

23:1 Job answered: 2 Today my complaint is again bitter; my strength is weighed down because of my groaning. 3 Oh, that I could know how to find him— come to his dwelling place; 4 I would lay out my case before him, fill my mouth with arguments, 5 know the words with which he would answer, understand what he would say to me. 6 Would he contend with me through brute force? No, he would surely listen to me. 7 There those who do the right thing can argue with him; I could escape from my judge forever.

8 Look, I go east; he's not there, west, and don't discover him; 9 north in his activity, and I don't grasp him; he turns south, and I don't see. ... 16 God has weakened my mind; the Almighty has frightened me. 17 Still I'm not annihilated by darkness; he has hidden deep darkness from me.

This is our middle sermon in a three part series about the book of Job, which is the classic book in the Bible (although, as we shall see momentarily, not the only book in the Bible) that teaches us about the issue of suffering, and the question, **“Why do good people suffer?”**

Last week's introductory sermon dealt largely with the character of the Satan, known to the people of the First Testament, not so much as a Tempter, but as the ACCUSER, much in the role of a Prosecuting Attorney, who went to and fro on the earth, accusing people of their shortcomings, prodding them into IF/THEN kinds of thinking (“**IF** you're good enough, **THEN** you would do such and such”)

Let me briefly review the circumstances of the plot – for the people who put together the Lectionary have not set forth the whole Job story in our Biblical text read during worship.

Job is this righteous man, who enjoys much prosperity in life. The Satan accuses: If he's so good, let's see if he still praises you, God, if we were to take away his material wealth. Voila! Wealth gone; still righteous. Satan, not satisfied, says, But if you take away his health, then he will not continue to be righteous; he's only in it for the goodies. So, Job is left with running, itching sores.

His wife tells him to curse God and die. Then Job's friends come to console him. After listening to him lament for awhile (actually they do so for SEVEN DAYS in silence – 2:13) they begin to chastise Job. They offer to Job what is the **prevailing sentiment/theology of the day**: **IF YOU SUFFER, THEN YOU MUST HAVE DONE SOMETHING BAD. GOD DOESN'T PUNISH GOOD PEOPLE. You are hiding something, Job. You must**

have been bad, in order to deserve this. The theological debate between each of the three friends and Job is what fills chapters 3 through 31.

For his part, Job neither gives in to his wife's demand to give up on God, nor does Job give up on his own claims of righteousness. Instead, he becomes pretty adamant that **what he wants** is an **audience with God**, although he really asks for something more **like a courtroom confrontation** – where he can accuse God of having treated him unjustly, making him suffer when he has done nothing to deserve it.

Such a protestation – demand for a face to face confrontation – forms our text today.

This book in the Bible specializes in what Biblical and Theological scholars call the **THEODICY question**. (That is your big word for the month – if you get into a religious debate with friends or at work, you can impress them with it: “THEODICY.”

It's about a dilemma: **Either God is all good, or God is all powerful. God can't be both, or bad things wouldn't happen to good people.** That's the THEODICY issue. A **big word it may be**; an **issue divorced from almost everyone's life, it is not.**

That's the substance of the book of Job. And, just as I promised last Sunday, we will get to the answer to that question which has haunted people for centuries. You've got to come back for one more Sunday, however, to get the final answer. (That's how sermon series work.)

In the **Biblical book of Ecclesiastes**, in perhaps the most well known portion of that book (thanks to the Byrds' song, Turn, Turn, Turn) we are told **“for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under the heavens.”** (3:1)

That applies to today's sermon, as we look at **Job**, who **illustrates that there really is a TIME FOR COMPLAINING**. It **really is OK to do so**.

Now, **some of you** are going to sit back, and relax, and say, **“Oh, good, I've got it made.”** There are **others who are going to sit up a little bit stick backed**, and

say, “Oh no! I’ve got to tough it out, and suffer quietly.” **Much** (although not all) **of that difference will *tend to be* cultural or denominational.**

In a Bible class here a few years back, one of the class members said pretty much those exact words: “Oh no! I’ve got to tough it out, and suffer quietly.” I knew she had been a cradle Methodist, so I said, “Tell me is your heritage German or English?” She looked at me rather surprisedly, then said, “English.”

Stereotypes are always broad brush strokes and we have to be very careful how we use them. I **ONLY** bring this stereotypical observation up now to indicate that many of us have **REASONS BEYOND JUST OUR FREEDOM OF CHOICE** that shape who we are. We all carry these **PARENTAL, CULTURAL TAPES THAT PLAY IN OUR HEADS**, and make us think that they are true.

Well, Job’s friends had such tapes, as well. And their tapes said, If you suffer then you deserve it.

Usually – regardless of who are your parents or tribe – **when people confront what they view as unwarranted suffering** – when it seems God is not acting like we sang about in the first hymn today -- **they usually will pick one of three responses:**

- (A) GIVE UP on God;**
- (B) MAKE EXCUSES for God; or**
- (C) BE HONEST with God.**

I’ve known people, and probably so do you, who have suffered some awful loss, such as lost a child to God in death, who have simply walked away from God. Quite frankly, I don’t argue with them. I can pretty much guarantee you that this is not going to do any good at all. Usually it takes time, prayer, loving attention, and God’s action to make a change there.

There are other people, who do just what Job's friends have done here: they head up the public relations department – making excuses for God. Surely YOU must have brought this on yourself. Surely YOU are to blame.

We still see this happen quite often. Watch any news story about some terrible suffering and eventually someone will get around to trying to blame the victim.

Then there is the Job response. Job is honest with God. He tells it how he sees it.

