**Steve Spilde:** Today, I am pleased to introduce Peter Watkins, a spiritual director and retreat leader from the Twin Cities. Peter has been a teacher of religion and theology at the high school, college and graduate levels. On February 18and 19, we will be honored to welcome him at the Franciscan Spirituality Center when he presents a retreat called “When Bad Things Happen: The Book of Job for Troubled Times.” Welcome, Peter.

**Peter Watkins:** Thanks. Good to be with you.

**Steve:** When you come in February to talk about Job, let’s figure out today first of all what the Book of Job is. My understanding at a basic level – at least this is the understanding for many people who know about the Bible – Job was this character in the Old Testament. At the beginning of the story, Job is very rich, and then he loses all his wealth and his family to a terrible tragedy. For a long time, he didn’t complain or curse God. And then at the end of the story, because he didn’t curse God he gets all his wealth and his family back. At least that’s the understanding a lot of people have, which I think is, at best, really an oversimplification and, at worst, is really a twisting of the story and missing the most important points. Tell us about the Book of Job from your understanding.

**Peter:** Your explanation, your kind of synopsis there, was kind of the original story. It was an oral tradition – it was kind of a folk tale – and it was, bad things happened to him, Job remained faithful; therefore, God rewarded him. It was kind of a superficial story that was taught: Make sure you remain faithful to God, even in the midst of suffering. Which is fine, except a wise rabbi, or a group of them, took that story and just, like, sliced it in half. And what they did was … It’s kind of a sandwich story, so you have the folk tale on either side, but in the middle you have this really amazing, poetic, very deep theology, this dialogue, this conversation among Job and his three friends. And that’s really where so much of this story happens.

**Steve:** In your sense, how old is the Book of Job that we find in the Bible? Are we talking 3,000 years old?

**Peter:** I don’t know. It’s part of wisdom literature. We do know that the author had some understanding of the Book of Isaiah [and] probably studied some Egyptian mythology. He knew the prophets. He was just brilliant, this author. I can’t remember the dates offhand, but certainly it was a later book that was written.

**Steve:** So, at the very least, we’re talking wisdom that’s 2,000, 2,500, maybe 3,000 years old. And yet even now at this time, there is wisdom there that even now we struggle to comprehend.

**Peter:** I think so. It’s sublime and really very profound. And I think very timely for what’s happening today, [which is] the problem of suffering and why is this happening and where is God in this? That’s just the human condition. This is something we all wrestle with.

**Steve:** For people who are not real familiar with the Book of Job, it kind of starts with this bizarre conversation between Satan and God.

**Peter:** It is kind of a mix of genres, because you do have kind of that folk tale, and then you have this other addition which is this kind of this heavenly scene. The book starts, though, with the character of Job, and Job is this kind of larger-than-life person. He’s sort of over the top. Job is kind of the extreme. He’s sort of the ideal … He’s sort of what everyone wished they could be. He’s got everything. He’s got wisdom. He’s got wealth [and] respect. He’s got a great family. Everybody loves this guy, and he’s humble. He’s sort of equal to the patriarchs like Jacob and Moses. The thing that’s so funny is that even God is enamored with him; he’s got everything. Even God is up there and he’s going on about, “Have you seen my servant, Job? This guy is just amazing! I love this guy!” He’s got the heavenly hosts around him. All these angels are up there, and I imagine God, The Father, [who has a] very masculine image here [and] a sort of kingly God bragging about Job. Then one of the angels … It’s interesting, because they don’t really translate the Hebrew. The Hebrew is *“Ha Satan,”* which is how we get the word Satan. It literally means “the adversary,” or the one who kind of plays the devil’s advocate, I suppose – just the one who is kind of going to go against. So, there he is, and it’s interesting [because] you have to ask, “What’s going on here?” Basically, he comes up and he says, “Look, the only reason that Job worships you is because he’s rich. Take away his fortune [and] take away all his comforts, and he’s just like the rest of them and he’s going to curse you.”

