

Job and His Friends

Scripture: Job 2:11-13 & 3

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Morning Service**

“With friends like these who needs enemies.” I don’t know where that phrase originally came from, but I can see how it could be based on the book of Job. After all, here we have three friends of Job, coming to bring comfort in the time of his intense suffering, but instead of bringing comfort, they end up accusing Job of bringing all his suffering upon himself. It’s his own fault that he lost all his livestock, his children, and his health. What comforting words! The words of his friends intensified the suffering of Job and made matters worse. With friends like these who needs enemies?

We are all friends of a Job. If Job can represent those who suffer, then we are all friends of Job, because we know plenty of people who suffer. We have friends who suffer. And we want to help. That’s good and commendable. But we struggle in how to help. How do we respond when we see people suffer? How can we show God’s love and compassion? What should we say? What shouldn’t we say?

As a pastor, I am acutely aware of the dangers and pitfalls of providing pastoral care. I have seen people suffer, not just from physical illnesses—the hurts of life are far more than those obvious ones. I, too, struggle in knowing what to do and what to say, realizing that many people are looking to me as the one who should be able to say the right words, at the right time.

How do I, how do we, avoid becoming like one of Job’s friends, offering cold comfort? How do we deal with the suffering of others? How do we deal with it when suffering comes our way? How can we express the hope that we have in Jesus, without coming across as trite and clichéd? These are the questions I wrestle with on a continual basis.

This morning we begin to explore these questions through the arrival of the three friends of Job and the beginning of the conversation that develops. And while the three friends end up looking very bad, they actually begin with a very good response to Job's suffering. That's not to be overlooked. We can learn a lot from how these friends initially responded to the news of Job's suffering.

First of all, they showed up. They came and visited with Job. From their three different cities, they decided to get together and visit their good friend, Job. They showed up. They paid a strong interest in what had happened to Job. And it was their desire to comfort him. What a blessing that is.

As books on pastoral care relate, the most important thing a person can do for a hurting and suffering person is just showing up. It's showing a concern for the other person's well being. It really doesn't matter so much what you say, it's the very act of being there for another person that is comforting and is appreciated.

I call it the ministry of presence. It's just being there. At times, that's all what we can do. When real communication is no longer possible, because of Atzmiers, or when death is approaching and the body is shutting, then, the time for speaking is over. We can merely sit with the other person. It's a ministry of presence and it's a powerful act.

The three friends showed up. Secondly, they mourned with Job. They shared their grief with Job. The actions of verse 12—weeping aloud, tearing their robes, sprinkling dust on their heads—all of these actions were visible signs of mourning in the ancient world. They shared in the grief and sorrow of Job.

That too is a very important part of providing comfort. Our rituals of mourning are very different than in the days of Job, but we still have some—our times of visitation and funeral services—and all what they entail—these are very important steps in the grieving process. They provide a formal way for friends, family, and the community of faith to comfort each other and to stand by those who feel the loss so acutely.

These acts of mourning of the three friends reveal the importance of mourning and lament in the lives of believers. We can and should mourn and lament, when dealing with the hurts and suffering of life. No artificial "Praise the Lord" attitude required. We can lament before the Lord our God.

Third, these friends just sat with Job in silence. "No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was." There is often an awkward moment, when entering a room of a person fighting for his life. Our typical form of greeting, saying, "Hi, How are you are", is completely

out of place, yet so often spoken. But it's the unspoken communication of eyes that meet, the hands that touch, and the hugs that embrace that better convey our thoughts than any words we might express.

One grief counselor calls that moment, the “sacrament of silence.” There are times when words are inadequate, and actually intrude. Perhaps it's the moment of silence standing by the coffin at the visitation, or at the end of the graveside ceremony, but there are moments when silence is needed, when words intrude—when a hug and shedding a few tears is what is needed, rather than words.

The sacrament of silence. It can be hard to discern when silence is needed. I know there is always a pressure to say something. And eventually words will be needed. But at times, being there together in silence is what is needed.

Today, “Job's comforters” is a disparaging term. It's now a term to describe a person who discourages a suffering person, even though his intent is to comfort. But we often forget that until the conversations begin, Job's friends were truly his comforters—in the best sense of that word, and we can learn a lot from their simple actions of showing up, mourning, and simply sitting in silence with Job.

But then the silence was broken and the conversations began and that's when things go sour.

Job spoke first. That was appropriate. That was expected. The friends were waiting for Job to speak first, as was the custom in the ancient world. But they didn't expect to hear what Job said. I'm not sure what they expected to hear from Job. But considering all what Job lost—his business, his family, his health—surely, you could have expected some anger and resentment, surely you would have expected the question of “why.”

