

A Serious Man

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It is one of the most popular stories ever told. The story of Job, his three comforters, and the voice of God in the whirlwind, are the major characters. The Book of Job is the last book in the Bible in which God speaks directly to a human being. It is also one of the few books in the Old Testament that has Satan as a featured character. Poems and plays have been written about Job. My favorite adaptation of the story came out just a few years ago. The Cohen Brothers, known for making movies like No Country for Old Men and Oh, Brother Where Art Thou?, did a film adaptation of Job entitled A Serious Man. The film is set in the 1960s in a Jewish community. All of the characters belong to a well-to-do synagogue in the suburbs. Instead of three comforters there are the three rabbis at the temple that the Job character consults at various times in the plot. Just as Oh Brother Where Art Thou was based on the Odyssey, so too, the more familiar you are with Job, the better A Serious Man is.

Now in the Bible, God and Satan have a debate about what makes someone good or evil. Satan points out that it is easy to be good and live a happy life when you are blessed with cattle, and family, and respect. Take away his blessings and see how quickly Job will curse your name. So, incredulously if you think about, God goes along with this gentlemen's wager. Job is stripped of everything he has, including his health, but his life is spared. He cries out to the heavens, begging for some understanding since he had done nothing wrong. It is hard not to sympathize with Job at this point. Certainly all of us have had bad things happen to us for no apparent reason. Biblical scholars believe that the authors of Job were writing in reaction to Proverbs which seems have almost a glib sense of karmic retribution about it. Sometimes the wicked are not punished. Sometimes the good suffer. That is life, and it is only human to crave some understanding, to make some meaning come from that suffering.

Scholars believe that Job is written in reaction to that position because that is what the so-called comforters of Job tell him. Essentially their point is, "Look, you had to have done something to deserve this. You are kidding yourself with your self-righteous piety. Just confess where you went wrong, and this will be undone." But Job sticks to his guns. He is blameless, yet all his children are dead, and his fields are withering away. He has boils springing up all over his body. He is writhing in ashes and sackcloth. He can fall no lower.

Their dialogue goes on at length about the nature of suffering, and who deserves to suffer. This includes some reflection on the nature of God, and why God would allow such suffering to exist at all. The Book of Job is actually the beginning of an entire sub-branch of theology called “theodicy”—the attempt to make sense of the existence of evil in a world that includes a loving and powerful God. Job is a very lengthy book, and I shall not outline all of the dialogues here. But there is an assumption made in Job that is carried on throughout Western thought on this subject. It is the idea that good and evil are distinct. Satan is an accuser, a prosecutor, in the heavenly court. The assumption of the comforters that suffering happens to people as a direct result of evil actions, also makes this assumption. And at the end when God speaks through the whirlwind, all he really says is “How dare you presume to be me! I am God, not you!” He doesn’t really answer the problem of evil.

Hannah Arendt coined the term “The Banality of Evil” to describe Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann ran many of the concentration camps in Nazi Germany. The witnesses at his trial in Jerusalem described incredible accounts of suffering and extraordinary acts of cruelty in the concentration camps he was in charge of. These stories have been told quite eloquently many times, and I am sure you are all familiar with the horrors of the Nazi holocaust. If ever there was a clear example of evil in the world that we could point to, it would be that.

But Arendt noticed something about Eichmann as she was covering his trial for the New York Times. He was a regular guy. To hear the stories you would half expect him to walk around with horns on his head or at least a black hat so that we can tell the good guys from the bad. But he wasn't. By all accounts Eichmann was average. He was a bureaucrat who did his job in a rather humdrum fashion. Only his job was to ensure that as many people were killed in an efficient manner as possible. But there was no anger in him, and in fact he was rather charming in person. Somehow he got caught up in Nazism and never spoke up or said no or stopped or made it stop. He went along with the crowd even when it meant killing innocent people. The mundane nature of this evil, inspired Arendt to coin that phrase "The Banality of Evil." Good and evil are not so distinct or different as we would like them to be. In our minds those are two totally different categories, and yet in the example of Eichmann we see someone who gets swept up into doing something very evil.

Someone who has studied evil quite extensively is the author of our story this morning. Philip Zimbardo is a noted social psychologist. He is interested in how human beings behave while they are in groups. He put together what has become known as the Stanford Prison Experiment that studied human behavior in a simulated prison scenario. He was also a key witness at the trial of Army MPs who were prosecuted for criminal activities at Abu Graib prison in Iraq. What he

has discovered is both frightening and intriguing. The banality of evil is just the tip of the iceberg.

Zimbardo tells us that we are extremely susceptible to suggestion from the people around us. If we hang around people who see the world in a certain way, then there is a very good chance that we will adopt the same worldview. And it doesn't even have to be big things either. Psychologists have done things like draw two lines on a piece of paper and hang it in a room. The two lines are exactly the same length. But in the experiment they bring in a group of people, who all claim that the top line is longer than the bottom. When it is the subject's turn to share what they think: are the two lines the same length or not, almost always they go along with the judgment of the group.

Get the group to think one way, and most people will follow the herd in that direction. This is the driving principle behind internet memes and viral advertising campaigns. If you get a couple of key groups to think that a certain brand of shoes or a particular movie is cool, then boom you have a hit on your hands even if it isn't the best one in the marketplace. Peer pressure is real and it is subtle. Actually this is simply a fact of our human psychology. There is nothing particularly good or evil about it. So long as the content of the meme or the latest fad happens to be a guy from Korea dancing around to a song called Gangnam style, then there is no real harm in it.

