

# August 1

## Lesson 9

### Worship

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**Focal Passage:** Job 1:8-20

**Background Texts:** Job 1:1-20; Psalm 3:1-8

**Purpose Statement:** To reclaim lament as integral to worship

**Job 1:8-20**

<sup>8</sup>The LORD said to the Adversary, “Have you thought about my servant Job; surely there is no one like him on earth, a man who is honest, who is of absolute integrity, who reveres God and avoids evil?”

<sup>9</sup>The Adversary answered the LORD, “Does Job revere God for nothing? <sup>10</sup>Haven’t you fenced him in—his house and all he has—and blessed the work of his hands so that his possessions extend throughout the earth? <sup>11</sup>But stretch out your hand and strike all he has. He will certainly curse you to your face.”

<sup>12</sup>The LORD said to the Adversary, “Look, all he has is within your power; only don’t stretch out your hand against him.” So the Adversary left the LORD’S presence.

<sup>13</sup>One day Job’s sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother’s house. <sup>14</sup>A messenger came to Job and said: “The oxen were plowing, and the donkeys were grazing

nearby <sup>15</sup>when the Sabeans took them and killed the young men with swords. I alone escaped to tell you.”

<sup>16</sup>While this messenger was speaking, another arrived and said: “A raging fire fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and devoured the young men. I alone escaped to tell you.”

<sup>17</sup>While this messenger was speaking, another arrived and said: “Chaldeans set up three companies, raided the camels and took them, killing the young men with swords. I alone escaped to tell you.”

<sup>18</sup>While this messenger was speaking, another arrived and said: “Your sons and your daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother’s house, <sup>19</sup>when a strong wind came from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It fell upon the young people, and they died. I alone escaped to tell you.”

<sup>20</sup>Job arose, tore his clothes, shaved his head, fell to the ground, and worshipped.

**Key Verse:** “Job arose, tore his clothes, shaved his head, fell to the ground, and worshipped” (Job 1:20).

It started just after lunch that day. The morning had been a fairly benign day of ministry. A few people came in needing assistance. I had answered some emails and done a little writing; but that after-

noon, things took a definite turn. Four people, none of whom had an appointment walked in, each with a different story. Each story got worse.

The last story was a tale of abuse that would turn the stomach of anyone, except apparently the person who was inflicting the abuse. The one who was sharing the story, however, was an observer. So the hands of both of us were tied. Neither of us could step in as abuser and abused were competent adults. To call the police would put the one being abused in significant danger, perhaps before she was ready to leave.

When that last person left my office, I looked at the ceiling, as we sometimes do when we feel as if we need to look straight at God. “Is this some kind of wager you and Satan have made, God? Are you trying to see if I will quit the ministry? Are you sending worse and worse stories to get me to give up? Well, I tell you what, I am not quitting!” It was the end of the day. I stood up, packed my backpack, went home, ate cookies for dinner, and went to bed. Tomorrow would be another day.

No one gets through life without days like this. Even more poignant, however, practically no one gets through life without suffering the way the people who came in my office that day described. It is this universal experience of suffering that makes Job so compelling. Job asked the questions we all tend to ask in such experiences, questions of theodicy: Where is God’s justice in the midst of such unjust and difficult times?

In the midst of tragedy upon tragedy, in the midst of incomparable grief, Job did what we all would do. Job lamented, but Job also worshiped.

## **Setting the Stage: Background on Job**

Job may contain some of the oldest writings in the Bible. The prologue and the epilogue (Job 1:1–2:11; 42:7–17) not only are written in prose and not in poetry like the rest of the book, they also seem to participate in an older tradition about a legendary figure from antiquity named Job who was renowned for his righteousness. Ezekiel 14:14, 20 refers to Job, but there is debate as to whether Ezekiel was referring to the story recounted in our biblical text or if he was making reference to other tradition around Job.

Because of an apparent legend of Job in the ancient Near East and the switch in genre of literature, it may be that the Book of Job that we have before us now is an assembly of multiple traditions about Job. If that is the case, the prologue and the epilogue are probably the older pieces of the book and may date anywhere from the tenth to the seventh century BC. Most likely, the book itself was pulled together during the Exile in the sixth century, when the themes of the book would resonate with the people.

The prologue introduces three central characters. We have already mentioned Job and his legendary status. Most of the lessons in this unit will unpack the character of another central figure, God. The remaining character, translated in the CEB as “the Adversary,” calls for a bit of reflection here.

The Hebrew word for “Adversary” is *Ha-Satan*. This is where we get the name *Satan*. The age of this book makes this likely the first appearance of Satan in the Bible. (Satan does not appear in Genesis 3; that character is a serpent. Only later interpretations link the two.) It is important, however, to notice who Ha-Satan actually is and isn’t here.

This is not the horned and hooved fiery ruler of hell so many of us picture when we hear the word *Satan*. Instead, Ha-Satan was a member of this court of God. The role Ha-Satan actually played is well caught in the translation as the Adversary.

Ha-Satan played the prosecuting attorney, bringing charges and challenges before God about Job. Like a prosecuting attorney bringing charges against a man, the Adversary literally was given power over Job's movement and prosperity. As a member of the court of justice, the Adversary was given enormous freedom to be unjust, but given that freedom with the permission of God. That frame will create much of the tension for us as we wrestle with the unfolding of this story.

One more interesting detail on the background of Job. You have probably heard reference to the patience of Job, and that reference is supposed to actually represent someone who is patient. But as we read the Book of Job, we discover that Job was not terribly patient. Where did that expression come from then? James 5:11 reads, "Look at how we honor those who have practiced endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job."

Endurance is not necessarily the same thing as patience, but they are related. There was also a Testament of Job produced somewhere between the first century BC and the first century AD that takes the rabbinic approach popular at that time that did emphasize Job's patience. Job never yelled at God in the recounting of his story to his family in that work. The same cannot be said of Job in our biblical book. Job brought his anguish before God and leveled charges of injustice at God's feet.

***What have you learned about the Book of Job that interested you?***

***What other questions do you have about this book?***

### **About Those Drive-Through Funeral Homes**

As Job's story unfolds, we read that Job repeatedly wished for his own death. He was impatient, but he had a right to be. He was also suffering, so he responded with lament.

But Job's response may make us uncomfortable. Why? Perhaps because we are uncomfortable with the questions it raises about God, and we will certainly work through that over the course of the next four lessons. But perhaps we are also uncomfortable with lament. Perhaps we have lost an appreciation for this ritual expression of grief. Perhaps we are just uncomfortable with grief.

Have you heard of or perhaps seen a drive-through funeral home? During the set visitation time, the casket is pushed up against an outside window, people drive up in their cars to the window, and they pay their respects.

My reaction to drive-through funeral homes is the same as my reaction to people who think we should not pull over for funeral processions anymore. Ours is a culture uncomfortable with loss. Many people no longer make time for mourning. They do not make the time to cry, to moan, and to let their hearts ache anymore. It makes me want to quote Emily Dickinson: "Because I could not stop for Death, he kindly stopped for me."

