

A sermon preached on October 10th, 2021 based upon Job 23:1-9 and 16-17 Mark 10:17-31, entitled “Job and Jesus and the Times of Deep Darkness.”

I’ve noted that listening to the different books of the Bible can be like listening in on a family discussion from different points of view regarding the mystery of God – and sometimes these discussions reach the point of a heated argument. In what we call the Old Testament, that’s clearly the case when we read the Book of Job. The author has a beef with a prevailing belief in his time that had its roots in words spoken by Moses at the end of the book of Deuteronomy. After wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, Moses presents the Hebrew people as they are about to enter the long awaited “promised land”: *Do good – keep God’s commandments and things will go well for you there. Do evil – break the commandments -- and things will go badly.*

There is a sense in which this idea has some truth to it. Live by the golden rule, be honest, don’t cheat people, and your relationships with other people will go better. Having a reputation for being trustworthy is not a small thing. Generally speaking, life will go better, but not always. Sometimes good people are betrayed. Sometimes they are attacked precisely because they speak the truth, the primary example being Jesus himself.

There is also truth in a similar idea you hear expressed often these days: put good energy and love out into the world and there will be ways it comes back to you. The attitude you bring to the world does impact how you experience the world.

But when the idea put forth by Moses is taken as an absolute principle of how life works, well it can become extremely harmful. The truth is, pain and suffering are unavoidable in this life, and some people suffer truly horrific things, and much of this pain has no rhyme or reason to it.

In a good deal of the Old Testament the idea took hold this way. The history of the reigns of the Kings of Judea and Israel is told with this idea as the key to interpreting what happened. Successful reigns were a result of the King and the people being obedient to the commandments of the covenant. Unsuccessful reigns – which were the majority of them – were the result of disobedience. They were punished for their faithlessness to the covenant. The idea came to mean that if a person was rich it was a sign that God had smiled upon them. Poor people, in contrast were receiving somehow the punishment they deserved.

The author of the book of Job recognized the harm this idea taken to the extreme causes. So, he wrote this story about a man named Job. In all likelihood there wasn’t an actual man named Job – the book is a creative work of fiction. But it is true in the sense that the experience of the character Job has been lived out in various ways in a great many peoples’ lives throughout history.

At the outset of the story we learn two things about Job. He is a very good man, and he is a very rich man. So far, so good in terms of fitting the picture of how life operates.

We briefly hear about a strange wager that is made between God and the tempter. Why this wager happened can be a distraction to our focus here, but the result is that Job suddenly receives

the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune to the tenth degree. First, all of his beloved children are suddenly killed when a powerful wind brings a big house crashing down where they were together enjoy life, having a party. Job is heartbroken. Next, all of Job's livestock – all of his wealth is taken from him, and he is left poverty stricken. Finally, Job is stricken by a terrible disease that leaves his skin in constant torment.

Job is in utter misery. His wife tells him to curse God and die but he won't do it. But he does curse the day he was born. All this takes place in the first two chapters and there are 42 chapters in the book of Job.

At the end of the second chapter some friends of Job show up to comfort him.

Even if we have never had anything that resembled "Job-like" suffering, most likely we have been in the place of Job's friends, and we know it isn't easy. What do you say at such a time?

A year ago, my son Bobby formed a friendship with a couple in Cincinnati who had had two sons, but just a couple of months earlier had suddenly lost one of the two, Nick who at the age of sixteen died from a brain aneurism. Their pain was agonizing. Wanting some good to come out of their tragedy, they began to work on behalf of Donate Life. Nick's organs had gone to help others in his death, and they won't to promote the cause of organ donations. Their son was a soccer goalkeeper, and since Bobby was a goalkeeper with the local professional soccer team they were connected by their shared membership in the "goalkeepers union." Bobby's modest bit of local fame gave him opportunity to bring some attention to their efforts to promote organ donation.

Overtime Bobby has become quite close to Nick's parents. They are still bigtime soccer fans, and although Bobby now plays in Indianapolis, when he plays in a game they drive two hours to watch him play. It touches my heart considerably.

