

“Learning To Live With the Questions”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’ And he said to them, ‘What is it you want me to do for you?’ And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’ But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’ They replied, ‘We are able.’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.’

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’

Job 38:1-7 and selected verses

*Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:
‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.*

*‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding,
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?’*

So we're going to take on the Book of Job today, so we really need to pray together, okay? Okay. Gracious God, you offer us your word, your gift, and your challenge. And so be with us now as we listen, we ponder, and we open our hearts. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

I think the Book of Job is a familiar story to many. The story about a man who suffers many losses and struggles and yet, in spite of it all, remains faithful. It's a book that focuses on the difficult questions of life and the struggle to understand the reason for suffering. Indeed the book itself is not an easy read. In the first two chapters alone we learn that Job, once living a blessed and prosperous life, finds himself in the midst of deep losses. The loss of family, the loss of livestock, the loss of health. All taking place in a short period of time. Even his wife is ready to give up. So Job is distraught and grieving.

Now I'll admit over the years I have wrestled with this story. I struggled with it because of the back story. Because of the fact that the terrible things that happen to Job essentially revolve around a bet. A bet between God and the one called the

advocate, also referred to as the devil. So the devil and God one day have been talking about the faithfulness of Job, and the devil pokes at God, saying that someone like Job is faithful only because he is so prosperous and blessed. God argues, "That is not the case." God believes Job is good, not because of what he has but because he is simply a good and faithful man. And the advocate says, "I'd like you to prove it." And God takes on the bet, and soon things begin to unravel for Job. Now I don't know about you, but as I first read this book over the years I wondered what kind of god would do such things to someone. And why would God be willing to be goaded into making someone suffer in order to prove a point? So it came as a great relief in Biblical studies when I learned that in the Jewish tradition and many Christian scholars as well believe this story is a folktale. A story that is to share a truth, but a folktale nonetheless. Think about how the book opens: "There once was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job." It sort of sounds like the beginning of the Wizard of Oz. The book though is a powerful example of what we call wisdom literature because it attempts to address an issue of humanity. To address and understand human suffering. Indeed the book was probably written to challenge a traditional viewpoint. Because in those days there was a perspective called the Deuteronomic view that held that those who were good and faithful would indeed be rewarded. The flip side then was if bad things happened, it was because the person had done something to offend God. So Job unfolds as a challenge to that kind of theology. A challenge to what those in the prosperity gospel might have us think. A reminder that faith is not a means to a self-serving end. It is about a relationship with God. So many scholars set the time of this book as being written during the exile, the time when the Jews had been defeated and exiled to another land. And it makes a lot of sense. This was a time of loss and struggle and suffering and sorrow. The Jews were far from home where they had lived out their traditions, where they worshipped God, and they had lived their faith. So one might ask, does Job represent Israel? He might. But perhaps there is more power in the story if it is focused on one individual. Because by focusing it on one individual, it can be seen as a reflection of the universal question about the cause of human suffering.

So returning to the book, not long after Job's many losses, we read the speeches that are given by three of his friends who come by to visit him and talk with him about his troubles. Now, you might think the friends would come by to commiserate and support him. But that's not their role in this book. They are here to represent that Deuteronomic perspective that suffering must be a punishment from God. So these friends, Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad go at it. They pester Job. They tried him, "What did you do to offend God?" We do not sense that Job is arrogant or in denial. He racks his brains honestly trying to figure out what it is that he might have done wrong. And his reply is, "I'm innocent."

The speeches continue, and finally, in Chapter 7, Job responds. He isn't speaking though so much to his friends as to God. And he rails at God with question after question and challenge after challenge, echoing like words from Psalm 22, "Why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from me? I cry by day and you do not answer, and by night but I find no rest." You can sense that he is shaking his fist and sputtering. He is someone ready to give up.

Yet God does not speak quite yet. His friends continue their interrogation but to no avail. The conversations satisfy neither his friends nor Job. And finally Job has had it, and he pushes back. But after that speech, one more person enters to offer another perspective. Elihu thinks that the older men don't know much about this, so he chimes in. And he begins by saying, "I have something to say on God's behalf. Truly, my words are not false." Elihu does not think that God has abandoned Job. God only abandons those who are wicked. What Elihu thinks is that God punishes those who sin. And Job, even faithful Job, must have done something and is being punished. He introduces a nuance that isn't reflected by the other three, that when bad things happen to the righteous, it's because God has a lesson to teach them. Therefore, Job should think about what it is God wants him to learn. As one scholar wrote, Elihu thinks that suffering is education and God is a great teacher.

At this point, the never-ending accusatory words of the friends continue. And I don't know about you, but it really begins to bug me. With friends like this, who needs enemies? They are so sure that they know that they are a mouthpiece for God. And they come across as self-righteous. And it seems that something's missing. And maybe they presume too much about what they know of God.

And I found myself thinking of the words to know in French. [foreign]. We can know something. We can know someone. Each one is different. But with God, it is even more different. They know God, but they don't know all about God. They are not made-- they do not think that they are made in the image of God so much as they act as though God is made in their image. Now, the truth is, we may know God and be in relationship with God, and yet not fully understand God. We may be in a relationship that is deeply connected, but we cannot possibly know all about God. For God is God is God.