This is in stark contrast to the expectations of the ancient world, where lament was not only a ritual expectation, it was a career. Professional mourners accompanied funerals, wailing and expressing grief at loss. Lament also shows up in ancient literature, including the poetry of Sumeria dating from 4,000 years ago. As long as people

have been feeling, we have been expressing grief. And as long as we have experienced the loss of ones we have loved and recognized that through ritual response (funerals, for example), lament has been part of our worship.

In the Western world, however, many people tend to view grief in some ways as a failure. They tell themselves, wrongly, that they ought to be tougher than this. They also put a greater value, at least in the United States, on things that are new and shiny rather than old and showing wear. So grief seems contrary to many of our dearly held values. But we can value all those things together and just recognize that different moments in life call for different responses.

We need to reclaim value in lament in worship, beyond the occasional expression in funerals and on All Saints Sunday. But when and how should we do so? Perhaps the answer lies in the journey of grief itself.

*What other elements of our society reveal that we are uncomfortable expressing grief and loss?*

### **Lament: Immediate and Delayed**

Job 1:13-19 describes a series of four messengers who went to Job to tell him about loss after loss of livestock, young men tending them, and Job's sons and daughters. Job's response to his loss was sudden: "Job arose, tore his clothes, shaved his head, fell to the ground, and worshipped" (Job 1:20).

The grief was immediate and overwhelming, and it should have been. Because Job was a man who kept his faith practices at the center of his life, he needed that ritual expression right then. He fell down and worshiped.

The Book of Job also ends with Job worshiping. In that case, Job's friends were required by God to bring offerings to apologize for how poorly they represented God when they were trying to be present for Job, and Job offered prayers on their behalf. There is certainly much to unpack about God's expectations there. But for our purposes here, we will just note that ritual also occurs on the back side of the hard times.

Both ritual moments are important. They should be defined less by a particular timeline, though, and more by how the grief unfolds. That means paying attention to the moments. So when we think about ritual grief, we need to be open to immediate response that may disrupt other plans, and we need to plan for later responses that allow the grief that has changed and has a different purpose to still be expressed.

This moment in time has me reflecting on two rituals of lament, one I experienced long ago and one I eagerly await experiencing. The first took place in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. It was the first major event I had experienced as someone who went to church. I do not know a single pastor who did not change her or his sermon that following Sunday. Expressions of lament and cries of injustice and mourning were shared across the nation.

But the lament did not stop there. It continued deeply into the year. It came in waves. It came as we stopped the rescue effort and moved to recovery. It came as our communities felt the economic impact and people lost jobs. It came as we faced going to war. Lament unfolded. It continues to unfold. I was seven years away from serving

as a pastor when the towers came down, but I have certainly taken time as a pastor for us to express lament, if only in abbreviated form.

The moment I anxiously await at this writing is our return to worship as we come out of the Covid-19 quarantine. I fear there will be a rush, considering our drive-through funeral home culture, to jump right to celebration and skip over lament. But we do ourselves a psychological and spiritual disservice if we do not take time to ritually mourn what we have lost.

We have lost old ways of doing things; and in some cases, we have literally lost people. If we do not stop to acknowledge that and bring it before God, we will miss a crucial step in our process of healing from it. We cannot move forward on the new if we do not recognize, honor, and memorialize what came before. And we need to stop and wail at what is gone so we can know what foundation we stand on going forward.

We will also need to return to reflection in later days when we can look back and learn from what all we have experienced in these moments. Lament needs to show up in the immediate aftermath, and we need to return to naming our struggles later, too, when we have had the time to reflect on how we have been shaped by loss.

*When have you lamented in your life?*

### **Reclaiming the Ritual Expression of Grief**

It is striking that Job's response was worship. But then we are told that Job worshiped regularly, particularly to protect the souls of his children.

Job 1:5 tells us, "When the days of the feast had been completed, Job would send word and purify his children. Getting up early in the

morning, he prepared entirely burned offerings for each one of them, for Job thought, Perhaps my children have sinned and then cursed God in their hearts. Job did this regularly." Job had so completely integrated worship in his life that it was his default response when he had deep soul cries he needed to express.

Do we make space for people to be so honest in our worship? Is worship so true to who our people are that it is the go-to response in times of celebration and desolation? I would love to be able to answer yes to this question, but I don't think it would be honest.

Perhaps the reason we do not fall suddenly to our knees and worship in such moments is because worship does not always adequately express the depth of human experience. It is time-consuming to plan an entirely new worship experience each week. It is easier to just stick to the tried-and-true patterns of worship and stay surface-level in content because diving deep opens cans of worms.

There is some comfort in predictable worship, and in some ways it mirrors the everyday nature of life. But too much of that flattens out worship and does not reflect the breadth of human experience. Then it fails to connect with us.

If worship does not provide space for all the messiness of life, it is inauthentic. We are supposed to bring all of who we are to God. That is what it means to be a whole and living sacrifice. If we are giving ourselves over to God in worship, then we need to give our whole selves over.

Yes, that includes our hope and joy, but that also includes our mess. That includes our loss. That includes our grief. That includes our anger. If the Book of Job teaches us anything, it affirms for us that

God wants us to bring ourselves before God, honestly offering who we are. And when we do, that's when we will encounter God.

*When have you experienced lament in worship? When do you think we have missed an opportunity to ritually lament?*

**Lord, we are grateful that you are the kind of God who will hear our cries, the kind of God who takes our authentic pain and transforms it into depth of connection. Thank you; in Jesus' name we pray.  
Amen.**



## August 8

### Lesson 10

#### Resignation

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**bless the LORD name.' " (Job 1:21).**

Blisters. All over my two-month-old's body. They had started out as just red patches. The pediatrician initially thought they were stork bites, those birth marks that show up on a newborn's skin. But, no, now they were blistered.

First guess was warts, which is not terribly comforting to a new mother. But then they started swelling and bursting open. Our doctor was mystified, so he called in his entire staff to look at my child's skin. No guesses.

We were referred to a dermatologist. The first one would not be able to work us in for seven months! The next one could see us in a month—a month! I would have a newborn child with blisters who would just have to suffer in his state for a month! He was fussy, with good reason, and my husband and I were stressed.

When we finally got in, the dermatologist, who had done a stint at Arkansas Children's Hospital, took one look and said, "Well, that's clearly urticaria pigmentosa." Clearly. What it meant for us was that we would have a child who would confront a myriad of contact allergies, and our lives would be significantly altered as we made space to keep him from suffering. In the midst of the whirlwind of reconfiguring our ways of being, I had to look toward God. But often I was looking to ask, "Really, God?!?!? Why my child?"

I have a pretty robust theology around suffering. Part of it comes from ten years of professional theological schooling. More of it, though, comes from a life lived. This theology affirms that God does not inflict evil on us, that God is indeed loving and good and seeks lives of thriving for all of us. That being said, when things come

**Focal Passages:** Job 1:21-22; 2:7-10

**Background Texts:** Job 1:21-22; 2:1-10; Psalm 139:19-24

**Purpose Statement:** To evaluate our willingness to "let God be God"

#### Job 1:21-22

**<sup>21</sup>He said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb; naked I will return there. The LORD has given; the LORD has taken; bless the LORD'S name." <sup>22</sup>In all this, Job didn't sin or blame God.**

#### Job 2:7-10

**<sup>7</sup>The Adversary departed from the LORD'S presence and struck Job with severe sores from the sole of his foot to the top of his head. <sup>8</sup>Job took a piece of broken pottery to scratch himself and sat down on a mound of ashes. <sup>9</sup>Job's wife said to him, "Are you still clinging to your integrity? Curse God, and die."**

**<sup>10</sup>Job said to her, "You're talking like a foolish woman. Will we receive good from God but not also receive bad?" In all this, Job didn't sin with his lips.**

**Key Verse:** "[Job] said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb; naked I will return there. The LORD has given; the LORD has taken;

crashing down, I don't always keep that robust theology in the forefront. Nope. I go for something more instinctual. I want God to fix it. Right now.

