

Journey with Job – Daring to Question God

Job 23:1-17

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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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.

But he knows where I am and what I've done.

He can cross-examine me all he wants, and I'll pass the test with honors.
I've followed him closely, my feet in his footprints, not once swerving from his way.
I've obeyed every word he's spoken, and not just obeyed his advice - I've treasured it.

But God 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. I can't see my hand in front of my face." (Job 23:1-17, [The Message](#))

One of the curious things about the book of Job is how much of it takes place outside of church. Here we sit in a sanctuary, gathered to hear these words from our holy scripture. Like the Jews who gave us this book, we know this is a religious text about our God. But then we read it, and hear it, and it threatens to blow the very roof off this building.

Job says, "I'm looking for God. I want to defend myself against God." It's striking that he doesn't go looking in a building. In the life of Israel, the Jerusalem temple was the center of everything. Ever since King Solomon built it, everybody believed the temple was the place where God touched down on earth. At the heart of the temple was the altar, where people offered sacrifices and God reciprocated with mercy. The altar of the temple was the one place on earth where God met the human race. But there's no mention of a temple or an altar in the entire book of Job.

Some scholars say this is a clue to dating the book. It could be this book was written after the Babylonians pulled down the first temple in 587 BC. And so, when Job was stricken, there was no temple where he could go and find God. Maybe so.

But that doesn't explain why there is no word of a sanctuary, its priests, or the liturgy. There is no mention of atonement sacrifices or holy days. In fact, there is only one glancing reference to the sacred scriptures, and it goes by pretty quickly. In today's text Job says, "I've obeyed every word God has spoken, and not just obeyed his advice – I've treasured it." He follows the Torah, yet he still suffers. The Bible is not some good luck charm for him. Organized religion does not save Job from his suffering.

That's a hard truth to swallow, especially if you're trying to be a religious person.

We hear the complaint some times: my mom was a good Christian woman, never missed a Sunday in church, never said a harsh word to anybody. So why is she suffering? Or it might be stated this way: we're good people, always tried to honor the Lord, always tried to live right, never got arrested, and now everything is falling apart. Why is this happening to us?

As I said last week, there are no simple answers, especially to the "why" questions. Sometimes the wrongdoer is discovered, and there are consequences. Job wants to know why the do-right person has trouble. Sometimes the suffering seems so random.

And it's not a matter of sickness, decline, or even death. Illness can strike out of the blue; we all know that. Every one of us is made of breakable parts. The longer we live, the more obvious this is. We have a limited number of days, and Job doesn't dispute that.

What he wants to know is why there isn't a clearer connection between the way he lives and the levels of his suffering and happiness. He's tried all his life to be a good person, but God isn't treating him any differently. And when he wants to complain about it, the God he believes in is nowhere to be found.

How you live versus how much you suffer: this is the same connection that Job's friends have been trying to make. They are certain there is a connection, and for twenty-one chapters, they've been trying to point that out to their buddy Job. "Surely you've done something wrong," they say. "Surely there's something about you or your behavior that a Holy God simply cannot tolerate." It's hard for them to believe that a good God would allow suffering to happen to good people.

Therefore, they reason, Job must not be as good as he says he is. Or maybe Job is being taught a lesson. Or maybe his pain is part of a larger plan and he will understand it later on. Or maybe it's a temporary setback on the way to a greater glory. These are the kind of things that his religious friends say. And Job is not comforted.

When he finds his voice, he yells back is that the whole situation isn't fair. "God has no right to treat me like this," he says. "I've done nothing wrong." He says to his friends, "Point out what I've done to justify how I'm suffering," and they can't do it. Job has lost his children, lost his business, lost his workers, and lost his health. None of his losses make any sense. The standard religious reasons do not fit.

Maybe you read the book *Tuesdays with Morrie*. When Morrie Schwartz was dying from ALS, his former student Mitch Albom asked him about the book of Job. Mitch said, “You remember that? Job was a good man, but God makes him suffer to test his faith.” Morrie said, “I remember.”

Mitch asked Morrie, “What do you think about that?” Morrie coughed violently. His hands quivered and dropped. He broke into a feeble smile and said, “I think God overdid it.”¹

As we heard Job say, “If I knew where to find God, I’d go up and state my case.” But he doesn’t know where to go. He says, “I travel East to look for God, and he’s not there. I travel West and North and South seeking after him, and he has hidden his tracks.” My hunch is that Job probably looked for God in all the places and practices of organized religion, and it didn’t work. It’s not that organized religion is a bad thing. Rather, the God who is behind it all isn’t always easy to find.