I told you at the beginning of this sermon that **Job is not the only book that deals with this issue.** The **Psalms** do as well. First Testament scholar **Walter Brueggemann**'s book on the Psalms says that there are basically three types of songs that are in the book: **(1) Psalms of Orientation** – much like our first hymn: God is good; do good and live well; **(2) Psalms of DISorientation** – Hey! Wait just a minute! I was good and I'm not living well! What's going on here!? Stop it, God! I mean it: stop it!! and then **(3) Psalms of REorientation** – how the person comes out on the other side of the experience of DISorientation. Sometimes these appear at the end of a psalm of disorientation.

Psalm 137 that we recited earlier in our worship is one of those Songs of DISorientation. The children of Israel have had their country overrun, their temple destroyed, their king's children killed in his presence, and then his eyes put out, so that the death of his own children was the last thing he ever saw, and then the people are taken into captivity. It is a horror that most of us cannot relate to. I only suggest: take **September 11, 2001** and **replay it day after day after day like a cosmic Groundhog Day Movie**, and then picture yourself taken into a strange land as a captive.

Psalm 137 is the Psalmist's dealing with that situation, that question of: "How we sing the Lord's Song in a strange land?" It is Job's question, too. And **How we sing the Lord's Song (as we have known it) in a foreign land (new circumstances) will have much to do with our faith development.**

When the Israelites asked that God would TAKE [THE BABYLONIANS'] LITTLE ONES AND SMASH THEM AGAINST A ROCK! were they **giving up on God?** Were they **making excuses for God?** Or **WERE THEY BEING HONEST WITH GOD?**

Yes, as uncomfortable as that scripture makes us feel, I am glad they put it into the Bible, because it shows us that BEING HONEST WITH GOD WITH OUR DIRTY, REVENGEFUL, NASTY FEELINGS is OK. It's of primary importance to BE HONEST with God.

The trick with being honest with God is to do it with HUMILITY. Oftentimes, we have more culpability that we often recognize. But – in a trade off, HONESTY is more important than HUMILITY.

When JESUS called out from the cross: MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME? He **was being honest with God.**

I know, there are **people who make excuses for Jesus' painful, suffering protest** from the cross – “Oh, He was just quoting from Psalm 22.” (Uh, do you think there was a reason He picked 22 instead of 23 –“the Lord is my Shepherd”?)

Jesus was fully human, and on the cross (where we say he took on human sins) he suffered not only the physical pain, but also the condition of sin – feeling separation from God. And He cried out: MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME? He was being honest with God.

The Psalm writers and singers may use offensive language, but one thing they don't do: **they don't give up on God.** They always allow God to be all powerful. They always accept that God is in charge. They always affirm their belief in God. **They keep real the relationship** – even when – AND ESPECIALLY WHEN – they use untidy language.

When you are dealing with God – **HONESTY is more important than POLITE!**

As a **RIGHTEOUS** man, Job had to **ARGUE AGAINST WHAT HE HAD BEEN TAUGHT ABOUT GOD.** **If Job had accepted the position of his friends, not because he believed it, but because it was the polite, orthodox way to do things, then his relationship with God would not longer be real.** It would be a plastic, platitude in a can that satisfied OTHER PEOPLE but not himself. **God would become a polite conversation partner, but not a personal companion.**

Sometimes you have to argue against **ORTHODOXY** in order to **ACCEPT** it.

When we remember how Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” it reminds us that **GOD joins in SUFFERING with us, and WILL BE WITH US, EVEN WHEN WE DON’T UNDERSTAND**

Now, I know I have to save something **from the end of Job**, to make sure that you come back next week. But let me leap ahead and tell you just one thing: When God does answer Job’s challenge and does show up, God has a few things to say. Let me tell you just one part of that today: **God does NOT reprimand Job for being honest with God. God DOES reprimand Job’s three friends for bowing down before the altar of orthodoxy and politeness. God finds the three friends at fault, and needful of forgiveness – NOT JOB.**

Our Hymn of Dedication is “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” Real friends are the ones that we can talk to, and be honest with. Last Sunday we talked about the Body of Christ being one in which people don’t act sinfully by always taking/finding offense – instead of working on unity. Good, fair, honest, communication with Jesus and with our sisters and brothers in the Body of Christ is what Jesus wants. It’s what Jesus empowers.

Don’t take offense at fellow humans; be honest with them about your feelings and work on the relationship.

Don’t be afraid of being honest with God. There’s nothing you can ever say to God that will make God stop loving you. **ONLY IF YOU INSULATE YOURSELF**

FROM GOD BY SOME HARD SHELL OF POLITENESS which is dishonest WILL YOU BE SEPARATED FROM GOD – and that will be by your own doing.

A woman that I used to work with – outside the church – had her husband taken away from her in death in really difficult circumstances. She was miserable. She never could get over her grief. I finally asked her once if she ever told God she was angry with God for taking her husband. (I pretty much knew the answer to my question, because I knew what denomination she belonged to – they teach that you're not allowed to do that.) She said, "Oh Rev'd Brown, I couldn't do that." (She also would never call me "Monty." Her religious background demanded that pastors not have first names, only titles.) I responded: you know, you may just never get over this until you get honest with God about your feelings. I know that I'm telling you something your church doesn't condone, but until you get honest with God and tell God how you really feel, you're going to feel separated from God and never get over your grief.

I'm happy to report that some years later, I encountered that same woman. She told me: "You know, Rev'd Brown, you were right. I had to be honest with God before God could help me be healed. Thank you." (Now, if only I could just get her to call me by my first name....)

My sisters and brothers, there's a SOMETIME for complaining. **With God, there is ALWAYS a need to be honest.**

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.