

Lamenting Allowed
A Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
October 10, 2021
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Job said:

*"Today also my complaint is bitter;
his hand is heavy despite my groaning.
Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his dwelling!
I would lay my case before him,
and fill my mouth with arguments.
I would learn what he would answer me,
and understand what he would say to me.
Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No; but he would give heed to me.
There an upright person could reason with him,
and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.
"If I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;
on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.
God has made my heart faint;
the Almighty has terrified me;
If only I could vanish in darkness,
and thick darkness would cover my face!"*

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

"Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling!"

Maybe you've been in in a similar place, your complaint bitter, unable to find God in your situation, and terrified of the thick darkness that seemed to hide all hope. An unwanted medical diagnosis, unemployment, a family fracture, the death of a loved one, or a plateful of existential angst served with two sides – depression and anxiety.

Since we left Job among the ashes with his potsherd last week, a lot has happened, almost twenty chapters' worth, and Job has reached the end of his rope. He is, as the psalmist likes to say, in the pit. He has lost hope and God is nowhere to be found, and his three friends have come to pay a bereavement call. It's important to remember that they really were his friends, they meant well, and they did care about Job. But when nothing they said seemed to comfort Job or make him snap out of his grief, they didn't know what to do. Their own faith and theology were threatened by Job's integrity and brutal honesty.

In the chapters missing from our lectionary, his friends accuse Job of terrible things, probably because he was challenging their own world view of suffering. Their insistence on a theology of deeds and consequences confirms for them that Job must have done something sinful to be experiencing such suffering. Have you ever heard someone say, “What did I do to deserve this?” or “I must not have enough faith.” Maybe you have said these words to yourself.

The friends are full of advice, they tell Job he must have sinned, they tell him he needs to repent. And here is where Job’s friends have gone to meddling! And they are counseling without a license! His friends have stopped comforting and are now only inflicting more pain on poor Job. They think Job’s pity party has gone on long enough and it’s time for him to get over it and get back to business.

But there is an unintended positive outcome from this pastoral mis-care by his well-meaning friends, because Job begins to question the theology that had been handed down to him. And instead of giving up on his faith, he decides to confront God. Job stops talking about God and starts speaking to God directly. As Old Testament professor Kathryn Schifferdecker notes, “The move from speaking only about God to speaking directly to God is the move from theologizing to lament.

Lament is one of the oldest forms of expression in human history. It is present in great literary works, and in the earliest writings of civilization. We find lament in the psalms, the Book of Lamentations, and all through the writings of the prophets. Lament is what trauma sounds like; a cry of need in the midst of crisis; an appeal for divine help in distress.

Expressing our experiences through lament is cathartic and good, but more often than not, when we lament it makes the people around us uncomfortable. And maybe that is what is good about lament, that it draws attention to what is not right. The truth is, some of us were raised to be nice all the time. We were taught never to let our feelings and emotions be seen or heard, and this has been especially true for women, minorities, and the marginalized. Speaking out, directly to God or in the face of injustice around us, is risky, and so we remain silent, which only compounds the trauma.

Generations of veterans returned home from the atrocities of war and never talked about it, never lamented, resulting in family trauma and unspoken pain, the scars of which some of us still bear today. We probably all know someone who is holding great pain, guilt, or grief deep inside, and we can see how it affects their life. Suffering comes into our lives in many ways and the book of Job suggests that not all suffering is a consequence of sinfulness.

When bad things happen to good people it isn’t time to blame ourselves or God. Most of the time there is no one to blame. Suffering is part of the fabric of life and sometimes a cause-and-effect theology of retributive justice simply will not suffice when we are dealing with real life and with the mystery of God. Job’s dilemma is ours when we find ourselves suffering and losing hope.

When what we have been told fails to convince or console us, what are we to do? When God seems absent, what do we do? Do we detach from God or do we detach from the theology? Because, if we can only see God as an angry judge who uses power to inflict punishment, then we will begin to see the world this way, holding a theology of retribution that will harm rather than heal, destroy rather than restore. And we will find ourselves on one side or the other of that kind of punishing power.

It has been clear to see, even before the pandemic, that many who were taught certain things about God have decided that religious teachings are no longer persuasive. The world is becoming weary of that kind of punishing power, and more and more are searching for ways to restore rather than judge a broken world.

There are many who have stopped attending church, yet they do believe something about God. Job can be a good example for us. He remained in dialogue with God, holding onto his integrity and faith while asking God questions. When the church can be a place where we can ask questions, dialogue peacefully, and work together to practice restorative justice in our community, then the church will experience a renewed depth of spirituality and faith.

Job shows us that it is okay to ask questions of God, that it is, in fact, a faithful response. Scripture is full of faithful questions from the likes of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, and the Prophets. Being part of a faith community gives us a place ask questions and support one another as we do the holy work of restorative justice.

We leave Job in his darkness this week, but we are learning from him how to lament; how to bring our anger, pain, grief and despair directly to God, even when we feel as if God is absent. Job's bitter complaint, his need for justice, and his need to see God, to speak with God, resonate with us. Job shows us that even in a place of thick darkness, there can still be a small glimmer of hope and trust.

Perhaps we can take some time this week to sit in the silence with our potsherd and consider what we believe about God, and whether or not it is helping us deepen and strengthen our faith.

Next week we will hear God's response to Job's lament. We will learn what can happen in our relationship with God when we seek out God on our own, rather than relying only on the theology of others that simply will not work for us. We will see that God's grace meets us wherever we are in life and will lift us up out of the ashes. Amen.