In this lesson, we continue examining Job's story and his responses to the suffering inflicted upon him. Job 2:7 tells us, "The Adversary departed from the LORD'S presence and struck Job with severe sores from the sole of his foot to the top of his head." What did Job do? What would you do?

### **De-fault Theology**

Many of the examples I use in this series of lessons from Job may seem to suggest that I might assume God is at least partially responsible for the bad things we go through. I don't actually believe that. I do believe that God is the source of all that is good and is in opposition to evil. The God of love would never bring misery and sickness and evil down on the head of anyone, much less someone who believes in God.

But then, in moments of suffering, all that fine theology has a tendency to slip out of my head. Then, all I want is an all-powerful God who hears my cries and says, "Whoops! Didn't mean to hit you with that tragedy that I sent down. My bad! Let me clean that right up for you!" I want to be able to lay all the blame at God's feet. I want a God I can yell at and demand justice from. I want a God I can fault for all that is wrong with the world.

Job's story is interesting because it sets up this quandary. Job didn't know that Satan and God were involved together in a plan to see if Job would blaspheme. But we know. While we know it was Satan who did the actual ill to Job, it sure looks like God was at the very least com-

plicit. The frame of the book fits this theology that many of us say we do not have.

In Job 1:21–2:10, Job is not yet deeply wrestling with God. Job is, however, naming God in the struggles he faces. Remember, at this point, Job has already lost his livestock, his workers, and his children. But here he sounds as if he is lifting a prayer or singing a hymn of praise: "The LORD has given; the LORD has taken; bless the LORD'S name."

In this moment, Job credited God with what was happening to him. It was God who had afflicted him, as far as Job was concerned. Job was de-faulting himself, nofaulting the Adversary (who, as far as Job knew, was not even part of the equation), and defaulting to a theology that faults God for all that happens in the world.

Our faith tradition does not put the blame on God for evil. We know that it is a product of free will to make our own choices. We know that we have broken the world with our sin. We know that, ultimately, we have a responsibility to seek restoration of our relationship with God so that we can cooperate with God's saving work.

But there are many days when I don't want to cooperate. I want God to swoop in and clean the slate. I fail to see that means some of the chalk would have to be erased from me, too. Those days, I fall to my own de-fault theology, too.

***When have you wanted to blame God for things going wrong in your life?***

### **A Biblical Conversation**

Pinning down who God is, even if we limit ourselves only to the Scriptures and don't take into account our own histories and



experiences of God, is practically impossible. Job stands in tension with a dominant theology of other biblical witnesses, particularly Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy roughly spells out a theology that celebrates the idea that, if you do good, you will be rewarded by God with a good life. If you do bad, however, you will receive punishment.

When I was in seminary, we boiled down Deuteronomistic theology to “do good, get good; do bad, get bad (abbreviated DGGG, DBGB). That is a lovely theology, except it is not true, at least not all the time. It’s true that sometimes good people are rewarded. But sometimes some of the most despicable people on the planet seem to gain more and more and more, and some dear saints just continue to suffer.

It is into that reality that Job stepped. Job’s story points out that sometimes righteous people suffer, too.

Now, we can debate how righteous Job was. Actually, we can’t debate how righteous Job was, and that may be the problem. We are told that he was “honest, a person of absolute integrity; he feared God and avoided evil” (Job 1:1).

We are also given enough other details to see that Job is set up as the ideal proof of DGGG theology. He was wealthy. He had lots of children. He had many servants. He also made sacrifices and performed acts of purification on behalf of his children, just to try to cover them in case they had sinned in their hearts. Job is the poster boy for DGGG theology. Here was a practically perfect man. Was he too perfect to be realistic?

In affliction, Job behaved like a lot of us would behave in such states. He whined and moaned, sank into depression, and became furiously angry. Despite the prevalence of the saying to the contrary, he certainly did not just patiently sit by and receive whatever came

at him. Job moved from being a caricature of perfection, which he is still holding onto in the text for this lesson, to being a real person with real pain and loss. In that space, the gloves tend to come off. Eventually.

*When have you seen “do good, get good” theology fail?*

### **The Problem of Evil**

All of this is driving at the problem of evil. Where does evil come from?

Let’s acknowledge that the answer to this question will be one we will wrestle with not only throughout this lesson, but throughout our lives. The answer will feel like a moving target. In this passage alone, we seem to have at least two answers.

Job credited God, but we know that the Adversary was actually inflicting the pain. Then, as we pull back and look at the whole, it also feels as if humanity had a role to play here, too. After all, Job’s friends were not terribly helpful in this moment. In fact, they often added to his pain. So don’t we sometimes participate and even create brokenness in the world, too?

This is a long-wrestled theological problem. Add to that the challenge that we are coming at it from our limited human perspective, something God will call out at the end of this book (spoiler alert). Big moments such as the Holocaust; the Indonesian tsunami the day after Christmas 2004; or the smaller but more personal struggle in my home state of Arkansas, which got riddled with tornadoes in the midst of a pandemic—those events will cause us to reflect on the nature of evil.

But so will sitting with someone who has lost a child to cancer, comforting a widower whose young wife was killed by a drunk driver, or trying to find purpose and focus after going through a school shooting. Whether on a large communal or nationwide scale or a catastrophic event at a personal level, sooner or later everyone has to ask where evil comes from because it is staring them in the face. Then we want to demand answers.

Job's wife was already there. "Are you still clinging to your integrity?" she asked Job. "Curse God, and die" (Job 2:9). Job wasn't there—yet. He would get right up to that door and knock. But can we blame him?

If this is the way God runs things, then what good is there in following and supporting this God? But if we take a deep breath and step back, if we re-center ourselves on what we actually believe, if we remember who God is to us, then we can trust God again. Right?

***How do you explain where evil comes from?***

### **Do You Trust Me?**

In the animated movie *Aladdin*, Princess Jasmine and Aladdin are pursued by Jafar's henchmen. Aladdin leans over and asks Jasmine, "Do you trust me?" She says yes, and they jump off a building together. Later, when Aladdin is disguised as Prince Ali and he is offering to show her the world on a magic carpet, he leans over again and asks, "Do you trust me?" Again, Jasmine says yes.<sup>1</sup>

But let's think about what is happening there. Aladdin is lying to Jasmine about who he is when he is Ali, and he is still inviting her to trust him. She will learn the truth eventually, and because it is a Disney cartoon, all will be forgiven. But in reality, that kind of deception

would make someone seriously question whether such trust should be extended again.

