

Sermon for 10-7-18
Scriptures: Job 1-2; Psalm 26
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On the first day of a seminary class called "Human Suffering," my professor walked into the room and silently handed each student six small squares of paper. He briefly introduced himself, and then asked us to take a few moments and write down on these squares the six most important things in our lives. To get us started, he suggested we might include at least one person's name, one possession, one activity or ability, and one role that we filled.

This was before Jon and Jesse, so I think I used up four of my squares with the names of my sisters and parents, and then I included either singing or reading (as an activity), and student or learner (as a role).

After we finished, the professor told us to place all our squares face down on our desks, and he began walking through the rows of students and randomly removing one square from each desk. Then he paused, and asked us to imagine what our lives would be like if that one thing he had taken were gone permanently.

After a few moments of reflection, the experiment continued. This time, as he walked around the classroom, he did not take from each student equally. From some of us, he took two or three squares, from some, just one more; some of us lost all of our squares, and some desks he passed by without taking anything else.

What followed was a challenging and deeply emotional, but important, discussion. Our professor explained the point of this activity -- to remind us that human suffering is not an abstract theoretical concept, but a lived reality. Human suffering is real, it hurts, and it affects us all to differing degrees. It may be easy to maintain intellectual distance when we're talking about another's pain; but when we reckon with the reality of our own pain, we realize that easy answers and simple theories just don't cut it.

Let's talk about the Book of Job, a story of great suffering ... Old Testament scholar Michael Coogan says Job is "one of the most difficult and challenging books in the entire Bible."¹

The traditional (and overly simplistic) understanding of Job is that it explains why bad things happen to good people. Now I hate to disappoint anyone, or go against centuries of interpretive tradition; but the Book of Job does not actually answer this question. Job's story doesn't tell us why we suffer. Job's story offers us wisdom about how we can and should live as people of faith in a world where suffering exists.

There are different distinct types of literature in the Old Testament, and one of the easiest mistakes we Christians tend to make in reading them is confusing one for another. Some parts of the Old Testament are **biblical history** (like Genesis); then there's the **law** (like the behavioral codes found in Leviticus). There's the **major and minor prophets** (from the more famous Isaiah all the way through the slightly less famous Habbakuk); the **apocalyptic** Book of Daniel; and of course the hymnal of the Old Testament, the **Psalms**.

The Book of Job is none of these. Job, along with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, is an example of ancient wisdom literature. These were writings intended to be heard and prayed over and digested by the people of God, imparting lessons of deep and cherished wisdom about living faithfully in the 'real world.' It can be a source of wisdom for us, too, if we will let it.

One minute summary of Job:

- Job is filthy rich, lives in a mansion, has a huge family, owns many slaves and lots of livestock. He's very prominent in the community, makes proper sacrifices to God, follows all the rules.
- Satan (which literally means *the accuser*) convinces God to let him destroy all of Job's blessings, wipe out his family, and afflict him with unimaginable suffering just for the fun of it, to see what he'll do.
- Job is distraught; goes and sits on an ash heap by himself, scraping his boils with a piece of pottery.

- Three of Job's friends show up to comfort him, but it turns out, they're not very good at it. They say things like:

-hey, it's not so bad, you're still alive, right?

-you must have done something sinful to deserve this, so if you repent God will fix it!

-don't be so focused on your own pain, humble yourself and ask for mercy!

- Eventually Job gets fed up with their nonsense, and tells them they don't know what they're talking about, what's happening to him is not fair or just or right.

- Then God shows up, speaking out of a great whirlwind. God doesn't offer any explanation, or try to make sense of Job's suffering. God doesn't say that Job deserves to suffer, or that there's a reason why this has happened to him.

Instead, God speaks about the immense majesty of all Creation. God has dreamt this entire world into being, designed every mountain and ocean, and breathed life into every creature. God is beyond all imagination and comprehension, beyond all that has been and all that is and all that ever will be!