Consider the name that Yahweh or God shares with Moses. A name that really cannot be fully interpreted or understood. It may mean, "I am who I am," or, "I will be who I will be," or simply, "I am."

God offers a word that cannot be fully understood or defined as a name. And it reminds us we cannot fully know or presume to understand the mind of God. When we do that, we try to be like God and we are not. It reflects in many ways what the Jews consider to be the interpretation of the creation story. In the desire to know the difference between good and evil, Adam tries to become like God. And in this case, it appears the friends have fallen into the trap that some of us do when we make God in our own image. They think they know all about God and miss out on what's really going on. They push Job down instead of helping him get back up. They are so sure they are made to represent the thought that when bad things happen to good people, they must have done something wrong.

And maybe at this point, it's important to acknowledge the difference between things that happen because of a person's actions and unexpected tragedies. Job didn't have an affair that destroyed his marriage. He didn't cheat people out of money in livestock trading. He didn't expose himself willingly to some disease. These are not acts of sin that we're talking about. This is unexpected tragedy and suffering. But for his friends, there does not seem to be a real difference for the reasons that these things happen.

And so we arrive towards the end of the book, and in the midst of the back and forth and finger pointing, God speaks. I know at first it doesn't seem that God is the most compassionate being. But it's a poetic response. God weaves images that talk about the unfolding of creation of the formation of wind and water, and light and dark, and death and life, God reminds Job that God was there before all that was, the beginning of time and before time and before all that has come to be. God is someone who neither Job nor any of us can fully understand or comprehend. But I think there's a lot more going on. God may push back at Job, but God does not push Job away. God does not tell Job that he shouldn't ask questions. God is not afraid of the questions. God senses the pain that triggers the questions. When tragedies occur, it is not the result of sinning. God does not respond to the question why bad things happen, but responds to the question when they happen and says, "I am with you." In fact, many of us often speak the name of the book by Rabbi Kushner with the wrong beginning. Many people call the book why bad things happen to good people, but the title is *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. And so in the end, Job comes to know that there are things that unfold in life that we may not understand and find hard to accept. Paul conveyed that in his letter to the Corinthians when he says, "Now, I see in a mirror dimly." It will not be all clear in his lifetime. But in the time to come, in the life beyond this life, there may be things that come clearer in the most unexpected ways. So when God talks to Job, he reminds him that suffering is not the end of the story. God reminds Job that God is with him no matter what.

I found myself thinking of the movie, *Life Is Beautiful*, that came out about 10 years ago. It's the story of a man named Guido who is Jewish, who lives in Italy with his wife and son, and it is the time of the Nazi taking over of the Germans and other countries. And Guido and his son are taken away to concentration camps. In order to keep his son from paralyzing fear, Guido takes on the role of one who interprets the events and horrors they face together with a softer and safe and sometimes humorous perspective. He is not making light of the events, he is simply trying to keep his son from despair. The days unfold and things become more difficult, yet each move Guido makes is one to help save his son. And while in the very end, Guido dies, his son lives because Guido has hidden him in a safe place. There were those who argued against the sense of humor used in this movie, but one person summed it up well. In the real death camps, there would not be a Guido. But *Life Is Beautiful* is not just about Nazis and Fascists, but about the human spirit. It's about rescuing whatever is good and hopeful from the wreckage of dreams, about the possibility for hope for the future, about the necessary human conviction or delusion that things will someday be better than right now. Guido's words enable his son to carry on. And in the end, I think Guido lives on through his son. While their present was terrible, Guido trusted in the possibility that the future might bring forth hope.

At the end of the day, I think that Job is a powerful witness like Guido. Job is often used to show the example of patience. But I think Job is more than that. Job is courageous; Job is honest with God. Job trusts God enough to ask the questions. Yes, it has a Hollywood ending - Job's life is once again filled with new blessings. But we also know that Job comes to understand and teaches us that the call of faith is not about the promise of prosperity but the promise of the presence and love of God. His response is to acknowledge that while he cannot fully understand the nature of God or why certain things happen, that in the midst of it all, God is with him. God will listen to his questions, stand by him in the midst of suffering, and be the presence of hope. And I would add as a P.S., God calls out the friends, too. He makes them do an act of

repentance. God says, "You haven't spoken to me of what is right as my servant Job has." I found that a little bit humorous. Job, while devastated by what happens, learns to trust more deeply in God. His story reminds us that when devastating events occur, things that are hard to fathom and understand, that we are not alone, that no matter what, God is with us from the beginning of time through the never-ending future. God is with us through the work of the Spirit and each time one of us is willing to be present and simply offer the gift of presence to one another.

I want to close with my favorite words from Isaiah - *Thus says the Lord, 'fear not for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, and you are mine. When you go through the waters, you will not be overwhelmed. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned and the flame will not consume you for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior: You are precious in my sight and honored and I love you.'* May we trust in these words and find in them hope and promise to sustain us in the storms of life. Amen.