Now let's consider another movie with the same line. In *Titanic*, Jack invites Rose to stand on the bow of the ship, to spread her arms, and to fly as he did in an earlier scene where he declared himself the king of the world. He asks Rose to step up, and when he does, he asks, "Do you trust me?" She does. He keeps her secure as she ventures beyond her comfort zone. But that is not all Jack does.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the movie, Jack makes sure Rose is safe on the debris and gives his own life keeping her from harm. He has proven himself wholly trustworthy.

The God we encounter in Job is the God of all creation. This God is the God of things far beyond our comprehension, which we will see as the Book of Job draws to a close. There is much about this God that is beyond us. We are invited, then, to trust that God.

We don't have a whole lot to go on for that trust. From Job's perspective, yes, it appears that God had historically blessed him with abundance. God had been Job's protector and provider, at least as Job understood it, and as he still understands it in this passage (though he will talk himself out of that understanding as the story goes on). God had been trustworthy up to that point. Why should Job question that now?

From our perspective, though, we see a God who is willing to allow lives to be put at risk to prove a point to Satan. Sure, Job's life was protected, but what about the lives of his children? Were they expendable just to make an illustration?

Our view of God through this story is different than the limited view Job had at this moment. But then, our view is all we have in

Scripture anyway. We can only encounter the Scripture that we can comprehend. We can't understand beyond our capacity, and God will always be beyond our capacity. Accepting that is how we come to terms with allowing God to be God.

However, this is not the only Scripture passage we have. In addition to the plural witnesses to God mentioned above, we also have the Gospels. Those Scriptures reveal a God who is willing to live the way we live, to feel the way we feel, to suffer and die the way we suffer and die, all in the name of drawing us closer to our own full and abundant salvation.

We have Jesus, the one who will give of himself to protect all of us. Do we trust God? Yes. We trust God because God is God, but we also

trust God because God is Jesus.

***What helps you trust God?***

**Mighty Lord, we know we cannot possibly comprehend how you are working in our lives and our world. Help us, even in the midst of such uncertainty, to continue to trust in you; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

<sup>1</sup>From *Aladin* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1992).

<sup>2</sup>From *Titantic* (Paramount Pictures, 1997).

# August 15

## Lesson 11

### Protest

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**Focal Passage:** Job 19:1-6, 13-19

**Background Texts:** Job 19:1-27; Psalm 43:1-5

**Purpose Statement:** To refuse to be content with letting injustices continue unimpeded

**Job 19:1-6, 13-19**

<sup>1</sup>Then Job responded:

<sup>2</sup>How long will you harass me  
and crush me with words?

<sup>3</sup>These ten times you've humiliated me;  
shamelessly you insult me.

<sup>4</sup>Have I really gone astray?  
If so, my error remains hidden inside me.

<sup>5</sup>If you look down on me  
and use my disgrace to criticize me,  
<sup>6</sup> know then that God has wronged me  
and enclosed his net over me.

He has distanced my family from me;  
my acquaintances are also alienated from me. . . .

<sup>14</sup>My visitors have ceased;  
those who know me have forgotten me.

<sup>15</sup>My guests and female servants think me a stranger;

I'm a foreigner in their sight.

<sup>16</sup>I call my servant, and he doesn't answer;  
I myself must beg him.

<sup>17</sup>My breath stinks to my wife;  
I am odious to my children.

<sup>18</sup>Even the young despise me;  
I get up, and they rail against me.

<sup>19</sup>All my closest friends despise me;  
the ones I have loved turn against me.

**Key Verses:** "If you look down on me and use my disgrace to criticize me, know then that God has wronged me and enclosed his net over me" (Job 19:5-6).

Three years. It took three years for us to make it to trial. My dad had been fired from a company he had worked with for 21 years. He had seen it coming, though. He had suspected it was coming when he hired the first two black employees to work for the company in its history other than as janitors and lawn care workers.

He had consulted an attorney ahead of his firing who told him he could make copies of anything he wanted and take those copies home; but as soon as he was fired, he would not be able to touch anything. So he had amassed a room full of evidence, evidence that proved discrimination and proved that he was good at his job and was unjustly fired. His goal in going to court, though, was to right the wrongs of injustice.



He wanted this company he loved and had poured more than two decades of life into to live more fully into its own ideas of service and hospitality. Three years, though. Three years is a long time to wait for justice. It took a deep toll on our family economically, emotionally, and spiritually. By the time the trial came, my dad was still single-minded. He was still focused on changing an unjust system. The rest of us in the family, though, were just angry.

Seeking justice in this world is not easy. We encounter a need for justice when our lives seem unfairly turned upside down. But that understanding of justice equates justice with fairness and also assumes justice is all about us. But is that a just approach to justice?

### **Going on Strike**

“I am going on strike from life lessons,” I announced to my mother. It was one of those periods of life when too many challenges stacked on top of each other. I decided that, if God or the universe was trying to teach me lessons by making me go through such hard things, then I would just refuse to learn the lessons, so there would no longer be a point to the hard things. Then whatever force was doing this to me could just quit.

At the time of this writing, strikes and protests are underway all around. We are in the midst of the Covid-19 quarantine. In the course of these few weeks, medical professionals have stood with signs outside hospitals, drawing attention to the fact that they need masks and gloves so they can do their jobs safely. Online retail workers are protesting that they continue to send out nonessential items. And people who are tired of staying home are marching in the streets to reclaim their movement, even potentially at the cost of their own

health and safety.

When our worlds turn upside down, we would do just about anything to turn them right side up. We long for what is known, for what is comfortable. However, sometimes our comfort depends on someone else's misery.

It is only when we find ourselves in miserable states as well that we see how messed up the world is. It is only when we are inconvenienced, afflicted, or oppressed that we have a greater understanding of what others in similar circumstances face.

Still, we have to be open to seeing those similarities. We have to decide if we are going to choose to strike to make the world different and better, or if we are going to strike against that possibility by staying in our own selfish perspective. It is the choice between self-pity and transformation. Both journeys, though, are often motivated by something unjust. Our response is what makes the difference.

***What is your typical reaction to experiencing an unjust situation?***

### **Just Say No**

During this Covid-19 pandemic, another place that people have raised objections is on social media. Some of them are disguised in humor, particularly in the myriad of memes that were passed around. Some examples of humorous but frustrated, angry, or biting words included:

- Your screen time last week: six years.
- When someone in your house comes back from getting groceries: “What’s the news of the outside world? Tell me everything!”



- We all spent years making 20/20 vision jokes, but none of us saw this coming.
- You wanted weekends to last longer; now here we are.
- Whoever is supposed to go to Nineveh, just GO ALREADY!

Those are all words that express, through humor, the challenge of those days. But sometimes the words are not softened by humor. Sometimes we need to pour out exactly what we mean without any sugar-coating to it at all.

Job's words began to get more insistent, more bitter, and closer to blasphemy. He did not out and out deny God, but he started laying blame for how he was suffering at God's feet. "How long will you harass me and crush me with words?" he asked (Job 19:2).

Job was also getting pretty tired of the perspective his friends were bringing, and he voiced how disillusioned he was with his relationship with his wife: "My breath stinks to my wife," he said (verse 17). Everything was starting to come crashing down, and with good reason! He had lost children, house, home, wealth, and health. Who wouldn't feel cursed—and feel like cursing—in such a moment?

