

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our living redeemer, Jesus Christ, amen.

We're now in the third week of reading through the Book of Job. The first week we read chapter one and saw that chapter, along with chapter 2 constituted a sort of folk tale where Job lost everything except his life and the tale was that he still worshipped God. The overriding question from these first 2 chapters asked was this: Does Job worship God for nothing, or does Job worship God because of what Job gains from God in terms of his personal blessings? If all we read was chapters 1 and 2 we'd have a pretty flat view of what it means to suffer loss and to experience the pain of griefpain.

Last week we heard more from Job and his friend Eliphaz. As the Book abruptly moved from a narrated folk tale to a genre called Wisdom Dialog there is an explosion of ideas. Job complains about his suffering and curses the days of his conception and his birth. Although we only read from Eliphaz's portion of the dialog, the friends suggestions can be summarized and categorized. They are usually thought of as being bad or even evil friends, mostly because at the end of the Book that's what God says about them. If we slow down and look at their ideas, we see they actually quote mainline religious thoughts. They rely on and quote parts of Deuteronomy, the Psalms, and from Proverbs. They talk to Job about his piety, telling him to pray to God and everything will be okay. They

suggest Job may have limitations about what he knows to be true. They say Job doesn't know everything about God since God is largely a mystery and belief in God relies on faith. They go on to say perhaps Job has sinned and just doesn't know that he has sinned. These together summarize the friend's claims.

Now we move onto Job himself. One thing I noticed is that Job's speeches are oriented differently than the friend's speeches. The friends talk about God. They advise Job to pray harder, but they never pray themselves. When Job is at his lowest point he talks directly to God, we call that prayer. Now, what he says, the actual words, we might find surprising at the least and blasphemous at worse. In his pain over the losses he experienced, Job doesn't cast his ire on those who killed or stole his livestock. He doesn't curse the tornado or blame Mother Earth or mankind for Climate Change. Instead he casts all his sorrow, grief, pain, and his anger and blame onto God.

I don't know if you've ever been that low, I hope not and I pray you never do get that low, but most people have or will hit rock bottom at some point in their lives. I've been where Job is. I mean I know Job has lost much more than I have, but still I've seen times when I was overwhelmed with grief and loss. I've been at the bottom and rather than look at the experiences and trying to figure out what's really happening and what or who or why these things are happening, I know what it's like to shake my fist in anger at God. I think there's something therapeutic

about releasing all of our complaints and anger toward God. It allows us to let it go without directing it toward our neighbor, or God forbid against our families and friends. In the end, and I hope I'm not revealing too much about how the Book ends, God says the friends are bad and evil, but commends Job. God hears all of our prayers, even the ones that blame God for our suffering and God sort of absorbs it when we punch God on the chin...

The next thing I notice about Job is his ability to hold to completely opposite experiences of God in constant tension. It's as if both opposite ends of the spectrum are equally true and valid. Job says God is at one and the same time both totally hostile and unfair and still our only source for hope and justice. Job struggles between these two opposites and I believe that's a pretty common struggle. We tend to define God by our own experiences of God. In Job's life, he experienced God as the one who provided blessings and the gifts of good things, but also when those good things were taken away, Job experienced God as the unfair and unjust God. I wonder how much our own experiences of life shape our description of God... Was Job's experience accurate for most people? When Job experiences the hostile, unjust and unfair God, his pain is overwhelming, even for his friends. For any of us who have experienced great loss, even though not as great as Job's, our pain and suffering seems overwhelming. As the Book of Job moves along we discover no matter how overwhelming our suffering feels, there is

more to the universe than our pain. Our suffering is so great and so overwhelming, but it's not everything. That's why Job keeps coming back to God as the source of hope and redemption. He somehow knows that as heavy as his suffering is, and in chapter 6, verse 3 Job says it's heavier than all the sands of the seas, yet it is not everything... God is still greater than his pain and God is so much greater than all the pain you and I carry around with us all the time.

In Chapter 7 Job's speech changes and he begins to address God. This morning we have some of Job's Lament. Scholars suggest some parts of Job are parodies or even opposites of other parts of scripture. For example, Psalm 34, verse 8 says, "taste and see that the Lord is good." We often use that line as an invitation to Holy Communion. Job might answer back, "I've tasted and the Lord ain't always so good!" Even when good comes in the end, it doesn't negate the pain and suffering that brought us to that good. Even when Jesus was resurrected and after he had been to heaven, when he came back to show himself to the disciples he still had the marks in his hands, his feet, and his side. The glory of Easter doesn't erase Jesus' lament from the Cross, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?"

Talking about the Book of Job is so timely right now. It's so easy to draw comparisons between what happened to Job and what is happening in our society today. Here's what I mean. Most of us believe America is this great land of

opportunity where hard work is paid off with success. We call it the American dream. How many of you were told or have told you children or grandchildren they could do and be whatever they set their minds to if they work hard. Probably all of us have had something like that said to us or we've said it to our young ones. When we taste America it tastes sweet and good. I didn't say easy, without trouble, or perfect, but good. On the other hand there are many people of color who have a different taste in their mouths from this great country. They have been stopped and questioned just because they have dark skin. They were born in neighborhoods where the schools were more like retail drug outlets than places of learning. The only opportunities they had were those given to them by the gangs that rule the streets. It's the same country, but the two groups experience it in vastly different ways. Job's friends are quick to defend God against Job's accusations. Most of us have experienced the American dream as a land that is mostly just, the land of the free and home of the brave and so, we rush to defend America against those who question America's values and our system of justice. My advice for all of us is to sit in the tension of both worlds. Let the disruption of some of these protests sink in for a while. Listen to the Wisdom Dialog between Black Lives Matter and the experiences we've had in the same America. The Bible presents us with many differing perspectives about God and our human relationship with God. Job's speeches and his answers back to his friend's

platitudes and defences of God border on blasphemy. Yet I think we'll find in the end, for all his anger and frustration, for all his grief and blaming of God, Job is not smited nor punished, but rather he is the one whom God vindicates. Even at his worse, when he's accusing God of being totally hostile and unjust, even unloving toward humans, God says Job acted rightly. You see, all the while, Job's friends talk "about" God, like lot's of Pastors I know, and not directly "to" God. Job, on the other hand many times turns to God directly. What great movement of faith. Speaking directly to God shows Job kows God is real and alive. It shows Job believes God exists and listens to us and is mindful of mere humans beings. I wish I spent more time talking to God than about him. If I did, then maybe my life would be much better off. I could release all those grudges and all the ill feelings I keep suppressed way down under the surface and live my life free from the excess baggage I carry around.

May we all learn to turn to God and talk directly to him, even when the words are harsh and our feelings are raw. May we never be afraid to express our dismay as well as our praise to the one God who is certainly big enough to handle our criticism. Job may have wished his words were written in stone, but they were written is something even pore permanent, Holy Scripture. May your load be lifted when you can say through all your suffering and pain, I know my redeemer lives!
Amen.