

Text: Job 42
Title: Job's Place
Date: 10.28.18
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The First Reformed Church of Schenectady, New York is a breathtakingly beautiful stone cathedral. With a long slate center aisle, high vaulted ceilings, warm wooden pews and chancel, it is regal and churchy and feels sacred.

When I served there we got a lot of walk-ins. People walked-in asking about weddings or funerals. They didn't have a church; when they needed a church, they wanted a beautiful one. The Senior Pastor didn't want to be bothered, the Calling Pastor was indifferent, so it often fell to the Youth Pastor. Me....

On one occasion I agreed to meet with a family requesting a funeral. A wife died of cancer; I met with her husband, a sister, and a friend. I didn't know much about their life together but wanted to be helpful. The conversation was awkward, but kind. We were all simply trying to do the best we could in a situation without form or familiarity. They told stories, wiped away tears, and talked about what they wanted in a funeral.

But, at one point the husband looked up and spit out,

I don't have any faith in God. I lost whatever faith I had. Why would God do this to her? Why would God take her? She was a beautiful good person. Why would he make her suffer? Nobody knows how much she suffered! I know. I know how much. Nobody else suffered like that....

As his voice rose, he looked at me defiant, lost, angry, broken, pleading....

I didn't know what to say.

I knew that all sorts of people know how much she suffered. Death by chemo and cancer is its own horror, but it is common. (Some of you know similar suffering.) And I knew that he was speaking out of a jarring, jagged grief. He thought God was supposed to protect his wife. And God didn't. Therefore, God was to blame. What kind of God wouldn't intervene, wouldn't save, wouldn't show up? "Why would he make her suffer?" I didn't know what to say.

Dear friends, its common to think that Job provides answers to our cries of "why." For example, I recently saw the social media post of a local pastor delineating six "clues God gives in the mystery of suffering through the life story of Job." So, we turn to Job because there must be some answers,

there must be some clues.
there must be some reasons.

"Why would he make her suffer?"

And yet, what if . . .

after God dangles Job in front of the devil,
after all the loss and all the lament,
after the silence and the speeches,
after the wrestling and wrangling,
after all the anger and all the awe,
what if Job is left not with answers but with a sense of place?

Consider.

Job's response to God's speech can faithfully be translated:

*I have heard you with my ears, but now my eyes have seen you.
Therefore, I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust.*

In response to God's four-chapter-catalogue-of-creation and better than 70 rhetorical questions about where Job helped in creating creation, Job's response is not one of faint praise or damning guilt. He doesn't wallow in self-pity or get indignant. He does, however, acknowledge his rightful place. In humility he confesses what he truly is . . .

neither god nor angel,
neither demon nor spirt,
but human, made of dust, *adamah*.
Dust to dust, earth to earth.
Job knows his place.

And while that may not be the answer that we think we want, it seems a gift to know who we are and where we fit.

We often try to project some self-image that we think others will accept or approve. We scramble to put on our best face, to keep the facade up, to preserve, or pretend, or post who we want to believe we are. So, it seems an expression of grace to know our rightful place. Maybe what we all long for is to stand with Job in an act of confession. Not to bemoan or be beat down, but in humility, in the full light of God's face, to say:

*I have heard you with my ears, but now my eyes have seen you.
Therefore, I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust.*

There are no answers in Job to why we suffer.

There are no answers in Job to why bad things happen to good people.

There are no answers in Job about trusting God to play by our rules of fairness.

God doesn't cough up answers. But . . .

Rather than answers there is encounter.

Rather than explanation there is rightful place.

Rather than reason there is relationship.

We may not be able to make suffering fit our matrix of meaning, and we may not be able to make sense of why things happen, but we know our place.

Does that seem like enough?

Is that too discouraging?

Shouldn't there be better news?

The husband in my office wanted something more.

The innocent victims in Tree of Life Synagogue want something more.

When my father was murdered I was in seminary. After a few weeks at home with my mother I returned to school still in shock, lost, broken. I had a hard time concentrating. There were lots of students who said things; I don't remember a single word....

But, there were two professors who had buried sons ~ both boys died in their twenties. One of those professors saw me looking out the window silently wiping away tears during class. After class he stopped me in the hallway. I don't remember much about the conversation, but I've clung to this. He said,

If God himself wrote down the reasons that my son died, I'd crumple it up and throw back in God's face. There will never be reason enough...

Dear friends, part of the human condition is suffering and loss; its cousin is the search for a meaningful grammar. We try to put words around it.

There are 42 chapters in the book of Job.

There are a lot of words about God.

There are libraries full of books, sermons full of sentences, and words piled on words piled on words, all trying to make sense.

But, there will never be reason enough.

I am not suggesting that there aren't appropriate responses to the hate and evil and idolatry of the shooting in the synagogue....

But in the face of suffering, without answers, part of our posture before God could be silent confession. Rather than blabber on like buffoons, rather than scurry around like squirrels trying to do and be enough, may we join Job in simple silent confession.

It strikes me that movement in Job is from contemplation to contention to awe to confession. Job suffers an unbearable loss; he and his friends sit in silence for a week. Then there is a long exchange as Job's friends offer explanation and rational. There has to be a reason. At one point, Job clearly calls for God to show his face to hear his case. God's response is a statement of sovereignty. "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?" And, ultimately Job's response is one of confession.

Contemplation.

Contention.

Awe.

Confession.

And by confession I don't mean ticking off a grocery list of peccadillos. Confession is not just naming what we did do that we shouldn't have done or what we didn't do that we should've done.

Rather, confession is the acknowledgement of our rightful place. Confession is, in part, claiming who we are. Owning our broken and bruised parts. Naming our limps and losses. And finding our very selves under God's sovereign creating love. Even without answers. Some theologians have summarized the meaning of Job as "You're God and I'm not."

Now. Maybe there should be something about Jesus becoming dust on our behalf so that we can know new life. Maybe there should be better news about how God loves us, that we are more than dust in the wind, and that God ultimately redeems us to the *shalom* that he intended...

Maybe. But, at least on this morning with our brothers and sisters in the Pittsburgh synagogue, at least on this morning with those burying loved ones of cancer, at least on this morning when we don't have answers, on this morning what we have is this text and this story.

And, it ends with Job's confession, the recognition of rightful place, and the release of a God who would play by our rules of fairness. At least on this morning may that be enough.

One last little epilogue.

Job gets double his money back on new cows, camels, sheep, donkeys, and new kids. It should be noted that new children don't replace the loss of his first children. While children are a gracious gift beyond imagining, there isn't a parent within earshot who believes that new children are replacement parts for those lost. Job, with Jacob, will always walk with a limp. Loss is part of his confession.

But, Job is changed. You don't encounter God and stay the same.

He sees things anew because he sees his rightful place in God's economy.

He sees things anew because in God's light he saw his place.

He sees things anew because contemplation leads to contention and contention to awe and awe to confession. And confession leads to wholeness and the freedom to live and love.

And there is this delightful twist...

Job seems to be so changed that he saw his daughters anew, and in a patriarchal society he cut them in on the family inheritance. Maybe he saw women rightly. Maybe he saw them in rightful relationship, because he saw himself in rightful relationship.

Dear friends, may we join Job and in the deepest places of our being know God, know who we are before God, and find there a comfort to live out our lives - full of years.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.

Amen.