Periodically, people will talk about how they know they shouldn't be angry. I hear this often from people of faith who think that to be "good Christians," they must be content all the time. But people go through some ridiculously hard and unjust things in the course of their lives.

Faith does not make us bulletproof from life's onslaught. We are created in the image of God, and Scripture affirms that God gets angry. In particular, God gets angry over unjust suffering.

If we never voiced our anger about injustice, no one would know

there was a need for change. Speaking out about problems, afflictions, and oppressions is the motivation for doing something about them. If we don't know, then we can't say, "No!"

Lament that comes honestly from frustrations about situations that seem undeserved and unfair is an important expression of our faith. Righteous anger has a place in our faith. Such anger is often the fire that fuels the breaking in of the reign of God.

***When have your angry words helped motivate change for good?***

### **Obstruction of Justice**

It is perhaps no coincidence that Job began in the court of the Lord. The text doesn't explicitly say that, but the divine beings have brought themselves before the Lord. As we noted in an earlier lesson, the Adversary here is the equivalent of a heavenly prosecuting attorney. Is it any wonder that questions of justice become so prevalent here?

Obstruction of justice describes the crime of willfully interfering with the process of justice particularly by influencing, threatening, harming, or impeding a witness, juror, or legal officer, or by furnishing false information in or otherwise impeding an investigation or legal process. Certainly, in Job's case it seems like justice was being interfered with. The obstruction was perpetrated, even, by an officer of the court so to speak (the Adversary). But the judge God was at the very least complicit in the work of the Adversary.

It feels impossible to see how justice can occur here because the justice system was stacked against Job. That is why it is understandable that Job danced right up on the edge of blasphemy. If there was ever a reason to stop revering God, it seems like making you the

wager in a bet and leveling you as part of that bet is the best reason there is.

Of course, as far as the narrative goes, Job did not know about the arrangement between God and the Adversary. Still, from Job's perspective, and his apparent theological commitment, God had just decided to beat Job down.

So was God obstructing justice? Was God threatening or harming a witness? What is the witness Job provided? Job was witnessing to God's power and presence in his life. Technically, Job was still witnessing to that reality. Job may have been angry with God for the way he had been treated, but Job had not denied God. Because Job continued to witness to God's power, justice was not being obstructed. Why? To understand that claim, we need to think about what actually constitutes justice.

*When have you experienced an interference in justice?*

### **Brought to Justice**

What is justice? Again, we find ourselves at a philosophical question for which there are a multitude of answers. There are big answers and personal answers to this question, as my family learned in the course of our long lawsuit.

We finally made it to trial in January 1998, three years after my dad was fired. What happened? Four intense days of trial, and then the other side came to my dad with a settlement offer. Dad's lawyers were tired. His family was angry. The other side was threatening to drag this out in appeals until my dad was dead. In the midst of weighing his options, my father recognized that he had exposed the evil. He took the settlement.

Within a few years, the leadership of the company turned over. The people who had supervised my father had to answer for their behavior, and they were fairly soon ushered out after the trial. People my father had trained were moved into those positions of leadership. The culture changed. More opportunities were opened for more people.

But for us? My father's lawyers were paid. My dad had enough money to pay off the house and go to school to become a truck driver. He would no longer be in sales or hold an executive position. Then he would spend just a few years in retirement before dying of cancer that rapidly overwhelmed his body. My mom lives in their house and manages on social security.

Did we get justice? Yes and no. Yes, things changed for the better—for other people. Not as much for us. Thinking about that experience inspires reflection on Job. Was Job's experience just? Yes and no. Job didn't deserve the suffering he went through, but then many people don't deserve what they go through. But Job witnessed to the power of God in his life.

Job has also given all of us permission to name injustice, to level charges. The justice of the Book of Job, then, is larger than the experience of one man. The justice of Job is to show us that justice can always be sought. In fact, justice can always be demanded.

In 2008, a movie came out entitled *God on Trial*, in which a group of Jews facing death at the Auschwitz concentration camp hold a rabbinic court to see if God is the source of their misery. The movie dramatically illustrates debates that were likely going through the minds of most of the people in the Nazi death camps.

How could a just God allow this to happen? Again, the question of evil gets tangled up in that answer. The point in this moment, though, is that people have permission to ask that question. The Book of Job gives voice to those exact questions. So when we think about defining biblical justice, we need to recognize that our understanding of justice without this book would not be nearly as deep.

Was what happened to Job fair? No. Justice isn't about fair, though. Justice is far more complex than fairness. Justice encompasses the whole of human history. Justice engages systems and breaks the back of evil, eventually. Justice will happen for individuals. But justice is also an umbrella of all that is, which means that, as long as we live in a broken world, some will be treated unjustly as we bend the arc of history toward justice.

Finally, what is justice? Well, from our faith perspective, justice comes from God. In that sense, justice is whatever God decides is

just. That is not a terribly comforting statement when we are on the receiving end of what feels like injustice. There is a bigger picture at work, though. A far more complex unfolding of God's reality of human history. We will sometimes pay the price, but hopefully that sacrifice will draw us closer to the reign of God.

No matter what we face, though, we can be confident of two things: We can always challenge injustice, no matter its source. And as we will see in the next couple of lessons, God will always be with us.

***What injustice do you want to bring before the court of God?***

**Lord of justice, give us the words and the courage to name what is wrong and to fight for what is right; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

## August 22

### Lesson 12

### Angry Despair

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**Focal Passage:** Job 30:16-23

**Background Texts:** Job 30:1-31; Psalm 44:9-26

**Purpose Statement:** To question why God sometimes seems unresponsive to our plight

**Job 30:16-23**

<sup>16</sup>Now my life is poured out on me;  
days of misery have seized me.

<sup>17</sup>At night he bores my bones;  
my gnawing pain won't rest.

<sup>18</sup>With great force he grasps my clothing;  
it binds me like the neck of my shirt.

<sup>19</sup>He hurls me into mud;  
I'm a cliché, like dust and ashes.

<sup>20</sup>I cry to you, and you don't answer;  
I stand up, but you just look at me.

<sup>21</sup>You are cruel to me,  
attack me with the strength of your hand.

<sup>22</sup>You lift me to the wind and make me ride;  
you melt me in its roar.

<sup>23</sup>I know you will return me to death,  
the house appointed for all the living.

**Key Verse:** "Now my life is poured out on me; days of misery have seized me" (Job 30:16).

On a retreat, we had gathered to engage in *lectio divina*, the spiritual practice where someone leads you through intentional contemplative reflection on a passage of Scripture. That morning, we were working with the raising of Lazarus in John 11.

As the guide invited us to see ourselves in the story, I could clearly see who I was. I was Lazarus's mother. You may be wondering where she is mentioned in the story. She is not. In all likelihood, she had probably already died. Despite that, I could see myself as her as clear as the day is long (and at this time, we are in quarantine, so the days are long).