- After coming face to face with the full majesty of his Creator, Job finally realizes that there is so very much he cannot ever fully understand, and he ends up in a place of acceptance. What happened to him is not right, or fair, or just, but it simply **is**, and he can live with that, as a man in ongoing relationship with his God. Job then experiences restoration -- of his fortunes, and more importantly, his spirit.

So, you may be wondering, where's the wisdom? What on earth does the Book of Job have to teach us about how we should live our lives?

For one thing, it teaches us about our human freedom and human responsibility. In Job's story God is not silent, and God is not absent; but God is also not a puppet master dictating every single happening and choice. God is revealed in Creation, but not a constant manipulator of Creation. Because we have been endowed with our own freedom and will, we are responsible for the choices we make and their ramifications for the world around us.

For another thing, Job teaches us that it's okay to be honest with God about our feelings. It's okay to be angry at God, it's okay to ask why, it's okay to argue with God. God can take it! God doesn't tell us to go through the motions and pretend

to be joyful when we're suffering; but God does ask us to look beyond ourselves as best we can and remember that there is an entire enormous world out there just pulsating with holiness and life.

Finally, Job teaches us about the importance of our motivations and priorities.

Remember that exercise from my seminary class, the one with the little slips of paper that kept getting taken away?

At the beginning of Job's story, his slips of paper would have said things like "my reputation," "my seat of honor," "my mansion," and "the way people look at me -- like they're very impressed." Job followed all the rules, made sacrifices to God, and even gave to the poor, but he wasn't doing it out of the pure goodness of his heart. He was doing it because he liked being seen as the 'Big Man in Town,' the top dog. His primary motivation was concern for himself, his reputation and his status.

By the end of Job's story, after he has suffered so greatly and seen God face to face, his motivations have changed. Where his previous worldview was self-centered, his renewed way of thinking is God-centered.

Whereas he used to care so much about protecting his own reputation, now Job cares about the well-being of others and the goodness of God's Creation. He has become a man with an outward-facing view and an open heart. In his renewed and restored life, he no longer owns slaves; he names and cherishes his daughters just as well as his sons; and he values his friends and relatives not for the honor they show him but for their companionship, sympathy, and comfort.ⁱⁱ

I think if Job were to do the slips-of-paper-in-the-classroom activity again at the end of his story, his slips would say things like "the love of my family," "the joy of each new day," "the beauty of the earth," "the support of my community," and "the blessing of a relationship with my Creator." These are the priorities of deepest faith. These are motivating values of a person in honest and right relationship with God.

The wisdom of Job's story is that true blessedness is not about what we have or how much we possess; true blessedness is found in how we live out our faith in our everyday circumstances, in what we choose to do with what we've been given. We do not have ultimate control over everything in our lives -- we all know this -- but we do have control over the choices we make, how we organize our priorities, how we spend our time and money and energy.

When we choose to invest primarily in things that are self-serving, we build up lives that are monuments to our own whims and desires, and those monuments tend to crumble in times of trial. They cannot offer us any real comfort or peace or love. They cannot take our hands and walk with us through our darkest valleys. All they can do is offer brief, empty distraction.

But when we invest in others, in our neighborhoods, our churches, and our communities, we're building up connections, relationships, and possibilities. We're investing in a world that doesn't revolve entirely around ourselves, a world that still stands when we fall down. We're investing in the people and places and structures that will be there to support us, to comfort us, to take our hands and lift us out of whatever pits we may fall into.... We're investing in a world that goes beyond our front doors, a world where we work together and everyone matters, a world where all of our choices demonstrate the truth of what we believe -- that God is real, God is present, and God is love, forever.

May we all, like the renewed Job, invest ourselves in a world that centers not on ourselves but on our eternal Creator. If we do this, then when hardships come we will be able to proclaim, just like David in today's Psalm: "As for me, I will live with integrity... My foot stands on level ground; in the full assembly I will bless the Lord."ⁱⁱⁱ **Amen.**

ⁱ Michael D. Coogan in *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2006; page 479.

ⁱⁱ Job 42:10-17

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 26:11-12