

“Inscrutable Love”
Job 28:12-28
Andrew Foster Connors
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4th Sunday in Easter
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The Book of Job is dramatic fiction, scholars tell us, which is a relief if you know anything about this story. Job is the most righteous man on the planet, prompting Satan to choose him for his double blind study to see if he can prove that people only obey God when they get something out of the deal. Job only loves you, Satan tells God, because you’ve blanketed him in blessings for his entire life. You’ve protected him, supported him, and answered all his prayers with everything that he wanted in life including the perfect family and material wealth. That’s not real faith, Satan argues. And it’s not real love, either. “Let me hurt him, then we’ll see how faithful he is.” God accepts the challenge and Job goes from riches to rags. Actually it’s worse than that. He loses all of his livestock wealth, his servants are killed and his many children die in a natural disaster. But Job - stubborn man that he is - is faithful. God thinks she’s won the bet, but Satan ups the ante. Let me afflict Job with disease and then see what happens. God says, you’re on, let’s rumble. Job is tortured with a terrible case of skin sores. It’s a good thing this book is fiction, a folktale, or I’d be worried about the ethics of God. “It is theater,” Walter Brueggemann writes, “designed to voice an alternative reality and to invite listening Israel to reimagine its explanation of reality, which had mostly gone uncriticized. Like all good theater, it is aimed at self-awareness that invites us to see our lives afresh from a new and different perspective.”¹

I don’t know about you, but in this moment in time, I’m a little tired of being invited to see our lives afresh from a new and different perspective. It could be that I’m increasingly skeptical that our current reality is actually going to lead us to a new and different perspective. As much as I want to believe that seeing the fruits of our massive inequalities, our less than universal health care system, our racial and class inequities, is going to lead to some structural changes, it’s also possible that it’s just going to lead toward more of the same. It could be that like so many of you that I’ve spoken with over the last couple of weeks, I’m getting restless in my daily commute between the kitchen and bedroom, weary from Zoom meetings that can never be the same as face to face, or just anxious about the financial disasters to come. Or it could just be the recognition, reading Job, that new and different perspectives of the biblical sort aren’t like taking a trip to Disney. They’re more like fighting for your life on the gurneys of our world.

¹ Bruce Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence Fretheim, and David Peterson, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 394. I’m indebted to the Rev. Chris Tuttle whose paper to the Well on the 38th chapter of Job informed this sermon the 28th chapter.

This kind of new and different perspective is a painful journey. The kind of growth that Job experiences, like Israel, comes with a lot of pain. It's no accident that we worship the crucified God.

I resonate more with Job's wife, who says to her poor, forsaken, and stubborn husband who refuses to renounce his faith, "Curse God and die." (Job 2:9)

Yet part of the reason this book made it into the Bible is because the questions that the book asks are questions that so many people of faith struggle with in the painful parts of life. How are we to make sense of a God who is silent in the face of suffering? Why do some seem blessed and others cursed regardless of their integrity or their faithfulness? And if faith in God doesn't protect you from suffering, then what good is it anyway? What real purpose does it serve in life?

Unlike so many other parts of the Bible, Job argues that these usual equations that we live by don't always hold up in the multiverse that is real living. You know the equations I'm talking about. The ones that say if you take good care of yourself, you'll have a good and long life. If you work hard and do what's right, you'll receive many blessings. If you do good, then it will come back and find you. Those equations work some of the time - much of the time?, but Job is that truthful voice that says, not always. Sometimes the world, or your life, unravels.

And when it does the sanitized, "too blessed to be stressed" surface stuff that passes for faith just won't cut it. And not only the trite, stitched on a pillow stuff, but the core theologies that do not always speak to the lived realities of unraveling. "God is good - all the time." Can you really say that in the face of a child who has lost a parent, or a parent who has lost a child? Or "God's grace is stronger than death." Dare we say that in the face of the refrigerated trucks substituting as morgues outside of some hospitals? "God's love never forsakes us." Is it good news to affirm that to the ears of someone who actually feels forsaken?

It's not that these core messages about God's steadfast love, God's bedrock commitment to justice, God's goodness are fake or false. *These are* convictions that I hold 95% of the time. They are things that I can find evidence for all over the world. It's just that the 5% of the time when our experience contradicts these core theologies doesn't disappear by lying to ourselves about this reality. Some of us have had our lives completely unravel, or will experience some kind of unraveling at some point. Some of us have lost loved ones to this virus. Some of us have lost jobs and are beginning to wonder how we'll pay the bills. Some of us have experienced the untold pain of losing a child. Some of us have wrestled with an unwelcome disability. Some of us have experienced the end of a relationship. As Michele pointed out last week we have all lost something this year. And to speak core messages of God's goodness, God's love, God's faithfulness in the face of someone who is wrestling with the absence of God, or the loneliness of lost love, or death that crowds out a sense of God's grace can be a kind of spiritual violence to those who are in pain.

