

## Wanting an Audience with God.

**Job 23:1-9; 16-17 (NRSV):**

**1** Then Job answered: **2** “Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. **3** Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! **4** I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments **5** I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. **6** Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me. **7** There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge. **8** If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; **9** on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.

**16** God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; **17** If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!”

### SERMON

Although this is Thanksgiving Sunday, two of the lectionary readings for today are on suffering. One is Ps 22, which begins with the familiar words of Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and the other – as we have just heard - is from Job. It was tempting to skip such passages for something more cheerful on this of all weekends. But one of the purposes of the lectionary is to stop preachers from doing just that! While we have much to be thankful to God for – and we have celebrated God’s goodness this morning - we also know that life can be hard and unfair. It is hard to be thankful when life is tough.

The book of Job is one of the most challenging books in the Bible. Scholars have diverse opinions concerning its overall message not only because of the difficulties in translation and structure, but because the way we approach the text is also build upon *our* assumed understanding of the character and actions of God, and the kind of world that God has made. We always come to the Bible with a set of overriding control beliefs which filter how we read and interpret its contents. Nevertheless, when we think about the problem of suffering, sooner or later we explore again the book of Job and wonder what we can learn from it afresh for today. This short sermon cannot hope to address the whole book or indeed the perennial problem of suffering. All we can do here is explore this one passage, and then I will suggest a practical way forward in times of suffering born from my personal experience.

We must also remember that the Old Testament view of existence at this point in time had no firm understanding of an afterlife. It was even a controversial topic between the Sadducees and Pharisees at the time Jesus. Knowing that Job and his friends’ had no ultimate hope of heaven as part of *their* control beliefs must inform the way we read the book.

One of the interesting things about the book of Job is that it represents honest theology of *protest*. The wisdom of the day was really more like a theology of *contract*. If you seek God, keep the 10 Commandments, and are disciplined and faithful in your routine sacrifices, then God will honor his side of the bargain and give you material blessings in *this* world. Sound familiar? It is what some today would call the “prosperity gospel”. But it is also a jaundiced view of the Law of Moses when all sense of a relationship with God is lost and we are simply left with dutiful rule-keeping.

Job was a pious man, who had every material blessing in life, but all was taken away for him - so the story goes - through a variety of calamities including raiders taking his livestock and killing his servants, and a natural disaster that wiped out all of his children. Job’s social welfare and financial security for the future was therefore decimated. After that, Job then experienced dire personal health crises, and his wife simply gave up and encouraged Job “to curse God and die” (2:9).

Part of the wisdom of the day was the idea that “you get what you deserve” or “you reap what you sow”. And so Job’s three so-called friends challenge Job and proclaim that he must have deeply offended God to deserve such a punishment. Hence they urged him to humbly repent and ask for God’s forgiveness. Their contract theology told them that if Job did that, then God would raise him up again and bless him with material things – after all, if there is no notion of an afterlife, the only meaningful benefits are in the here and now. The story does not comment on how you could replace his dead children!

Job on the other hand believes he has done absolutely nothing wrong; not that he was perfect, but simply that his conscience is clear before God. We may think that this is a rather arrogant and presumptive stance to take before Almighty God. But the author tells us in the very first verse of the book that Job was genuinely blameless and morally upright, he honored God and had turned from all evil ways. Moreover, even at the end of the book of Job, when God finally speaks to him in Chapters 38-41, God does not dispute Job’s claim of being blameless.

That being the case the writer of Job was challenging the wisdom of the day. Job had *not* reaped what he had sowed, but was the recipient of pointless evil, seemingly random natural disasters and – on top of it all – grave personal illness. Life was therefore unfair! God was not keeping his side of the bargain...or else, perhaps the author was using the story to push hard against the traditional “contract with God” perspective, claiming such a theology is flawed. (*I leave you to mull that over later.*)

Today’s passage tells us something about Job himself. On one hand, Job has a passionate belief in God and a sense of justice, and on the other hand, he presents a devastating indictment of a God who seems different to a world of injustice. It also tells us that in the midst of his suffering he has *not* turned his back on God. What he desperately wants is to *find* God and to be able to state his case before him as if in a court of law. He is convinced that God would listen to him and God – the just Judge - would indeed acquit him. In other words Job is saying: “The suffering I have experienced is truly unfair. I know that I’m on the side of the righteous, whatever my friends may think.”

Job continues to be frustrated because whether he goes forwards or backwards he cannot find God. If he turns to the left or to the right, God remains elusive and he cannot see him. The chapter concludes with Job's thoughts: "God has made my heart faint and the Almighty has terrified me, yet I am not silenced by this thick darkness that covers my life." Job is indeed far from silent as he experiences his "dark night of the soul".

The remarkable thing about Job is his honesty and that he is prepared to butt heads with God, and to challenge the theological status quo. Job does not abandon his ultimate faith in God. He does not walk completely away from God in times of suffering. Even when God is absent and cannot be seen or found, he holds on in faith that God *is* ultimately a God of justice and of mercy and will vindicate him.