At that time in my life, my son was in trouble. I was worried that the ramifications of the path he was on would lead to death, at least spiritually. There was also deep division between the two of us. So, as I envisioned myself in that scene, I felt as though I was beating the rock covering the tomb, screaming for all I was worth, smashing my arms so hard against the rock they were bloody and bruised, desperate to reach my child.

I didn't even notice as Jesus approached and talked to Martha and Mary. My focus was fully on the tomb and my own rage and anguish. So when Jesus finally made his way to the tomb, he stood right beside me. He looked at the rock, and then he looked at me. Then he touched my shoulder, and he said. . . .

Most of us have had moments in our lives when we thought things could not get any worse. When those times occur, we are desperate for God to hear us. But what if God seems silent? That's where we

find Job in the text for this lesson. “Days of misery have seized me,” he said (Job 30:16). “I cry to you,” he said to God, “and you don’t answer” (verse 20).

*Where is God when we cry out from the depths of our souls?*

### **The Dark Night of the Soul**

If you have ever been through a significant struggle in life or felt that your faith was slipping away and you had nothing left to stand on, that God seemed not to exist or had decided to ignore you completely, you have been in a “dark night of the soul.” This descriptive phrase is attributed to the 16th-century Spanish Roman Catholic mystic Saint John of the Cross and refers to a spiritual crisis. It is a place of anguish. A place of fatigue. A place of hopelessness. It can be a place where we can get very, very lost.

I suppose there are people who have walked through life with a constant sense of God being present with them. I envy that assurance. I don’t doubt the existence of God, primarily because I have encountered God. But I have wondered on occasion about my devotion to God.

Life can be hard, and—right or not—it is very human to think that membership “in the club” ought to bring some privileges. When it comes to faith, it is perfectly natural to think some of those privileges ought to be a life relatively free from trouble. Oh, sure, we can expect the occasional situation that knocks the knees out from under us. That just keeps our attention. But, seriously, God? Can’t we get some bulletproof vests here?

But as long as we live in a broken world, a world that is not the reign of God (even if we get regular glimpses), we are not immune

from problems, unfairness, or misery. Critical to surviving the dark night of the soul is having people with whom we can share our experiences. We all need those friends who let us drop our filters. Hopefully, those friends are more helpful than Job’s.

Still, one thing that was helpful about Job’s friends is that they represented different responses to his plight. In this case, they likely represented different theological explanations to suffering. But when we are in a dark night of the soul, we need different friends who bring a unique presence to help us get through.

When I was struggling with the situation involving my son, I went to several people who were ordained with me. In fact, we started a text thread that actually continues to this day and is a space where all of us can bring our worries to one another.

We have each taken a turn at being Job, and we have each taken turns at being the friends. Some of us have even played the role of Job’s friend Eliphaz, pointing out when we are getting too mired in self-pity. Even when it feels as if God isn’t listening, the family of God still is.

*If you find yourself in a “dark night of the soul,” who can you call on to walk that path with you?*

### **“I’m a Cliché”**

Sometimes the CEB translation strikes me. For example, Job says of God, “He hurls me into mud; I’m a cliché, like dust and ashes” (Job 30:19). *Cliché* doesn’t sound like a Hebrew word. Of course, it isn’t a Hebrew word; it is an English translation of a Hebrew word. But it is an unusual English word to use in translating a Hebrew word.



The Hebrew word is *wa-et-massel*, the verb form of which turns the meaning of that word into something roughly equivalent to “And I am a proverb.” There is a certain logic, then, in translating that phrase as “I am a cliché.” It captures the idea that Job felt as though his situation was so over-the-top as to be representative of the worst of human suffering. It is as if someone designed an example for all that can go wrong at once, and Job found himself representing that very reality.

Of course, there is deep dramatic irony here because the Adversary actually did design this moment to do exactly that: test the limits of human suffering. Job was, in fact, the suffering cliché.

A *cliché* is defined as a phrase or an opinion that seems overused and unoriginal, or even a person or thing that seems unoriginal or predictable. It is stereotypical because it is so common in thought or existence. Job had at one time felt as though he was special, even beloved by God. Now he felt debased and common. He felt as if he was ignored, and he had definitely lost the prior sense of privilege he once enjoyed.

Yes, on one level what he was going through was unique to him. On another, though, it was a predictable reality of being human. We all go through periods of painful loss.

We have a number of phrases that captures a similar concept, of feeling as if we are caught in a stereotypical moment, like when we say we are trapped in a bad dream. Bad dreams are almost universal human experiences. That expression is itself a cliché that captures that human condition. There is a reason clichés are clichés, though. They describe something that is familiar to enough people to be used as an expression over and over and over again.

Job probably did feel like a cliché here. We can also say, however, that Job has become a cliché. Whenever we are suffering, we often compare ourselves to Job. Some of those comparisons are warranted. Some of them, such as when we feel “afflicted” because the store is out of our favorite kind of ice cream at the end of a mediocre day at work, maybe not so much.

Still, Job has become representative of suffering. And if there is one thing about suffering, it is a universal human experience. Of course, that is so cliché.

***When have you felt like a cliché?***

### **Honest Prayer**

I like to listen to music while I write. I have playlists that are built around moods. I choose a list based around the kind of writing I am doing. For writing on Job, I have seesawed back and forth between lists entitled “Angry Thoughtful” and “Contemplative.” I have deliberately avoided the lists “Good Times, Good Songs” and “Inspiration.”

So as I sit listening to “Contemplative,” the Garth Brooks song “Unanswered Prayers” has rolled up. It tells the story of a man who prayed that God would put him together with a high school flame, but that didn’t happen. When he ran into that woman years later and imagined what life would be like with her as opposed to life with his wife, he was grateful that God didn’t listen to him.

Most of us have probably prayed for something that didn’t happen and then been grateful for that. We have probably also prayed for something that didn’t happen and we still want it anyway. We fail to see why God didn’t respond. We have thought through this, and clearly we have wisdom about what is best for our lives, and we are

mystified why God would not just take our word for it. Or we at the very least feel as though we are entitled to an answer.

But is the purpose of prayer transactional? In other words, should we come to God with a list of demands (or to put it more nicely, “requests”) and then expect that our faith entitles us to a response?

I have been asked three times to help with confirmation, and all three times I’ve been responsible for the lesson on the vows of membership. The first thing we vow is how we will support the local church through our prayers.

I tend to ask the confirmands, “What should we not pray to God for?” One young man said, “An Xbox.” I responded by telling him to go ahead and pray for that but not necessarily to expect that prayer would be answered. The point, though, is to bring what is on our hearts before God. We should be unfiltered in what we want to bring before God. We should bring our desires, our pains, our angers, our joys—the whole of our human experience. In a sense, it is one of the ways we are a holy and living sacrifice, because we give it all over to God.

For some reason, though, we struggle with bringing ourselves honestly before God. Do we think we can hide something from God? We can’t. But maybe bringing things to God makes them too real for us, too. Still, the biblical witness models this for us through lament. Not only in Lamentations, not only in Psalms, but also in these words of Job.

Job finally started taking off the gloves. He called God out for dragging him around and for being cruel. “At night he bores my bones; my gnawing pain won’t rest. With great force he grasps my clothing; . . . He hurls me into mud; . . . You are cruel to me, attack me

with the strength of your hand” (Job 30:17-18; 19; 21). Job lost his comfortable theology and got real, and it is in that space that God has real invitation to show up.