I became Facebook friends with Nick's mother Aimee. Pretty much every day she posts pictures of Nick. Aimee makes it clear that although a year and a half has passed since her son's death, some days her grief feels as raw as ever -- so deep is her love for her son.

Occasionally Aimee will have a post expressing the anger she carries regarding the hurtful things that people can sometimes say in a thoughtless attempt to bring comfort. With the subtle implication that she should get over her grief, someone told her, "*Be grateful that you still have a son.*" Sometimes people try to explain God by noting what an inspiration she has been in trying to bring some good out of her pain. "*That's why God took Nick: so you could be such an inspiration for so many.*"

It's not easy to be in the situation of Job's friends. You feel the need to speak, to find something to say that will be of comfort, but what can you say? I know that there have been times I've said things which tried to put a person's suffering in some bigger picture at a time when they were in no way ready to consider such things. Was I really trying to comfort them, or was I trying to comfort myself?

Job's friends show up and we are told that for a whole week they simply sit in the ashes with him, weeping but saying nothing. This is Job's friends at their best.

But then, beginning in the 3rd chapter they begin to talk, and for the next thirty plus chapters they proceed to argue with Job. They would have said they were trying to help Job, but really they were trying to keep their world from falling apart. In essence they tell him that since God is just, there is no way God would have been given him such suffering unless he had done something wrong. He should search his heart and find how he sinned and repent.

Job isn't buying it. There is nothing he did that deserved the horror of what he is going through.

When we are in the position of Job's friends, often the less said the better. Just show up and let the hurting person know you love them. Maybe bake a casserole if you know how to do that sort of thing.

By the 23rd chapter Job's lament reaches a crescendo. He speaks of the dimension of his pain that involves a sense of utter abandonment by God. God is nowhere to be found to answer his heart-wrenching questions.

It is worth taking a moment to ponder the fact that the Book of Job is in the Bible. Sometimes people who haven't actually read much of the Bible assume that it is made up of nothing but inspiring stories and words of encouragement. There is indeed that but there is also an acknowledgement of Job's experience. There are other places where you also find such deep darkness expressed, for instance in portions of the psalms and the Book of Lamentations.

The fact that we find these writings in the Bible and occasionally hear them in our worship is a reminder that life is a journey and some times there are times of what feels like impenetrable darkness. The presence of these passages suggest we would do well not to try to move either ourselves or others too quickly through this darkness. Sometimes the darkness simply needs to be experienced, as hard as this is. We have to ponder the crucifixion without being too quick to jump to the resurrection.

Spoiler alert: At the end of the Book of Job God actually does appear to Job in a whirlwind. Job gets to see God face to face – pretty much the only time this occurs in the Bible. God doesn't explain what has happened, but God does make it clear that Job's friends should have shut their mouths.

Nonetheless, seeing God face to face seems to be enough for Job. He is able to finally let go.

The people who put together the Lectionary clearly seem to have selected passages to hear on a given Sunday that can be in conversation with one another, and such is the case with the passage from Job and the Gospel lesson assigned for this Sunday.

It comes from the 10th chapter of Mark. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. In short order he will arrive and Holy Week will begin. Jesus is on his way to lay down his life in death.

Mark reminds us of this at the outset of our passage. Jesus is on the journey he tells us when a rich man comes running up to him with a question. The man is in pain. We know this because he runs to Jesus, and in those days men – especially men of stature like the rich man didn't run to people – it was considered undignified. The fact that the father in Jesus' parable runs to his prodigal son is noteworthy because it tells us that at this moment the father doesn't care what the neighbors will say – he just aches so to embrace his long lost son.

To understand the man's pain we need to realize that the belief in its extreme form that has its roots in the words of Moses to the Hebrew people was still very much the common understanding of how God interacts with human beings.

The rich man **should** feel blessed. There is no mention of outward causes for his suffering of the sort Job experienced – no great grief or sickness. He should feel God smiling on him. But he doesn't. His pain arises from within but it is nonetheless quite real. There is this gnawing emptiness. Perhaps it is the pain of which Peggy Lee sung in the song, *"Is This All There Is?"* God seems altogether absent to the man, and in this sense he is like Job.