It’s sort of funny, because I always think of Milton and then the fall of the angel and that sort of thing. But here, he’s not lurking in hell – Satan is actually right with them, which makes you kind of think about, keep your friends close, but your enemies closer. He’s right there, and at one point he’s like, “Wait a minute, where have you been?” He says, “I’ve been roaming the earth back and forth,” and you just know that the guy’s been up to no good. I think the problem is that God actually starts talking with him. They say there’s kind of a rule [of] don’t ever discuss anything with the Devil [and] don’t ever get into an argument [because] the old boy is going to clean your clock [and] you are going to lose. It’s not clear when God and Satan start talking [as to], who’s got the upper hand? Is God just naïve about Job’s purity and goodness? Is Satan right? God almost seems sort of naïve, kind of like Eve handing over the fruit. And that’s what he does: He hands Job over to him. It’s like, “OK, don’t touch him, but you can have your way with Job.” So, the story goes that immediately all these bad things happen to him. He loses his house, his cattle, his children, and his bed. And then the scene goes back to heaven again, and God is bragging about Job because Job still hasn’t cursed him. And Satan, they have another round, and he hands Job over to Satan again. This is very intentional by God. It wasn’t just sort of a whim; it happens again. He says, “Just don’t kill him.” That’s when Job gets this terrible disease. He’s got boils all over his skin, and then we find him in the ash heap, but it’s sort of like the garbage dump. He’s out there on the outskirts of everything, and he’s just sitting with the garbage, scraping these boils off of his skin. It’s like this great person all of a sudden in the very worst place a person could be.

**Steve:** And then the book shifts, and it’s obvious now this is a different author. Reading the book, I see almost like a movie like “The Wizard of Oz.” The beginning of “The Wizard of Oz” is in black and white, and then [Dorothy] enters Oz, and now it’s in color. And then the end of the movie, it’s back to black and white. The Book of Job is like that. It feels almost like a cartoon, kind of like this fantasy cartoon, and then all of a sudden the movie comes out in … Now it’s actual actors. It’s color. [Job] is sitting on the ash heap, and he’s in just complete misery. Then there’s this long period of dialogue that’s almost like Shakespeare where they’re having these deep, philosophical arguments. But up until this point, even though it feels very fantastical, on the other hand, that’s the way it is for us sometimes. We’re kind of cruising along. We kind of feel like we have life by the tail, and then one thing happens after another. You’re afraid to ask, “Could it get any worse?” because it does.

**Peter:** This kind of over-the-top story, that idea that they’re on the garbage dump kind of away from the city from his town, it is kind of this liminal place. It’s this marginalized, “Alice in Wonderland” kind of place where this really insane kind of dialogue … Insane might not be the best word, but extraordinary kind of thing. And yet it’s very universal and it brings us very deep into the mystery of suffering and, what is this all about?

**Steve:** So, Job is sitting there. He’s on the edge of town sitting out by the garbage dump itching these boils, and then what happens?

**Peter:** He has some friends come by. Actually, there’s also a very brief scene with his wife. His seven children die, and that number seven is always symbolic. You don’t hear a lot from Job; there isn’t this outcry. But his wife outcries in despair and this terrible grief. It’s a very sort of masculine story in many ways, but you do have her in there. I think she gives in some ways this honesty and this emotive outcry that is very human.

**Steve:** And she says, “Curse God and die,” right?

**Peter:** Yeah. It’s just from her soul. And [Job] is very …

**Steve:** Stoic.

**Peter:** At this point, yeah. That’s a good word for it: stoic. He’s very stoic, and she is not.

**Steve:** He would be a good Northern European. That’s kind of the philosophy that I was raised with: If you face struggle, don’t complain about it [because] other people have it worse. But part of the drama of Job’s story is literally no one had it worse.

**Peter:** No one has it worse than this guy. The stoicism changes. He’s stoic in the beginning. That’s the interesting thing is all these characters, they change. He has three friends who come to visit him. Their names are Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. Each of these characters, they’re very wise, but they’re also very flawed. The dialogue with Job and his friends, it really just kind of sheds this bright light on humanity because it’s just so brutally honest. I think at first what they do well is they sit with Job without discussing just in silence, and it says for seven days – which, again, is that symbolic number. It means fullness. The world was created in seven days. We have seven of his children die, so there’s kind of this parallel thing going on with this numerology there. That’s really amazing that they do that.

Then they start talking, and they try to help him or to fix what’s wrong with Job. Of course, there’s something wrong with him that has to be fixed – that’s the assumption, right? I kind of am empathetic with his friends because if you’ve ever really been with someone who’s deeply suffering and in a lot of pain, it’s really hard to be with them. It can be really frightening, so oftentimes we will shield ourselves from the pain and we’ll just try to make sense of it. For example, I heard someone say, “My co-worker died of lung cancer.” Then another person [asked], “Was she a smoker?” [The person responded], “She was a smoker.” [The other person said], “Oh, good – she was a smoker. I’m not a smoker.” In other words, it’s a way of, by making sense of things, sometimes what we’re really doing is trying to push it away. And I think in some ways, that’s what happens with Job’s friends.

**Steve:** Because inevitably, that making sense leads to judgment – I want to understand why the suffering is happening to you, but it’s not for your sake, it’s for my sake so I can say, “OK, that’s why I’m different from you. That’s why it happened to you and it won’t happen to me.”