***When have you felt as if you were the most honest with God in your prayers?***

### **Kill the Noise**

“Woman, hush.”

That was the response Jesus gave me as I found myself before the tomb in the *lectio divina* practice. My reaction? At first, I wanted to object to the order to be quiet. Who was this man to tell me, an aching and heartbroken mother, to hush? But then I saw the man, and something told me not to object, but just to do exactly as he said. So I stood next to him, quietly, while he called my child from the tomb.

I realized in that moment that Jesus was working on my child, but that it was a longer journey than I was giving credit for. Bringing someone from death to life can take awhile. We focus on how quickly Lazarus and Jesus were raised, but I suppose those days of death felt like the longest days on the planet. And they were probably days filled with wailing and moaning, too. Those are necessary pieces of grief. They are necessary pieces of lament.

But it is important also to remember that, yes, God is in the whirlwind, as we will see in the next few chapters of Job. But Elijah’s experience in 1 Kings 19:12 was that God is in the thin and quiet, the silence.

I wonder if we don’t sometimes miss that God is responding to our cries because we don’t stop all our noise and listen. In times of chaos, there is often a lot of noise. It is hard to tamp it down. But a God of real

presence like we worship is also found in the most surprising places, speaking in the most surprising ways. But how can we hear if we don't listen? How can we notice the whisper if we won't hush?

Funny enough, I finished writing this lesson as another song rolled up in my song list. This time it is a song by Barlow Girl called "Never Alone." It is a song that affirms that, even when we feel as if God cannot hear us, we are still never alone. But it does so still with an edge and an anguish about affirming that truth, even as God still is silent.

Maybe I should turn off this song list and listen for God. Or maybe I should stop everything, quiet my mind for a minute, and recognize that God is speaking through it, telling me exactly what I need to hear.

*When do you hear God most clearly, in the noise or in the quiet?*

**Lord, when we cry out, help us hear you; in Jesus' name we pray.  
Amen.**

## August 29

### Lesson 13

### Acceptance

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**Focal Passages:** Job 40:1-5; 41:1-10; 42:1-6

**Background Texts:** Job 40:1-42:6; Psalm 13:1-6

**Purpose Statement:** To learn to live faithfully without knowing all the answers

#### Job 40:1-5

<sup>1</sup>The LORD continued to respond to Job:

<sup>2</sup>Will the one who disputes with the Almighty correct him?  
God's instructor must answer him.

<sup>3</sup>Job responded to the LORD:

<sup>4</sup>Look, I'm of little worth. What can I answer you?  
I'll put my hand over my mouth.

<sup>5</sup>I have spoken once, I won't answer;  
twice, I won't do it again.

#### Job 41:1-10

<sup>1</sup>Can you draw out Leviathan with a hook,  
restrain his tongue with a rope?

<sup>2</sup>Can you put a cord through his nose,  
pierce his jaw with a barb?

<sup>3</sup>Will he beg you at length  
or speak gentle words to you?

<sup>4</sup>Will he make a pact with you  
so that you will take him as a permanent slave?

<sup>5</sup>Can you play with him like a bird,  
put a leash on him for your girls?

<sup>6</sup>Will merchants sell him;  
will they divide him among traders?

<sup>7</sup>Can you fill his hide with darts,  
his head with a fishing spear?

<sup>8</sup>Should you lay your hand on him,  
you would never remember the battle.

<sup>9</sup>Such hopes would be delusional;  
surely the sight of him makes one stumble.

<sup>10</sup>Nobody is fierce enough to rouse him;  
who then can stand before me?

#### Job 42:1-6

<sup>1</sup>Job answered the LORD:

<sup>2</sup>I know you can do anything;  
no plan of yours can be opposed successfully.

<sup>3</sup>You said, "Who is this darkening counsel without  
knowledge?"

I have indeed spoken about things I didn't understand,  
wonders beyond my comprehension.

<sup>4</sup>You said, "Listen and I will speak;  
I will question you and you will inform me."

<sup>5</sup>My ears had heard about you,  
but now my eyes have seen you.

**<sup>6</sup>Therefore, I relent and find comfort  
on dust and ashes.**

**Key Verse: “You said, ‘Who is this darkening counsel without knowledge?’ I have indeed spoken about things I didn’t understand, wonders beyond my comprehension” (Job 42:3).**

At the height of its collection, the Library at Alexandria, Egypt, may have held 400,000 works. Now, admittedly, in comparison to the 16 million+ books and 120 million+ additional works in the US Library of Congress, that is a paltry amount. For antiquity, however, the Library at Alexandria represented the greatest repository of human knowledge the world had ever known.

Alexandria itself was a busy port, a meeting place of many of the world’s cultures. At times in its history, Alexandria enforced a policy that if you docked and were carrying any written material, you had to surrender it to be copied. It could be returned once scribes had captured it.

It reached its height in the third and second centuries BC. Then, the library began to decline. It lost funding, intellectuals were cast out of Alexandria, and it suffered a series of fires that also destroyed its branch campus at the Serapeum. By the end of the fourth century, the Library at Alexandria was no more.

But what if it had survived? What if it had even thrived? What if it collected and then shared more and more and more of the world’s knowledge? Would the so-called Dark Ages have happened? Where would human knowledge be now? What did we know then that would have changed what we know now? If the Library at Alexandria

had not been destroyed, would the knowledge contained there have altered the course of history? Then again, are there important limits to our knowledge? Perhaps it is better that we don’t know.

Despite the fact that Ecclesiastes warns us, “In much wisdom is much aggravation; the more knowledge, the more pain” (Ecclesiastes 1:18), humans endlessly seek to know. That curiosity can be one of the great virtues of being human and can reflect how we are created in the image of God. But we are the image of God; we are not God. We will come up against limits to what we know, and one of those limits is fully knowing God. That doesn’t mean we won’t keep trying, though.

### **Scripture, Tradition, Reason, Experience**

As Albert C. Outler studied the works of John Wesley, he noticed that Wesley used four lenses in trying to understand God: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. He termed these collective lenses “the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” Basically, the idea behind Outler’s model is that Wesley did not just rely on one of these when it came to discerning who God is and what God’s will is for us, but instead kept all four approaches in conversation with one another.

While he acknowledged that Scripture is our primary source for knowing God, we also understand God through the study of church and church history in tradition. We use our God-given capacity for reason to reflect on God. We also continue to have individual and collective experiences of God that reveal more of God, too.

Those four lenses are fairly comprehensive. They take into account a full picture of how we can know. The study of how we know, by the way, is called epistemology. The epistemology of the



Methodist tradition is in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. We use a conversation among Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience to know how we respond as people of faith. We also use all four to better understand God. But they are not totally comprehensive.

In the first place, the lenses are limited by individual capacity. We can only know about our experience, and the experience of others that they choose to share with us. Our intellect, our reason, is defined in part by genetics, part by social location as we grew, part by the educational experiences we have had. Our traditional understanding is shaped by the church tradition we choose to give weight to. And Scripture is affected by translation and interpretation.

We cannot even fully utilize the four lenses. How can we possibly comprehensively apply them to the key object of their study, God? Human understanding is limited because humans are limited.