We often speak of "the patience of Job". In reading the book, I do not find Job particularly patient, but I do find him remarkably steadfast towards God in the face of life's bitter circumstances. He refuses to let go of the idea of a loving God and that justice will ultimately prevail. Those two things – a loving God and justice – speak to me of the basis of our Christian hope. Whatever happens in life, that hope must be protected and nurtured at all costs, for without it we are likely to die as embittered people.

What you do and I do when faced with our own suffering? Do we, like Job, demand an audience with God and proclaim life's not fair? Or do we hang on by a fine thread in faith, wrestling with God and having no peace of mind? Or do we give up and walk away? We have a choice and some have chosen to abandon their faith in God's goodness.

I want to suggest a practical way forward. If we want to experience God in tough times, we have to take some responsibility or some proactive steps to be in a 'place' where we can experience him. While none of us will ever be immune to the dark night of the soul, we can take constructive steps towards the open arms of God. What I am about to say is not a trite recipe for victory, but series of steps of hope towards the light in our places of darkness.

As some of you know, my first wife - Anne – died of cancer 4½ years ago, having battled the disease for 6 years. It was a journey of suffering that neither of us deserved, and – incidentally – I don't blame God for it because I don't regard him as the direct cause of it; it wasn't personal punishment for anything. My control beliefs tell me that God does not work that way. But as a widower, I was naturally left with a broken heart and shattered dreams. I developed a mental image of a framework; a scaffolding that surrounded my fractured heart. The way I saw it, God's job was to both direct and be actively involved in mending the heart. My job is *not* to mend the heart, but to *partner* with God by building a framework, or scaffolding to provide stability while God's healing activity takes place.

What does that mean in practice? First it means to have a plan and not be a passive 'victim'. Second, I had to be realistic, to know where and when I was weak and vulnerable, and try to avoid or anticipate such situations – like being overwhelmed by loneliness. In such circumstances I had to very intentional and do a life-enhancing activity – like going out of the house to a bookstore, or while at home being careful with my music choice.

Third, I took a page out of Job's book and literally talked out loud to God or Jesus. I just told him how I felt, no hiding my emotions. He knows anyway, so no point in trying to fake it or be 'holy'. Like Job, sometimes it felt like I was talking to myself, but I found that visualizing Jesus next to me was particularly important and comforting. Remember Jesus is the very likeness or image of the invisible God. Even if Jesus said nothing, the image of him next to me was vividly reassuring. By concentrating on my mental image of Jesus, I was simply focusing on God's *character* - not what I wanted him to *do* for me. Knowing God's presence is not just about emotion and feelings, but requires the use of our minds and intelligence – both are gifts of God.

Fourth, to be at a place where God is – I came to Church! I did not feel I had to sing or be joyful. I could quietly slip in at the back and afterwards I did not *have* to chat about how things were going. Something happens when Christians meet together that is different from being on your own with God, so we should not cut ourselves off from a potentially life-giving source. Others contribute to God's healing so I had to learn not to be too private. The Bible encourages us to share one another's burdens; that can only happen if we are prepared to open up to people we trust.

Finally, I focused on life-giving activities. We can experience God doing very secular – fun-filled - things. Ride a bike, go for a walk, go window shopping, read a book, write a journal, see a movie, draw a picture. By doing these kinds of activities we are creating a healthy routine of building and maintaining our framework while God continues with the slow process of healing.

Often we panic when all we experience is God's silence. Like Job, we are busy trying to tell God what he *should* be doing. We want to claim this or that verse, or some 'victory'. We say, God you *promised* this or that..... Sometimes God never promised anything of the sort. Often we are impatient.....God what are you waiting for? I need this now! But this is entitlement language of 'contract' that we see in Job's friends – if I do this and that, then you will bless me.

Like Job, in the end we have to wait and listen – not rush around wasting energy– and allow God to meet us at our point of need. We simply wait. (We find it hard to wait don't we?) In that quiet, *know* the presence of God. As followers of Jesus we are beloved children of God. We don't need to frantically search for God, or try and cut deals with him, or twist his arm. If we want to encounter the living God, it will always be on his terms. And the first step in that – and I contend that it is often as simple as that (though we love to make it more complicated) – is to consciously face towards God, rather than away from him.

Is God indifferent to our suffering? Does God care? I know that he really cares! As Christians we have another foundation for that hope, namely the resurrection of Jesus. That is one reason why the resurrection is so important – it tells us that evil will not ultimately prevail. God did not abandon the world he made but came to it on that first Christmas to reveal what God was like and his ways. God is not indifferent to our suffering; rather Jesus suffered too; we humans cruelly killed the son of God. But God said "No" and in a unique act of vindication and of divine justice raised Jesus up from the

dead. When we face suffering, we can take hope in the fact that God in Christ experienced suffering too and God vindicated him. The resurrection states “no more”; today begins a new age of restoration. The resurrection is a glimpse of the future when one day the God of justice *will* set all wrongs to right. Until then, in the power of the resurrection and with the aid of the Holy Spirit, we work for God’s justice in an unjust and unfair world.

Protest theology is not unique to Job. I want to end today with another person, Habakkuk, who also wondered where God was and what he was doing in the middle of life’s struggles. Chapter 1 begins: *O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?* But the book ends with an affirmation of hope using imagery that is most appropriate at harvest time:

*Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.*

Amen