

Job's Complaint Against God
Psalm 22:1-6; Job 23:1-17
November 8, 2009

Humorist Erma Bombeck told a story about a Jewish grandmother who "took her grandson to the beach one day, complete with bucket, shovel and sun hat. The grandmother dozed off and as she slept, a large wave dragged the child out to sea. The grandmother awoke and was devastated. She fell to the ground on her knees and prayed, 'God, if you save my grandchild, I promise I'll make it up to you. I'll join whatever club you want me to. I'll volunteer at the hospital, give to the poor and do anything that makes you happy.'

"Suddenly, a huge wave tossed her grandson on the beach at her feet. She noticed color in his cheeks and his eyes were bright. He was alive. As she stood up, however, she seemed to be upset. She put her hands on her hips, looked skyward, and said sharply, 'He had a hat, you know.'"ⁱ

We human beings are prone to complaint. When things don't go our way, we tend to gripe and grumble. That's exactly where we find Job today, with good reason. Last week we started looking at Job's story. In one fell swoop he lost his family and his possessions.

Upon hearing of this devastation, three of Job's friends came to his home to console and comfort him. For seven days and seven nights they sat on the ground with Job in the Jewish tradition of mourning called "sitting shiv'ah." "None spoke a word to him for they saw how very great was his suffering" (2:11-13). Oftentimes in the face of death or loss there is not much that can be said. No words are adequate, especially when confronting a nonsensical tragedy such as Job's. Our presence communicates the caring and strength that others need.

According to Judaism's guidelines for comforting mourners, "the persons paying a condolence call should not open their mouths until the mourner first opens his or her mouth."ⁱⁱ In chapter 3 Job begins his lament, cursing the day of his birth and pouring out his grief and pain. Before we look at Job's remarks, we will first hear what Job's friends have to say to him.

When the friends speak, it is a classic case of "open mouth, insert foot." One of the points that the friends continue to make is the traditional wisdom that good people prosper and do not suffer. They understand suffering as God's way of disciplining sinful people. Thus, because he has experienced such devastating loss, Job must have sinned in order to deserve it. However, Job's spiritual experience tells him otherwise and he refuses to repent for sins he has not committed. The conversation continues for several chapters. Job does not find his friends loyal and supportive; rather they are insulting and condemning. They even have the nerve to

tell Job, in his own home, that he talks too much! Just because a person talks a lot does not mean he is right (11:2-3).

Little or no empathy for Job's suffering is expressed by his so-called "friends." Instead they resort to the cruel tactic of blaming the victim for his own suffering. With friends like these, Job doesn't need enemies. What Job and anyone who is suffering needs is people who will listen to us, not give us advice. We need people who will try to understand, who will hold our pain with us. When we feel understood, when we feel that someone genuinely cares, some of our burden is lifted. The fact that someone is sharing the load, walking the journey with us, relieves some of the pain.

Understandably in light of these accusations, Job loses his patience with his friends and with God. That's why the phrase "the patience of Job" is a misnomer. Job complains that his behavior has not merited the extreme punishment he seems to be receiving. He has the audacity to suggest that God sometimes uses power in negative or abusive ways. Job yearns to be judged fairly by God. He complains that sometimes the wicked prosper, which is evidence that justice does not always prevail. He would like to take God to court and sue Him for treating him unjustly. However, he has decided not to do so because he knows that there is no point in taking God to court. God is both the prosecutor and the judge. Job's case cannot possibly be adjudicated fairly.

Job is obviously and justifiably angry. He is so angry that he tells God it would have been better if he hadn't even been born. "Curse the day on which I was born" (3:3). It is healthy for him to express his rage and hurt. Anger is one of the stages of grief, according to Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. Franciscan scholar Richard Rohr says, "Emotions ought to be allowed to run their course. Emotions are not right or wrong; they have no moral meaning....They are merely indicators of what is happening." Many people experience ulcers, internal diseases, depression, irritability, and misdirected anger because they refuse to let their emotions run their course or to find some appropriate place to share them. It is only by working through, understanding, and owning our anger that we are able to move beyond it. Job's honest expression of his feelings is healthy for him.

The fact that Job can take out his anger on God indicates that he has an intimate relationship with God. Job could not pour out his heart in rage with a God he never knew. Only a firm foundation of trust and faith can contain the anger and fury.