*How do you use the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in the understanding of your faith? Is there one lens you lean on more heavily than the others?*

### **The Great “Because I Said So”**

My parents said “Because I said so” more times than I could count. It was a terribly frustrating answer to get. I wanted to know why we had to do things, or couldn’t do things, whatever the case may be. I promised that I would never do the same thing to my child.

But then I confronted a two-year-old with endless questions. I could only run down that rabbit hole so long. Eventually, I had to hush him up so we could move on with our day! So, I told him we were doing such and such, “Because I said so.” The shame I felt was overshadowed by the relief at not having to answer any more questions!

The questions children bring are usually good questions. They may seem simple to us, but if children don’t ask the questions, they cannot learn. When we have time and patience to answer them, we contribute to that growth.

Sometimes, though, we don’t have the time to answer them. At other times, they are not ready for the answers. Sometimes we would need to explain too much background, and they would all lose interest before the question was answered. In some cases, their brains just aren’t capable of comprehending the answer they seek. It would be like learning simple addition and then asking for help with a calculus question. They aren’t ready. We can’t go there. In those cases, giving a short answer is an understandable way of handling things.

God did show up and answer Job’s questions about suffering. Well, God sort of answered Job’s questions. God basically answered Job with a giant “Because I said so.” God explained to Job how he could not possibly have the perspective he needed to understand suffering.

God went through a long litany of divine action in creation, of all that God manages beyond Job’s miniscule human existence. There is more than a little bit of sarcasm in God’s response to Job, effectively saying at times, “Oh, I forgot that you, Job, were there when I set the foundations of the earth!” which of course, Job wasn’t. God distinguished between what the divine knowledge includes and what human brains can possibly comprehend.

We are accustomed to knowing anything we want to know. Not knowing frustrates us. We have especially become accustomed to knowing whatever we want to know in an era when the devices we carry in our purses or back pockets contain access to more informa-

tion than the librarian in Alexandria could have possibly conceived. It is more than the librarians at the Library of Congress can conceive.

We can know practically anything. But even in these conditions, just because we can know doesn't mean that we should know or even that we have the capacity to know. The knowledge that our human minds have access to cannot be contained anymore in a single lifetime.

And the truth of the matter is, we don't know everything. As I write in the shadow of quarantine, when the world is scrambling to come up with a vaccine to combat a miniscule particle that is wreaking havoc on our world, we have come face-to-face with the limits of our knowledge. How much more are those limits exposed when we come face-to-face with the power of God.

*When have you been frustrated because you didn't understand something?*

### **Confronting the Whirlwind**

We don't know how tornadoes work. We know more about them than we did when my hometown was hit by one in 1975. In those days, we had just a few minutes of warning that a tornado was upon us. Now we may have hours. In fact, once when I lived in Dallas, we were given days of notice that tornadoes would likely hit. Doppler radar and new technologies have taught us much about how tornadoes form.

That being said, we still do not know why certain conditions give rise to tornadoes one time and those same conditions do not produce even high winds the next time. Then there is the unpredictability when the tornadoes do form. We can make rough estimates about the

direction tornadoes will head, but that is still an inexact science.

Sometimes tornadoes stay on the ground for an hour or more. Sometimes they pop down for five minutes and dissipate. For all our study and science, there is still so much we don't comprehend about a phenomenon people confront in our world every single year. This one thing we do know, though. When you come face-to-face with a tornado, it will knock you to your knees. To stand in the path of such power is overwhelming, if not also life altering, to say the least.

It seems wholly appropriate, then, that in this encounter with Job, "The LORD answered Job from the whirlwind" (Job 40:6). God appeared in the whirlwind to effectively say, "You don't understand, and you can't understand." And what was Job's response to such incredible power? "I have indeed spoken about things I didn't understand, wonders beyond my comprehension" (42:3).

There is no other answer to confronting the full reality of God. Job wanted answers. What he got instead was the whirlwind. What he got was God.

*What is the most awestruck moment from your life, and how did you detect God's presence in it?*

### **The Ultimate Answer**

42.

According to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a science fiction series created by Douglas Adams, the answer to The Ultimate Question about Life, the Universe, and Everything is 42. The answer was calculated by a computer named Deep Thought over the course of 7.5 million years. That answer is not terribly satisfying. It also does not take into account what the question is.

Part of being human, I suppose, is at some point or other asking ourselves what the purpose of life is. It is the “Why am I here?” question that eventually, if fleetingly, crosses most of our minds at least once in our lifetime. It is a question seeking significance. Also, because suffering seems to be a universal experience, most of us also ask at some point, “Why me?”

I had such questions once. I was in the midst of a year dealing with surviving a school shooting. When I found myself in another threatening situation on that same campus less than a year later, the house of cards of coping that I had built around me came crashing down. I also finally got angry with God.

I had all the questions that Job had for God and all the accusations, too. Frustrated, scared, and angry, I demanded in prayer in the middle of a worship service that God show up and explain. Tell me why there is evil in the world. Tell me why good people have to suffer. Tell me!

A few hours later, God did show up.

God did not come in a whirlwind for me. God came as an overwhelming presence of peace. I have never been able to adequately describe that moment. But even now, 20 years since it happened, when I try to explain it, I always get goosebumps. And in the course of time that I found myself in God’s presence, God did give me an answer to my question.

“You want to know why there is evil in the world? There is no good answer. But here’s what you can do. You can come work for me. Spend your life bringing this kind of peace into the lives of others. Then there will be less evil. There will be less suffering. Come work for me.”

It was my call to ministry. It still is my call to ministry. It will

always be my call to ministry. It is also the answer to my questions. Not everyone’s answer. My answer. My answer is distinct from Job’s. Job got an answer that basically put him in his place (Job 40:4-5). I suspect that is what Job ultimately needed. But the words that God spoke to each of us, that is only part of the answer we were given. The unspoken answer was the same for both of us.

God is with us. Always. “My ears had heard about you,” Job finally said to God, “but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I relent and find comfort on dust and ashes” (42:5-6).

Ultimately, that is the most satisfying answer of all. It is all we need. We may not recognize it in the heat of days; but when we experience it, we are humbled, we are silenced, we are awestruck. And we never have to question the existence of God again.

It becomes enough to know that there is a God, a God who loves us enough to walk with us through life. There is a God who loves enough to be whirlwind and whisper, to found the universe and care for the sparrow. There is a God who loves enough to become human, walk beside us, experience pain, and reveal that death is defeated.

There are many answers for why there is evil in the world. Some of them are more helpful than others. None of them does away with evil. None of them is ultimately satisfactory. There are also many answers for the role God plays in good and evil. None of them compares to actually encountering God. And even in those encounters, like for Job, the fullness of God’s reality is impossible to comprehend.

We will not know, we cannot know, and that is okay. It’s what makes God God and us not. *Who* God is—that is not the answer we need. *That* God is—that is the answer we need. And the rest of that

answer, that no matter what, God is with us, is all we ever need to know.

*How does knowing God provide all the answers to the questions we have?*

**Lord of all the universe, great and small, we are forever thankful  
that you love us and are always with us; in Jesus' name we pray.  
Amen.**