Maybe not the full torrent of anger and anguish that emerged from Job's lips. One commentator describes Job's opening speech, as the curse of “may” and the protest of “why”.

In the opening verses, Job curses the day he was born: May the day of my birth perish... may that night be barren. Thirteen times in these eight verses, we encounter that simple word, may. And with it, Job's anger. “Curses fly against the night of his conception, the day of his birth, the dawn of his existence.” The curse of “may.”

Then in verses 11 to the end of chapter three, he asks the “why” question. Why was I even born? Why are we given life, when we only experience such misery? Why? Sometimes it is the question of curiosity, like when a three-year old always asks, “Why, mommy?” But here the why is a

cry of despair arising from the injustice of his situation. The protest of “why.”

The curse of “may” and protest of “why” leads to Job’s conclusion: “I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil.”

What do you make of such a speech? How do you react to such bitter disappointment in life and in God? Are you shocked by these words of a God-fearing, righteous man? Job’s friends were and they were very quick to show their disapproval to his words.

And to be honest, I think most of us would be too. When we hear a suffering friend expressing his wish that he was already dead, we are quick to say, “No, don’t say that, you have so much to live for.” When a wife says she wishes was killed in the car accident that took the life of her husband, we are quick to respond, “But what about your children and grandchildren—they couldn’t bear to lose both of you.” And so, we quickly silence the other person. We deny their expression of hurt and pain. We want to clean up their theology and quickly move on to words of hope.

The curse of “may” and the protest of “why” are unsettling. They are unnerving. They verge at the edge of blasphemy, that is, they come close to cursing God—though Job never goes that far. Still, his bitterness, his anger, and his disillusionment, are not what we might have expected from a person so highly praised in chapter 1 for his faith and righteousness.

And yet, maybe they are to be expected, precisely from a man of faith. Oh yes, an unbeliever will also curse the presence of suffering and evil in our world. Sure, a non-Christian will protest the injustice, we see unfold before our eyes on a daily basis. But perhaps it is only a believer who can express these protests within the proper framework.

After all, the believer knows that God created the creation good and that the present state of affairs in our world, with its suffering and evil is not the way it is suppose to be. He knows that God remains in sovereign control over this creation, over the direction of history, and over our lives.

And so when Job reflects upon how his life has been completely turned upside down, he raises his protest. He asks his questions. He asks them in ways that are troubling and disconcerting. But the manner of his questions does not invalidate their underlying concern.

And that’s the problem with Job’s friends. They quickly overlook the pain expressed in Job’s words and they quickly want to correct Job’s theology. And they end up providing an alternative theology that is distorted and twisted and therefore fails to answer Job’s cry of anguish.

We do need to answer the curse of “may” and the protest of “why”. But we first of all need to hear the pain in the lament of Job. We shouldn’t

quickly silence the words of protest. We shouldn't quickly say: You can't say that. Yes, we may have to offer words of correction. Eventually, we'll have to make sure the lament is biblically grounded. But we first of all, need to appreciate and understand the feelings and emotions being spoken.

A person in his anger over his suffering, over an injustice he experienced, may just pick up his cup of coffee, throwing it against the wall, smashing the cup and staining the carpet. Our instinct may be to quickly say: You shouldn't have done that. Perhaps, a better response is to say nothing, but pick up the pieces and clean up the mess. And only after time, deal not with the action, but with emotions that lead to the actions.

Job's friends started off that way. They started off as true comforters. They showed up, they mourned, and they sat in silence with Job. And then as Job spoke, they should have responded, with the same type of attitude they began with. Perhaps then they would have comforted Job, not just with their initial actions, but also with their subsequent words.

Now as we seek to comfort those suffering in our circle of friends and family, we too will hear words of "may" and "why." But as we respond, we have an advantage over the friends of Job. Because we know something that Job and his friends did not. We know what is happening behind the scenes. In the particular case of Job, we know what happened in chapter one and two. We know about the wager between God and Satan. We know that ultimately, the question for Job is not a question of suffering, but a question of faith in the midst of suffering. We know the answer to Job's question of "why".

And we know the answer to broader question of what God is doing about all the suffering and evil in our world. We have the answer in Jesus Christ. In this season of Lent, we are reminded of Jesus' suffering and death. In the agony of the cross, Jesus too cried out his "why": "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

It's a question that will be answered with the empty tomb. And so in the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have God's answer to the problem of suffering. And this is the word of comfort, we can bring as friends to those who are suffering. But we can bring this word of comfort, only when we show up, only when we allow those who suffer to offer their words of lament. Amen.