The man throws himself at Jesus' feet and asks, *"Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* Jesus responds, *"Why do you call me good? None are good but God alone. You know the commandments."* Jesus proceeds to rattle off six of the ten commandments, the ones that pretty down to earth. The man replies, *"I have kept these since my youth."*

Like Job, he is a "good man" in our usual sense of the word.

And then these two striking details: First, Mark tells us that Jesus looked at the man. This happens a number of times and whenever we hear this it means that Jesus is giving someone his full attention – seeing into their souls, so to speak. Jesus looks at the man and then Mark adds, *"loving him..."* This is the only place in all the Gospels where Jesus is described as specifically loving an individual.

Jesus looks at the man, and loving him said, *"You lack one thing: Go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor. Then come, follow me."*

The man is shocked. He can't do what Jesus asks of him – let go his tight grip on his possessions. He goes off sorrowfully.

Some people hear this story and think: this was the man's chance for salvation! It came to him and he let it pass him by.

But for a couple of reasons, I don't see it this way. First, we know Jesus loved the man and that love didn't end when the man walked away. It's the same point made with the Shepherd that seeks out the sheep that has wandered off. The shepherd doesn't quit searching until he finds that lost sheep.

And second, I think Jesus understood life to be a journey. As he would say to his disciples who were utterly bewildered by what they just witnessed, sometimes something that is impossible in the present moment becomes possible at some point in the future by the grace of God.

Why couldn't the man let go of his money? Well, for the same reason that probably most of us wouldn't be able to do so if Jesus were to say the same to us. Although deep down we know that money can't satisfy the deepest longing of our soul, nonetheless we cling to what money we have because it provides some bit of security against the forces of chaos in this world that threaten us. It allows us to feel at least some sense of being in control.

There are other things Jesus could ask us to let go of on which we probably aren't ready to release our tight grip. *"Let go of your concern for your reputation – what others think of you and concern yourself only with what I am calling you to."* Who is ready to do that?

"Let go of your resentments and your need for revenge from those who have harmed us in big and small ways." Are we ready to do that? Yes, in some places. But not, I suspect in others. The ability to forgive evades us, and to pretend to be able to let go when we aren't would be fraudulent. We're just not ready.

But maybe in time.

Remember where Jesus is headed. He is going to lay his life down – to die. He invites us to do the same. That seems morbid.

Job let go when he saw God face to face. Death is the great "letting go." There is a sense in which the journey of life is practice in dying insofar as it provides us with ample opportunity if we can see it this way to practice learning how to let go. If you're a parent you're involved in an ongoing process of letting go of your child, of which the first day of school and the day of their moving out of your home are just two of the bigger milestones.

Every time someone hurts us is an opportunity to practice letting go. Growing old involves an ongoing process of letting go. We hold on, as well we should, to our energy and independence and loved ones, but as time practices, the energy diminishes, as does our independence, and loved ones leave us, by death or otherwise. It isn't easy. It can be very, very hard. But either we learn over time how to let go or aging takes us on a path of increasing bitterness, the loss of our soul.

It is only in letting go that we begin to experience what the man was pointing to when he asked about "eternal life." We experience the everlasting arms of God there to hold us when we are ready to stop all our clutching.

And then there is this. By going to Jerusalem, Jesus chooses freely to enter into the experience of Job and all of us who find ourselves in times feel "Job-like" pain. Jesus – who in some mysterious sense is God incarnate – enters into the deepest darkness. It is not an insignificant detail that on the cross in Mark's Gospel, Jesus cries, *"My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?!"* The great mystery that God has entered into the experience of feeling abandoned by God.

So, when we sing the old hymn, "*What a Friend We Have in Jesus*", we are recognizing Jesus as the friend who can keep us company when we, like Job, sit in the ashes of our broken lives. He can sit and wait with us in the deep darkness until the morning sun finally arises.