I know a Methodist preacher who says, “God is sneaky.” He’s probably right. We don’t spend a lot of time talking about this in church, and I suspect they didn’t talk about it very much in Israel either. Inside the church, we spend a lot of time describing God’s presence, not listing God’s absences. After all, doesn’t one of the psalms say, “O Lord, where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” Maybe you remember the words of Psalm 139:

If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,”
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. (Psalm 139:5, 7-12)

Inside the church, we declare God can be anywhere. (Some nature lovers tell me that when they skip out of worship.) Yet Job says, “I can’t find him. And I’m still in the dark.”

So why is this book in the Bible? I have an idea, and let me try it out on you. Maybe the book of Job is here to rattle our easy assurances. Maybe it’s here to challenge our religious clichés. Maybe it’s here to push us beyond mere religion into the hands of a living God. Maybe it’s here because life is more mysterious and complex than an inflexible faith can comprehend. Maybe it’s here to remind religious people that we should never try to shrink God down to our size, or call in God as a way to manipulate other people.

I thought of two situations this week. On Friday morning, I decided to head up to the mountains to see the autumn leaves. It was a beautiful day, and I love nature too. I stopped in a supermarket in Clifford to buy a couple of apples for a snack. On the bulletin board by the door,

¹ Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays With Morrie* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 150-151

there was a sign inviting me to a local church. It said, “Join us on Sunday to gain victory over your trials and troubles.”

I was mulling that over for a minute as I stood at the checkout line. And then I noticed the woman in front of me. She was signing a WIC check to buy two gallons of milk and fourteen cans of baby formula. A three-year-old girl with curls kept distracting her by pulling a bag of balloons off the rack. “Momma,” she said, “I want some balloons.” The mother snatched them away and said, “We can’t get those.” The daughter burst into tears. As I watched them move across the parking lot, I wondered if they had seen the sign for that “victorious” church. And if they ever went on a Sunday morning, would they be taken seriously?

It’s awfully tempting to hire some cheerleaders to lift our spirits and make us feel a little better. It’s tempting for the church to get into the entertainment business so that it can avoid the harder realities of life. That’s what the rest of our culture is doing. But Job is led to believe in a God who is greater than all of this. “*God Almighty gives me the shudders,*” he says. “*Is it any wonder that I dread meeting him?*” Say what you want, but he has a healthy respect for a God who will not be trifled with.

The second situation was a bit more disturbing, especially with a national election in a few weeks. The Friday evening news had a report about some of those conservative preachers who keep trying to push their way into the White House. New documents have surfaced to suggest that the politicians are glad to take their money, but they ridicule those preachers behind closed doors. It strikes me as so cynical that, on both sides of the equation, people would use religion as a way of gaining power, usually in the name of intolerance, and not in the name of justice and freedom for all.

Here it is, chapter 23. If there is anything that Job knows, it’s that God will not be mocked. God will not be used or manipulated.

It is a blessing when faith gives us a firm foundation, or sets us in a constructive direction, or conditions us to love other people and trust the Lord. Sometimes faith will make us better people and transform our corner of the world into a better place. But sooner or later, when everything is scraped away, there is only God. And Job wants us to remember that God doesn’t live by human categories nor bend to human rules. As he puts it in chapter 23, “God does whatever he wants, whenever he wants... and I am still in the dark.”

If the book of Job were to stop here, it would be a lesson in reverence. We would end up respecting a God who hears our prayer, but doesn’t always talk back right away. We would listen to a God who has spoken, and isn’t in a hurry to say a lot more. We would seek a God who is capable of splitting the sea and calming the threatening storm, but who does not rush to break the laws of physics at our request. Job is discovering all over again that he is not the center of the universe.

And I think that's why the heart of the Christian life is praying and waiting. It's waiting and praying, praying and waiting. Every day we keep rattling at God's door, and knocking at God's window. We keep chasing after God until we understand what is now over our heads. We keep learning the hard way that God is stronger and wiser than all of us. And like old Job, we keep remembering that, even though he's silent, God knows right where we are.

If the book of Job were to stop here, the moral of the story would read, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom."

But this isn't the end, so we'll return next week to hear how God responds.