Kate Bowler, suffering with stage 4 colon cancer said in her book about the experience that the life lessons that some people tried to teach her in the middle of her suffering were

sometimes worse than the cancer itself. She divided those misplaced lessons into 3 kinds of people. Minimizers are the people who try to teach her that death isn't the ultimate end. She should therefore stop complaining or searching and just accept the world as it is. The Teachers were that group of people who focused on why this experience was supposed to be an education for her. After publishing a reflection in a newspaper, one man wrote to her, "I hope you have a 'Job' experience." "I can't think of anything worse to wish on someone," Bowler writes, not if you actually know the story. Yet the hardest of the three lessons came from the Solutions People who were always presenting a solutions focused theology. "Those letter writers are not simply trying to give me something. They are . . . tallying up the sum of my life, sometimes for clues, sometimes for answers, always to pronounce a verdict. But I am not on trial."²

It takes 27 chapters in Job for his friends to realize that Job is not on trial. His friends actually start out as models for what to do when a friend is suffering. They go and sit with him for 7 days and nights. Just sit and listen, which is the best comfort friends can provide. But after seven days they turn into the kind of people that Bowler warned us about. Chapter after chapter they try to explain to Job the possible reasons for his suffering. He must have done something wrong, Eliphaz says. God is always right, Bildad adds. Even if Job does not know what he has done wrong, Zophar says, God does. Job should just go ahead, say he is sorry, and let God apply the repentance that is required. Later, God will silence all of this prognostication. But we listen to it now to see how defending the theological system of right/wrong, good/bad, sin/suffering doesn't really work in all times and circumstances. It doesn't work in the face of unexplainable suffering. It just makes things worse.

So chapter 28 arrives as a kind of conclusion to all this madness. Wisdom, it observes, is more difficult to pin down than the most difficult-to-find resources on the planet. You can't mine it, you can't buy it, you can't trade for it, you can't even find it a lot of the time. God's the only one who has found a way to it. So the best that *we can do* to get close to wisdom is to get close to God.

That sounded odd or even untrue when I first put it on the page for this sermon. The church has a checkered history when it comes to wisdom. At some points in history, the church stood in the way of some of the greatest scientific advances of humankind, like defending the earth as the center of the solar system. But pointing to this kind of error of people of faith is sort of the point of the book of Job. When we substitute our systems about God for a relationship with God, we are bound to follow something that is of our own creation. Our ideas about God aren't big enough, or complex enough to match the reality of the overwhelming experience of God. And when we accept those systems that we create instead of facing the awe of the Lord that keeps us always searching to understand, confess, and articulate the experience of the divine, we settle for something that is not good enough, not holy enough, not adequate enough to substitute for God.

² Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*, (New York: Random House), 2019, pp. 116-119.

Thankfully the church isn't the only institution that sets up systems of belief that get in the way of true wisdom. In the book I'm reading on the 1918 pandemic, *The Great Influenza*, author John Barry observes that the failure of medicine to progress for nearly 2500 years had nothing to do with religion or superstition. The failure to progress was due to the limits of reason itself. For centuries the ideas that the body was made up of four humors, or that sweating, vomiting, and bleeding were all legitimate practices recommended by competent physicians - these were all "perfectly logical extensions of Hippocratic. . . thought."³ They all made sense by logic. As the author points out, these logical systems continued in medicine well into the 1800s. Yet biology does not always lend itself to logic. "Biology is chaos," Barry writes. "Biological systems are the product not of logic but of evolution, an inelegant process. Life does not choose the logically best design to meet a new situation. It adapts to what already exists."⁴ It was not until scientists and doctors questioned these closed logical systems, applying the scientific method that medicine began to advance in significant and profound ways.

Of course, science and faith ask two very different sorts of questions. Faith often asks, "why?" Science often asks "how?" What's needed in both, is an environment that isn't afraid of the questions.

Bowler said that the letter writers who gave her the most comfort were never the people trying to teach her the answer to the why questions, they were the people who wrote about who was there in their own suffering. "When you were afraid that the end had come, were you alone?" she asks. A summary from the Near Death Experience Research Foundation - which apparently really exists - says that thousands of people who have survived close calls with death described the same strange thing: love. As one letter writer wrote to Bowler: God was there - an indescribable peace that changed him forever. "I have no idea how this works, but I wish this for you as you move forward."⁵

In my dream for our church that's the kind of friends we are for each other whatever we're going through. The loss of a job, a cancer diagnosis, the death of a loved one from COVID-19, the end of a marriage, the drinking that's really hard to stop, or the crippling kind of depression that makes it hard to get out of bed in the morning, or the anxiety that is sweeping over so many of us. I would want us to be the kinds of friends to Job who know how to sit in the ashes and wish that all-encompassing, unexplainable sense that you are loved by a God who defies explanation, but keeps showing up.

Bowler writes, "I can't reconcile the way that the world is jolted by events that are wonderful and terrible, the gorgeous and the tragic." "Except I am beginning to believe that these opposites do not cancel each other out... Life is beautiful. Life is hard."⁶

³ John Barry, *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*, (New York: Penguin Books), 2005, 18.

⁴ Ibid, 23-24.

⁵ Bowler, 120.

⁶ Ibid, 123.

If that is part of the wisdom of worshipping this God then it is enough for me to trust even when I can't answer all the questions that arise from our suffering. I'll keep asking them, unafraid of God, just in awe that even in our worst suffering, love finds its way into my heart and yours.