**Peter:** They all at one point chime in and said, “You must have sinned. You must have done something wrong.” And Job continues to claim his innocence. It’s interesting. If you notice what’s at stake for them is really the very whole foundation – whether they really understand that’s the foundation or not – but the whole foundation of what they believe to be their faith, which is, everything makes sense [and] everything happens for a reason. There is a reason why you are suffering, and it must be this and this and this. In some ways, what they’re doing too is they’re kind of resisting the journey of Job. Job is kind of everyman, every person. We’re all called to what the Greeks called *“katabasis,”* which is sort of that going down into suffering and then coming back up, or what Christians call the “Paschal Mystery.” It’s that kind of death and resurrection. It’s at the heart of reality. To really enter into that is, that’s the journey of Job. That was the journey of Jesus as well. It’s not just figuring things out theologically. In some ways, we’re called to let go, and to, as Francis says, “to die to ourselves.” We all resist it; of course, we do. That’s our human nature; we want to protect ourselves.

What is interesting too is that I think religion in some ways can really help us to do this work. But we can also use it to remain complacent and resist, and even to try to shield ourselves from reality by having real quick explanations with things.

**Steve:** I’m a big fan of Richard Rohr, and Rohr talks a lot about first half of life spirituality, and second half of life. I think so much of this book is really challenging that first half of life spirituality. I think maybe we’re taught it and maybe it just makes sense to us, but if I do everything right, then things should work out. If things don’t work out, then I must have done something wrong. Maybe people teach us that and we don’t even remember, or maybe that is just how we’re wired as humans. But that’s kind of the expectation, right? I would say a lot of first half of life religion really teaches that, too – if you want things to go well, then you need to do things right, and then we do that as a way of giving ourselves immunity from struggle. But if we live long enough and we have enough experiences, sooner or later that’s going to break down.

**Peter:** It does break down. And at one point Job even says, “Calamity comes to both the blameless and the wicked.” And that really shakes his concept of God, and it challenges his friends’ concept of God. So, the question is, “What does it do to mine?” I mean, if this is really true, then you can ask first half of life stuff [such as], “Well then, why should I pray?” Or, “Why should I spend any time with this if I don’t get anything out of it if it doesn’t really protect me?” I think that that question is really the beginning of a major transition. It’s a faith that moves me from the center of everything to, suddenly, God is at the center of things. That is hard to do. That is very hard to do. And again, there’s a real resistance there.

**Steve:** Once again, referring to Rohr, he says that there are two paths to spiritual growth: deep suffering and deep love. I always kind of modify that because I’ve never known anyone who got there through deep love; it was always deep suffering. But where I’ve refrained that quote is that there are certain forms of suffering that I don’t enter until I am in love. I know with my daughter and my wife, I’ve been willing to enter suffering only because I love them and I don’t want to lose them, so I will really join them in their suffering or enter the areas of suffering in my own life that are causing problems in that relationship. Because of my love for them, OK, now I’ll do my suffering work. In that regard, that’s where I find the love part. It’s not like I get the deep spiritual understanding because I’m so in love and had this great awakening. It’s more like, I still think suffering is the path to a deeper understanding of awareness. What’s your reaction?

**Peter:** It’s all a mystery. And it’s really not a kind of a “what” or a philosophy or a definition, but it’s more of a “how” – how do I live my life? What is the process? How do I respond to suffering on a very day-to-day relational, as you said, my soul [and] my heart? It’s right in there. And I know that it’s so easy … The first of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism is, “Life is difficult. Life is suffering.” The idea here is once we acknowledge that and name it and understand that and live into it, only then can we actually transcend it. But so many of us are taught, “Well, if I’m suffering, there must be something wrong with me.” Or, “There must be something that I’m not doing.” Or, “If I just try harder ...” Or, “If I could just earn more respect …” Or, “If I can just do this and this, and then …” Or, the big one is, “If I can just make my life more comfortable or easy, then my suffering will go away.” What this book, and what wise people tell us, is, “No. That is just an inextricable part of life.” But once we accept that instead of running away from it or pretending that it’s not there or theologizing it away or trying to fly over it, once we just accept it, then all of a sudden I think our world can really open up and we have a deeper wisdom and understanding of God. And this is where Job was going, and his friends were resisting. They were using religion … That’s the interesting thing, because you read the friends and you [say], “Oh, that’s wise. That makes sense. That’s absolutely right.” Then you see this flaw. The brilliance of this book is it kind of brings out the best of religion, and then the worst of religion, and it puts it all together. This is in the Bible? This is so amazing. Why don’t we listen to this more and read this more, because it could be a real help for us.

