

Pentecost 21

Job 38: 1-7 Psalm 104: 1-10, 26 Hebrews: 5: 1-10 Mark 10: 35-45

Two weeks ago we left Job sitting on an ash heap scraping his sores with a piece of broken pottery.



Most of the story since then, Chapters 3 to 38, where we are today, has been taken up with Job and his friends, trying to make sense of Job's undeserved suffering. It bewilders and outrages Job because he was doing everything right, when suddenly everything went wrong. It is the kind of suffering that can bewilder and outrage us too.

Job has two main accusations against God. First, he seems to suggest that God has "fallen asleep at the wheel" in running the universe, so divine neglect has made him endure unjust suffering. Second, God has failed to enforce the strict principle of retribution to reward good deeds and punish bad ones.

That was the conventional religious wisdom of the day, and it has been expounded by Job's friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and Elihu over 24 chapters. They have trotted out every religious cliché and holy platitude in a spectacular display of sound without substance, form without content.



Like his peers, Job understood suffering as a form of divine punishment and all abundance as a form of reward. That is, until he himself endured inexplicable, undeserved suffering.

Reflecting on Job's friends has made me wonder about how we behave.

Pious, religious banalities and holy-sounding inanities are no more palatable to people now who suffer deeply and inexplicably, than they were to Job.

We don't like to see people suffer. Our instinct is to prevent and alleviate suffering. But we ought to be careful not to be like Job's friends: Not presume that we can fix things, make them better, explain away the problem or simply "get rid of it".

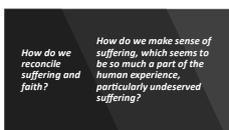
The story of Job reminds us that no matter how insightful we may be, we don't *really* understand the full nature of our friends' problems. And then, more often than not, people of faith – probably any and all faith – do not suffer *less*, but *more*. When believing people suffer, their lives are often transformed, deepened, marked with beauty and holiness in remarkable ways that would not have been anticipated before they experienced suffering. I imagine you have encountered such people.

Instead of trying to prevent or stop suffering, which we most probably cannot do, anyway, perhaps we can try to enter into the suffering of others by participating insofar as we are able to, entering into the mystery and looking around for God. Perhaps we can have true *com-passion*, for compassion means exactly that to "suffer together or with". Perhaps we can even learn from them and, if they will let, us join with them in protest and prayer.

And so to today's text that has God speaking to Job out of a whirlwind.



Does God offer answers to the questions with which I left you two weeks ago? Nah, not really.



Job never does find out why he suffered and neither does the reader. That was never the goal of the book.

Rather, God's first speech, a response to Job's accusation of being asleep at the wheel makes clear that God **is** in control and **does** know everything that transpires in the world, and God's perspective on the universe is much broader than we could ever have.

We are finite creatures; we are not designed to take in the information necessary to make evaluations of God's choices. We're just not God.

Job questioned God's design and God responds that he has **insufficient** knowledge to do this. Though we might not like it, we need to content ourselves with God's assertion that the world is ordered enough for the human project to flourish, but chaos has not been entirely eradicated. We live in an incredibly complex, amazing world that at this stage at least, is not designed to prevent suffering.

So God's answer to Job does not explain why righteous people suffer, simply that the cosmos is not designed to prevent righteous people from suffering. God confirms that Job's suffering was not warranted for "any reason".

Job's second accusation was that God doesn't seem to operate the universe according to the principle of retribution, as Job's friends said God does and should. God asserts that Job is correct, sometimes terrible things happen for no discernible reason. God does not operate off the principle of retribution. So Job's friends were wrong, God says, their ideas about God's justice too simple, not true to the complexity of God, God's wisdom or the world.

But God affirms Job and his wrestling with suffering, confirming that Job spoke correctly about God and recognising his honesty in expressing the full range of his emotions: Confusion, pain, rage, tender devotion and praise. The right way to process these, God affirms, is in prayer.

Perhaps the key idea to take from Job's experience is this: That in all he suffered, what he was most desperate about was to commune with God again. That God speaks at all is enough for Job.

Job's greatest agony was that he felt God had abandoned him, the heavens remained implacably silent in the face of all his rage and despair. By the end of the Book, he knows that God has not abandoned him, but still cares for him. Job certainly feels very small before the greatness of God, but this cannot take away from the massive comfort he feels in simply being in communion with his Lord again. All he really needs and wants to know is that everything is still all right between him and God. What he needs most "is a visit from God." (Bouzard)

I'd suggest that this is true for us too. What we and others need most when we suffer, is a visit from God. We need to feel that God is present to us and with us, no matter what.

In a sense that is also what we are called to do for one another and for others: To show up on behalf of God when others feel abandoned, bereft of God like Job did. To be present in and with suffering and sufferers.

In next week's final reading, the book concludes with Job's health, family and wealth restored, not as a reward for good behaviour but simply as a generous gift from God. And that's the end.

We will end by standing now to recite the psalm, which is a wonderful affirmation of divine majesty using language similar to that of the Book of Job.

Please stand.



References

The Message, Eugene H. Peterson, 2002, Navpress

blueletterbible.com

enduringword.com

Workingpreacher.com: Karl Jacobson, Walter Bouzard, Karen Schiffendecker

myjewishlearning.com/article/the-book-of-job/

bibleproject.com/blog/book-job-whats-going/ - Tim Mackie

Interruptingthesilence.com