Job's rage is less about his suffering and more about missing God. In the lament we heard today, Job insists that God is hiding from him. Job sincerely wants to find God. He turns to the four directions – east, west, north, and south – but God cannot be found. Job feels abandoned by God. This relationship which has been a solid rock for him feels fractured; he is adrift without it.

“In his book, *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis is awash in a sea of grief and pain in the wake of his wife’s death. He too probes deeply into dark questions of faith, asking ‘Meanwhile, where is God?’ In previous times of happiness, Lewis claims that he found God present everywhere he turned. But in the midst of his present anguish, searching for God is like knocking on the door of a house and hearing the door being bolted in your face. What you are left with, he says, is silence, and the disturbing fear that maybe this is what God is like after all.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Tragic events in the past few weeks have undoubtedly left many people wondering where God is. Where is God when a 15 year old girl is gang raped with bystanders watching but no one calling for help to save her from this trauma? Where is God when a colleague acts out in violence, taking the lives of innocent people? Where is God in the endless violence of warfare, resulting in the loss of life, limbs, family life, and mental health for many? Where is God when youth are driven to place themselves on train tracks to end their lives?

Oftentimes when people have experienced immense suffering or the absence of God, they have simply resigned themselves to misfortune, accepting it as the will of the Lord or abandoning faith in God altogether. Job offers a third way: he is unwilling to accept suffering passively, but he also refuses to abandon his faith! Arguing with God is an act of deep faith—deeper, perhaps, than a passive acceptance of whatever happens as God’s will, or a carefully articulated theological rationalization for why things are. Even more than release from his pain, Job deeply desires God. He begs not to be alienated by God, but to experience God’s presence in the midst of his pain.

The prayer of lament or protest is not a denial of faith. It is a means of hanging on to God, pleading and complaining in hope of response to the need or crisis that overwhelms. Lament provides a way for us to voice our concerns not in spite of our trust in God, but because of our trust in God. “Lament is not a denial of faith. It is faith willing to struggle with unanswered questions and unresolved crises by holding on to God in the heart of the storm.”^{iv}

Our next hymn, “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” was written by African American jazz and blues composer Thomas Dorsey. Dorsey grew up in Georgia as a preacher’s kid. As his success as a composer grew, he drifted away from God. Relationship with God didn’t seem that important in the glow of his success.

After a couple of brushes with near-death, Dorsey felt led to return to his relationship with God. As his life began to change, he wrote gospel songs and he sang in worship services.

During a revival meeting in 1931 in St. Louis, Missouri, he received a telegram telling the tragic news of his wife and infant son: she died in childbirth and the son died shortly after. Stunned and grief-stricken, Dorsey raged, much like Job, “God, you aren’t worth a dime to me right now!”

A few weeks later, however, as Dorsey noodled on the keyboard of a piano, he created the lines of “Precious Lord.” From shock through rage to resurrection, Dorsey was able to express a deeply intimate relationship with God—even as he grieved.

Thirty six years later the song comforted a nation, indeed the world, when Mahalia Jackson sang it at the open-air service at Morehouse College following the death of Martin Luther King, Jr.^v

“Thru’ the storm, thru’ the night, lead me on to the light –
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.”

The prayer of rage, anger, and lament is an appropriate response to suffering. It is an expression of authentic relationship with God and of a desire to experience God when God feels hidden. The prayer of complaint offers a cathartic release of toxic emotions leaving space for the healing presence of God to return. In the midst of his dark night, Job begs for the light of God’s presence because he has not given up on God. As we move through seasons of suffering, may we have the courage and audacity of Job to be authentic and honest with God. In the heart of the storm may we hold on to the hope that God indeed will be found.

ⁱ Erma Bombeck, *I Want to Grow Hair, I Want to Grow Up, I Want to Go to Boise: Children Surviving Cancer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), pp. 56-57.

ⁱⁱ *The Jewish Study Bible: Tanakh Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 1508.

ⁱⁱⁱ J.S. Randolph Harris, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year B, Volume 4* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 149.

^{iv} John Indermark, *Seasons of the Spirit*, “Lament,” October 15-21, 2006.

^v Kenneth W. Osbeck, *Amazing Grace: 366 Inspiring Hymn Stories for Daily Devotions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1990) and Carlton R. Young, *Companion to the UMC Hymnal* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

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