**Steve:** As you read it through, everything the friends say is what normal people would agree with – it makes sense to me, [and] it makes sense to me. And Job really comes off as this crazy guy, this heretic – a good person would not say the things that he is saying.

**Peter:** That’s right.A good person doesn’t question God. Job is adamant, though. The other thing that’s great about Job is that he’s always active and he’s not passive. At one point toward the end, he says, “I am going to search the world over. I will not stop. I will find God. I will put God on trial because there is an injustice that is done. I am outraged. This is wrong, and I am not going to stop until I actually have it out with God.” The rest of them [say], “I don’t want to hear this.” But that’s his bridge to God: that outrage [and] that injustice. For me, that’s such a reminder that that’s sometimes the most powerful prayer: outrage.

**Steve:**  So, he gets to that place of outrage [and says], “I don’t care what any of you say. I know this is wrong, and God needs to stand to account.”

**Peter:** It’s interesting. There’s a guy who comes into the scene, and his name is Elihu. He shows up late, and he seems to be very wise. He says, “Look, Job. With this suffering, God is communicating with you because in the end, you will know God’s greater love.” And [you think], “Elihu seems to really have the theological answer here.” Again, he assumes that Job is too self-indulgent. He must be wicked. There is something wrong with Job. All of them have just a little piece of truth or wisdom, but they’re all flawed in their theology because no theology, as brilliant as it might be, can really bring you to what actually happens to Job at the end, which is of course he actually … He moves from being the theologian to being the mystic, [and] to actually encountering God.

**Steve:** Describe that scene. Describe what happens in that scene.

**Peter:** It’s in Chapter 38, and God actually comes on the scene. Job was just honest. What happens is God comes to Job in a whirlwind, which I think is an amazing … It’s just this swirl of power, but also kind of a randomness. This weather pattern, it’s just whirling around him. I know that at times we can say, “My life feels like a whirlwind. It just feels out of control.” That’s how God appears to him. Basically, what happens is he takes Job on this sort of tour of the world. You want God to be sort of nice, and you want him to sort of comfort Job. It’s like, they’re there, I didn’t really mean it. You want him to just be sort of a mother, kind of nurturing and just taking care of this poor guy, like nursing him back to … There is none of that. God comes to Job. I think God gives him something better than that. He takes him on this tour of the world, and he just says, “Look at this. See this. The incredible, awesome mystery of the world, and of existence.” And he [asks], “Do you know of how the world came into existence? Do you know what a leaf really is? Do you know how high this mountain is? Do you know how deep the ocean is?” He keeps asking him, “Do you know? Do you know?” “Look,” he says. “See. Notice. Be aware. Be mindful. Look at all of this.” It sort of makes me think about … There is an Ignatian saying or motto, which is, “God in all things.” This is how we encounter God. Open your eyes and look and see. Not the labels of things, but as the Psalm says, “Taste and see.” I think that’s what he’s doing, but he’s also doing it in a way of humility.

At first reading, you think, “God is just not being very … not that ‘Minnesota Nice’ kind of thing.” God is really challenging him, and the challenge is, “Get out of the way. You are not the center. I am the center.” And that is enough for Job, to take this tour of the universe with God. And God is very proud of creation, especially of the big monsters like Leviathan and others that seem to be the appearance of this overwhelming power, but it’s actually beautiful and wonderful when you see it from a different perspective.

**Steve:** What’s your connection to this material? Or how do you understand this material in your life?

**Peter:** I find it very encouraging. I love theology, and [I] studied it. But what I love more these days is doing spiritual direction with folks because I find that that’s how … It’s not the “what,” it’s the how people live. And I find that everyone is Job. We’re all in this Job journey. It really encourages me to have a learner’s stance. It encourages me to continue asking the question, “Where are you, God?” in the same way that Job did. It encourages me to bring all my emotions to prayer, and sometimes to have it out with God. The other thing is that, again, Job is not passive. He’s active, and he’s always taking action. That also is kind of a “how” in life. I have to believe that taking action is really where we find hope, to understand that our actions do matter. And it also teaches me the way of mysticism [and] an actual encounter with God. After all that Job went through, encountering God – not hearsay, not rumors, not talking about God – but actually encountering God through the world, that’s enough for him. It satisfies him, and he says, “I didn’t know what I was talking about before, and now I see. Now I get it.” And as we read it, we [say], “What? What did you get? Tell us.” And then we [realize] you kind of have to take that journey of Job that we have to take. We have to encounter it and do it for ourselves to find out what that is.

**Steve:** You’re coming to the spirituality center in February, and you’re going to do an entire day or a weekend with Job?

**Peter:** It will be an overnight, so it will be Friday night and into Saturday. What I’m hoping is that we can use the story of Job as sort of a launching pad to look more deeply into our own lives.