But what if the content of this little group-think is not so tame? What if the popular notion is that immigrants or some ethnic group is to blame for the bad economy? Historians have been able to correlate anti-immigrant sentiment in America to downturns in the economy; including the most recent one. What if one group decides that another group is not human, or doesn't count as being human? We are different and that difference means that we can do anything we want to those people over there. It could be a difference of race or sexual orientation. In the Stanford experiment the difference was as arbitrary as naming one half of the volunteers guards and the other half prisoners. That very small difference, wound up becoming a very big difference. And that big difference between us and them allowed people to justify to themselves all sorts of atrocities as the nation so painfully saw in the pictures that came out of Abu Graib prison. All you need are a few friends who affirm the non-humanity of some other group of people, and before you know it we can justify almost any evil act against them. That is how banal evil can be. Zimbardo dubbed this "The Lucifer Effect."

This puts the welcome we say every Sunday in a whole new context for me. From time to time people, not many but a few, have asked me why we always say the same welcome every Sunday. Isn't it obvious to us by now that we welcome all those differences of race, class, politics, and whom you love? I suppose it is for those of us who have been around awhile to grow accustomed if not bored by such

statements. But I think it is so important to acknowledge that the differences between us that divide us when we are not together as a worshiping community, and I include in that people here for the first time today, those difference are overcome when we are here. It's not that we don't see them or sense them, but that our Unitarian Universalist faith asks us to go deeper than the outward differences and seek out the ways which we are united. That unity may not be as visible or tangible to us as the differences tend to be, but it is there. We share a common humanity, we are all children of God, we all have Buddha-nature, whatever theological language you choose to say it in the point remains the same that we are interconnected to one another regardless of how the world might tell us we are divided.

Believe it or not Zimbardo offers us hope. It turns out Hannah Arendt was only half right. There is a banality of evil, but there is also a banality of heroism. In the story this morning Professor Edward Tolman refused to sign a loyalty oath. If ever there was an example of the Lucifer Effect in American history it surely was McCarthyism. But in this case, all it took was one man, again not a particularly remarkable man, not a radical per se, but just a man who dared to speak up and say something different than what the rest of the crowd thought. Remember the psychologists who studied the people who had to give their opinion on whether or not the two lines were the same length? They put a wrinkle in after awhile. Turns out if one person, just one person in the

group gave a different answer than the rest, then the subject was far more accurate in claiming that the two lines were the same. It doesn't take a special calling from God in a whirlwind or to hear some voice proclaim you a prophet. Simply saying that "No those people may be different but they are still people" is a very courageous and very powerful statement to make. It opens up clearer thinking and calmer responses. The best part is anyone can do it. It just takes one person to say, "No matter your race, your class, your politics or whom you love, you are welcomed here." That is the banality of heroism.

In many ways, that is the attitude Job had in the Bible. His comforters were all going along with the conventional wisdom about why bad things happen to people. Bad things happen because we do bad things. God punishes the wicked and blesses the faithful. But Job says, wait a second. Maybe things don't work quite that nice and neat in real life. Maybe the world doesn't fit into nice little moral categories as we would like it to. And Job isn't just contradicting these three guys, but a whole body of Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament, and then finally God himself in God's final appearance in the Bible! That takes a lot of guts. And you know what; Job was right.

I believe that Unitarian Universalism calls us to the banality of heroism. It asks us to affirm the hidden interconnections between us, and to live according to that unity more so than our differences. Channing himself used to talk about "Self-Culture" and later generations

of Unitarians would call this “Salvation by Character.” Essentially it is the idea that religion was intended to mold us and shape us into moral human beings. Channing taught that we would be so inspired by the teachings and affirmations of a reasonable religion that we would be able to rise above the influences of others. He writes, “So tremendous is the power of passion, so subtle is temptation, so contagious is the influence of example, that a man or woman, conscious of no Higher power than his or her own...might well despair of resisting the combined powers of evil. An Infinite Motive is needed to quicken us in this never-ending war with selfishness and the world.”

Channing of course is referring to God as that “Infinite Motive” and the “Higher power” that we look to by way of inspiration. I think that’s one way to go. Certainly it is a time honored option, but part of me is not satisfied with the answer to the Lucifer Effect being “Just follow what God tells you to!” Seems to me that lots of people under the sway of the Lucifer Effect justify their killing and murder of those other people over there using God at some point. The Civil War may be the greatest and bloodiest example that we have known in our history of Americans dehumanizing the other; be it North and South or Black and White. It was Lincoln himself who pointed out in the Second Inaugural Address that both sides of the conflict invoke God as being on their side. Channing stands at other end of the Civil War, and so perhaps his saying “God’s will is the answer” sounds a bit naïve to our modern ears.

I believe that Unitarian Universalism has within it the resources to help us move beyond the divisive group-think of the Lucifer Effect and move us toward heroism. Whenever you find yourself in a small group at work or in some other scenario and they are looking down at others or noting their own superiority, imagine ways to speak up and dare to say something different. Affirm commonalities with the “lesser” group or person even and especially when it seems “un-cool” to do so. Dare to be the one who claims that yes in fact those two lines are the same length no matter what the rest of you yahoos think. Have the courage to affirm diversity as a strength and not a weakness of difference. We are all different in some capacity, but how we are united—that is what makes all the difference in the world. Amen Blessed Be.