

JOB: THE STORY FOR THE AGES

Act Two: "With Friends like These" (Job 23:1-9, 16-17)

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The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost - Amos 5:6-7; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/job-the-story-for-the-ages-act-2

Job 23:1-9

Job replied:

"I'm not letting up—I'm standing my ground.

My complaint is legitimate.

God has no right to treat me like this—

it isn't fair!

If I knew where on earth to find him,

I'd go straight to him.

I'd lay my case before him face-to-face,

give him all my arguments firsthand.

*I'd find out exactly what he's thinking,
discover what's going on in his head.*

Do you think he'd dismiss me or bully me?

No, he'd take me seriously.

He'd see a straight-living man standing before him;

my Judge would acquit me for good of all charges.

"I travel East looking for him—I find no one;

then West, but not a trace;

I go North, but he's hidden his tracks;

then South, but not even a glimpse.

Job 23:16-17

"But he is singular and sovereign. Who can argue with him?

He does what he wants, when he wants to.

*He'll complete in detail what he's decided about me,
and whatever else he determines to do.*

Is it any wonder that I dread meeting him?

Whenever I think about it, I get scared all over again.

God makes my heart sink!

God Almighty gives me the shudders!

I'm completely in the dark,

In the drama of Job's life, the disasters of Job's downfall are told with startling speed. In no time at all, he is stripped of his fortune and all his possessions. The lives of his children are snuffed out by a raging desert wind as it flattens his house on top of them. All his sheep and goats, the visible signs of his vast wealth, are destroyed. His friends desert him *and even his wife turns on him in disgust*. In essence, he loses everything that helped give his life meaning.

We are fond of saying that for every crime there is a punishment. In Job's case we have the punishment, but where is the crime? Most of us have been raised to think that when we do something good, we are rewarded, and when we do something bad, we are punished. That's our first mistake because life doesn't keep these simple rules.

Job is exemplary in his conduct. He does it all right and yet life doles out one punitive event after another. Part of the problem is that Job is almost too perfect. He had it all and even as his life came tumbling down around him, he uttered not a word. But he's not Everyman in this story, he's Superman.

This is not about controlling ourselves in the face of calamities. It's not about maintaining control over our emotions over the things that cause the ground to shake under us. Job is about the freedom to ask the fiercest questions that haunt us whenever our lives are under siege.

Old Testament scholar Karla Suomala compares this long middle stretch of Job to "fly over" territory. That's us here in the Midwest. Between the bookends of Job, between the initial set-up and the dramatic end, are long chapters we know little about. The opening and closing portions of Job's story are the prose passages of Job while the long middle chapters are mostly poetry. This squishy middle of Job is absolutely contrary to what we really want: story, plot, action. Like most unwanted advice from people who think they know better, the unwelcomed moralistic speeches of Job's friends are written as poetry and are both repetitive and tedious. Poet Elizabeth Alexander, in a conversation with Krista Tippett on the NPR program "*On Being*," suggests that reading and writing poetry are often ways to get at hard and true things that other forms of language and literature can't quite do, especially in ways that allows both poet and reader to formulate and nurture questions of depth. Perhaps this is the reason poetry is the primary vehicle of communication in the Book of Job, which is essentially about tackling ultimate questions, from the angles and perspectives of pain.

Nevertheless, we are forced to admit reading through this poetic middle, with all these interminable speeches, is hard work. We are rather drawn to stories and the familiar dramatic structure as Aristotle defined it as having a beginning, a middle, and an end.

This is, by the way, exactly what happens when we try to give unwanted advice. We miss the story that is actually at work in someone's life. We would do better to join Job sitting in the dirt, living with him in his pain, sharing his despair. There's a familiar saying, "Don't just sit there, *do* something!" When we want to be helpful to our friends we could flip that over and say instead, "Don't just do something, *sit* there!"

Two things have happened to Job since last week and this week. First, he has these ... friends, "Job's friends." have you ever heard that phrase? Have you encountered any of them? At first, Job's friends are reduced to silence by the enormity and gravity of his plight. So much loss! They step away, and wait in silence, accompanying him in that manner which is so often the best of all – a quiet, sharing of grief, a stunned stillness of wonder that so very much can go wrong.

But then these friends of Job get restless. They, like most of us, believe life should be just, should be fair. In our presumptive ideal world, bad things do not happen to good people. And so, they accuse Job: "You must have done something wrong. You must have engaged in evils about which we do not know." The only possible explanation for the calamities that have befallen him? They're his fault. "*The righteous are not cut off,*" they tell him; the wicked are punished. Job must have deserved what has happened to him.

We know those feelings and ideas, don't we? Have you ever heard about a teenager's bad behavior and thought, "Grrr, those parents ... I thought they were all right, but there must be something wrong going on in that house." Or, "That wouldn't have happened to her if she'd dressed decently." Or, "It wouldn't have happened to him if he stayed out of that neighborhood?" Have you ever wondered, when something terrible has happened in your own life that God is punishing you for something?

And that's the second thing that has happened between the readings for this fly-over part of the story: Job speaks of his anguish and frustration with honesty directly to God. His so-called friends? He describes them as "*miserable comforters with windy words.*" But God? God he wants to hear from. "*I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. I will say to God, 'Do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me. Does it seem good to you to oppress? ... Do you see as humans see? ... you know that I am not guilty ... [and yet] you turn and destroy me.'*"

"Where is God?" That's what Job wants to know, and in crying out for an answer, he echoes the long biblical tradition of lament. Sometimes we think, or perhaps we've been told, that it's somehow wrong, incorrect, inappropriate, to express our deepest anger and fear and sadness to God. I don't know where we get that idea, but we do. We think we are only allowed to express gratitude to God, or that we are only allowed to ask God nicely – that we are somehow rejecting God if we give voice to our hurts and sorrows.

Job cannot find or see or hear God, but he remains undeterred. What is the great grace, the great gift of God, reflected in Job's words? That he longs for God. That his hope in God, and his belief in God's care for him, will persist. That he is certain that the silence of God is not the last thing he will hear.

The silence of God – it's very silent, indeed. And it's difficult for us to interpret. We are people of story, of narrative, of proclamation, of conversation – people of a multitude of words. We know, from the first verses of Genesis, that God spoke creation into being. We know, from the first verses of the Gospel of John that Jesus is The Word, God-spoken and speaking into

humanity. And we know when we, like Job, experience that vast silence in which God resides in times of trial, that we, too, long to know God is there. Elie Wiesel once described Job as “our colleague,” indicating that most of us relate to the struggles of Job as much as we find ourselves struggling. Maybe you find yourself today in a season of wearisome struggle.

Many of those voices are heard in the psalms, the songbook and prayer book of the Jewish people, and most particularly in the specific psalms of lament. There’s even a book in the OT entitled Lamentations. Other laments are heard in the voices of the prophets, and in the words of Jesus himself. As he died upon the cross, he called out in agony, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* (the words of the first verse of Psalm 22). His words echo the lament of human beings for centuries before him. *Where are you, God? Why have you abandoned me?*

At the end of the lament, when the words and the music have stilled themselves, and the one suffering from the silence and despair of God’s empty absence, there yet remains a slender thread of hope. Job found this hope by dwelling in the depths of despair where he turned to God. In that emptiness he clung to a thread of hope and proclaimed, *“I know my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another”* (Job 19:25-27a).

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By the way, the back page for Playbill is for you to keep the conversation going. It’s meant to be used to stir the pot of your thinking, to give you a new path toward a deeper faith. Share these thought-provoking questions with your best friend or neighbor and join the conversation.