. The answer that I got was that God – that amazing, unfathomable, incomprehensible, elemental being that creates and sustains everything – wants to be in relationship with me.

But God does not only want to be in relationship with me, and with you, and with each animal and plant and stone and star that swirl together in the dance of creation – God wants us to be in relationship with one another. And our relationships with God and with one another are inextricably entwined. As Jesus said, the two greatest commandments are to love God, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Another way to say that is, thank God that we are all in this together! Today, as we have already heard in the Word for the Children, is the day that we make or renew our commitment to God through this church. We promise to practice spiritual disciplines, like regularly reading the Bible, reflecting on our attitudes and actions, and listening for God's voice; to take care of the natural world, both for its own sake and for

the sake of generations to come; to work for justice and peace in both our personal lives and in the world around us; and to do all this in joyful response to God's ongoing relationship with us.

One of the spiritual disciplines of the Stewards of this church is to spend an hour in silence here, in this room, discerning whether we are called to commit as a Steward for another year. As I sat in the silence earlier this month, the questions before me were not about raw survival, as they had been when I lived in Venice Beach, but about living in community, about trusting God together with others. In answer to the question posed by SLT, "What is God's emerging call on Seekers Church as one, small part of the Body of Christ?", I wrote,

We are changing. We are being changed. We are beginning to see it as our ongoing duty to help one another in real, material, practical ways. I think that has always happened, but that in times past such help was seen as both private and extraordinary, an individual response to a special moment in a particular person's life rather than central to our call to be church. That is what is changing – we now offer ongoing material support to a number of our members officially through the budget as well as unofficially through personal relationships.

Those who have more material resources are opening not only their hearts but their bank accounts to those who have less. To me, it sounds like those first century Christians we read about in Acts, sharing what they had so that all would have enough. It's pretty amazing for a small church that also supports a wide variety of other ministries and gives away



lots of money to lots of good projects.

The discernment questions around recommitment also asked me to consider what I am being called to offer to God and God's creation. I answered,

In my intellect, my passion, my awareness that life must be more than attention to the brokenness of the world, I am called to help people see, realize, and increase the awareness of God's abundant grace. This is what distinguishes us from animals: that we embellish the world we live in rather than simply accepting it as given. We are partners in God's creative act.

I am called to joyful participation in the sorrows of the world. Not that I succeed in that part too often, but it is to this that I am called. Being part of Seekers Church brings me back to this awareness, over and over and over again. It is like returning to an awareness of the breath when my mind wanders during meditation. Every week in my spiritual reports, in preparing for and participating in worship in mission group and other meetings, I am constantly being asked to account for my life, for my obedience to this call.

I cannot do these things alone. And neither can you. Together, we practice forgiving others and ourselves. Together, we practice working for peace and justice. Together, we practice listening for God's voice in the silence of retreat and in the midst of busy lives. Together, we remind one another of who and what we are: beloved members in the mystical, eternally crucified, eternally risen Body of Christ. Together, God's own

abundance keeps pouring through us for the healing of the world, as we practice being in relationship with God and with one another, as we practice trusting God together. Amen.