

Being Job's Friends

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Job 1:1-4; 2:1-10; 23:1-9; 38:1-7

Once upon a time. How all good stories begin. The biblical story of Job is no different. "There once was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job." Once upon a time...

We know what happens. God and Satan have a heavenly debate – if enough bad things happen to Job, will Job curse God? It sounds like one of those late-night philosophical debates we had as youth. Job loses his property, his family, his own health. "Curse God and die," his wife reasonably says. But he does not. Job's internal and external dialogues continue – his public status plummets and his sense of self diminishes. Yet his faith in God persists, even as he questions God's ways.

That's what we know about Job – the "patience" of Job, we sometimes reflect. But it is more than that. Read the whole story. It is, like any iconic short story, filled with characters, unexpected plot twists, timeless words. And throughout, as Job defends himself to others and to God, he never turns on God.

We could spend a whole year just on Job, though I am not sure anybody would come back after a week or two!

Last week Barbara Wheeler asked what it would look like for us to be more honest communally as we face our own suffering. Here Job's suffering is on full display, and we are quick to turn to his response – patience – rather than facing it head-on. What would that look like?

The story raises all kinds of questions – about God, about us, about the nature of suffering. John Guns writes: "The story of Job is an incredible journey that often brings preachers to a rather precarious place. While we feel called to preach

hope, healing, and abundance, there are moments within the Job saga where hope, healing, and abundance seem absent."

Finally, after all the suffering has happened, and the wide litany of responses from a cast of characters as well, God responds. From the whirlwind. It is intense, so intense. Who are you, God says to Job. Who are you? In the face to face encounter, Job is humbled, and, with no promise of restoration, his own faithfulness is deepened.

A question this morning among the many questions...what about those friends? Though the main characters in the story are Job and God, God, really, the friends – Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar – emerge as important carriers of the well-constructed narrative, appearing consistently throughout to offer wise commentary on what is happening to their friend Job.

Yet here's the thing. It may be friendly advice, but it's not always wise.

"Who can keep from speaking," Eliphaz asks. Yet that's exactly what he should have done, and all of them. Keep from speaking.

"I must have done something to deserve all of this," Job says repeatedly, though we know from the outset this is not the case. But the friends scour his behavior, his words, his life, to find reason. You want to know why this is happening, Job's dear friends ask him. Well, let us tell you.

Another friend joins in, with a different point of view. Elihu is angry, angry at Job because Job has sought to justify his own behavior before God, offering a rationale defense of why God is acting in a way that God shouldn't. But Elihu is more angry at Job's supposedly-wise friends, because though they talk and talk and talk, in the end their words ring hollow and fail, and make Job's life worse.

Elihu's anger at the three friends is intense – empty talk that neither helped Job nor the situation, nor, in the end, honored God. In the end, when God speaks from the whirlwind, God doubles down on the critique: "My wrath is kindled against you," God says to the friends, "for you have not spoken of me what is right."

In the end, the friends repent, and are spared. Job acknowledges his own error, trying to understand what could never be understood, that is, God's mystery,

God's providence. Job's life is restored in all its full blessing, and his generations prospered.

Read the whole story for the arc of the narrative and the power of the themes – God, humanity, the nature of suffering, the nature of faith.

But for the moment, these friends. What should they have done?

- Shown up and kept talking until they finally hit on something useful? No!
- Nothing? No!
- Shown up to be with their friend, sit with their friend, and done so in silence, silence in solidarity with their friend as he undergoes suffering? Yes – clearly.

Both Elihu's and God's rejection of the friends' attempts reminds us that showing up in faithfulness, being present, matters, and matters more powerfully than any words ever can. You know that. When a friend or loved one is suffering, going through a divorce, facing cancer, losing a parent, deep, real suffering, trying to explain it, rationalize it, find cause, for any number of reasons, rarely helps and often hurts.

"I wouldn't know what to say," I often hear, when people wonder how they might respond to a suffering friend in crisis. Don't say anything. Just show up. Be there, with a hand to hold, ready to listen but not answer, to maintain a faithful witness in solidarity.

No one needs to hear speculation as to why they have the disease they do, or why their marriage fell apart. What they need is support, the deep friendship of presence, no matter what.

That's what the world needs right now as well.

This week I was in Seattle for a meeting of the leadership team of Next Church, a group of Presbyterians helping to think about, and model, what's "next" for the Presbyterian church. About 18 months ago, realizing that the leadership team was entirely too white, especially as we think about the church's future in a 90% white denomination, we decided that half of our team, 50%, would represent people of color.

Having done that thing, we are now living into that reality, which means living more deeply with the insidious impact of racism, and realizing how a dominant white culture has perpetrated, overtly and not always overtly, a racist church in a racist culture.

What I am learning – I haven't fully learned it yet, and might never fully learn it – is that talk is cheap, that change is hard, that action matters. I am learning that I must always listen, then listen some more, then some more, before I speak, IF I speak.

Just as I, as a man, a white, straight, man, must listen, and listen, and listen some more, to women who have been sexually assaulted, before I speak, IF I speak.

I cannot “white-splain.” I cannot “man-splain.” I can be present, when appropriate. And I can listen.

Our group, meeting in a downtown church in Seattle where the homeless population continues to rise, celebrated communion. The leader used words I often use, and will sue this morning, about the “joyful feast of the people of God.” She then acknowledged that things, in the church, in the city, in the world, didn't feel all that joyful. But that's only, she said, if you equate “joyful” with “happy.” Joy is deeper than that. It is about finding hope in the face of suffering, and solidarity with fellow travelers, the siblings in faith and friends in the journey who joins us around the table. The ones who show up and are present, in the aftermath of cancer or loss, or assault, or injustice, whose silent witness offers all that is needed to persist and persevere.

World Communion can seem quaint and naïve, even now, people around the world joined in unity around Christ's table, a tangible counter to our brokenness and division. But it is not quaint and it is not naïve.

What would it look like for us – especially those of us who represent dominance in both church and culture – to sit at table, united, and silent and be nourished – in joy – by bread and cup?

What would it look like to take suffering – of our friends, in our city, in the church, in the world – seriously, not to rationalize, but simply to be present in silence as bread is broken and the cup is poured out. To acknowledge, rather than deny or explain the brokenness.

I can see that being a “joyful feast,” and so much more. And I can see that being the feast that is so needed right now, as we navigate the brokenness of our own lives and the suffering of those we love, even this world so hungry for justice and peace. Amen.