

## *God, are you there?*

*Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Matthew 6:25-33*

On this day of Thanksgiving, we hear the struggle and suffering of Job, who is seeking to find God so that he can plead his case. So who was Job, you might be wondering? I never liked to assume that everyone knows the Old Testament stories, so let me give you a little bit of background:

Job was a very wealthy man from the land of Uz in northwest Arabia. He was a non-Israelite who was a faithful and devout follower of God. He's actually described as someone who was blameless. As someone who was an upright individual. He had seven sons, three daughters, lots of animals and servants, and he showed his devotion to God by making regular sacrifices to God, which in the Hebrew scriptures – the Old Testament – was very customary for people who worshipped God.

Now, one might wonder why Job needed to plead his case with God today, considering he had done everything right. Why was Job struggling so much – so much so that he was searching for God to plead his case?

Let me go back to the beginning: there was a meeting of God's council. And at this meeting, God was questioned by one of the heavenly beings – often thought to be Satan – though the Hebrew word in the scriptures is "ha-satan" which actually is translated as "The Accuser". The Accuser did not believe that Job was a good and noble person. Wasn't as good and noble as God made him out to be. The Accuser therefore decided to question Job's motives for being so good. The Accuser believed that Job was only doing good things because God kept giving him wealth and divine treasures. Basically, The Accuser was questioning Job's intentions. This was the moment when God and The Accuser struck a deal. God gave The Accuser permission to test Job – to see if Job was a loyal and as good as God had portrayed him to be.

In his first test, Job had all of his wealth and everything he held dear – including his children and his sheep – they were all taken away from him, leaving him with nothing. The Accuser thought that after losing everything, Job would yell at God or would say something bad about God. Even cry out to God. But Job did not.

The Accuser was not satisfied with this, so God agreed to let The Accuser also take away Job's health. Job ended up with all sorts of sores all over his body, leaving him with complete misery and suffering. Job, in that moment, suffered in silence. It was actually Job's wife who ended up getting mad. She went to Job and asked him, "Why are you putting up with this? You're a good

man. Why would God do this to you? Why is God torturing you?" And even Job's wife couldn't convince him to yell at God or get upset. She just didn't understand why he could be so understanding.

It became clear that Job did not do the things that he had done simply because he wanted divine reward. So we, therefore, shouldn't really be questioning his motives. Job accepted his suffering as a mystery because he had no other explanation. The passage we heard today is a response to one of his friends. In the Book of Job, the bulk of the book is the argument between Job and three of his friends, and I want to read a few verses from what his friends said, because I think it will help to give context to why he was so frustrated. His friend asked him:

"Can a mortal be of use to God? Can even the wisest be of service to God? Is it any pleasure to the almighty if you are righteous, or is it gain to God if your ways are blameless? Is it for your pity that God reproves you and enters into judgement with you? Is it not your wickedness, is it great? There is no end to your iniquities, for you have exacted pledges from your family for no reason, and you have been stripped naked of all the clothing."

Can you imagine your friend saying that to you? The Book of Job may not answer the hard questions. I mean, how many of you, like Job, are wondering, where is God in my life? Job, in that speech, wanted to meet God. He wanted to have the opportunity to plead his case. About what had happened to him, and how he really didn't feel that he deserved it. Job wants us to hear what God has to say about why this is happening. Job feels that in that moment, God is nowhere to be found. You heard in the scriptures that he looked right, he looked left, he looked behind him, he looked before him...but he could not find God. God had left him to fend for himself...or so it seemed. How many of you are like Job, wondering where God is in your life? How many of you feel that God has abandoned you in your time of greatest need? And how many of you were brought up believing that it is wrong to question God? That it's wrong to yell at God. For to do so would be a true sign of disrespect.

The Book of Job may not answer these hard questions, as I said. The questions of why people who are good, faithful followers end up suffering. Where is God in all of the suffering? Job's biggest challenge today is that he can't find God, wondering if God had abandoned him. Is Job meant to accept the idea that suffering is caused by his lack of faith? The answer is absolutely not. Job shows us that he will not suffer passively, and he refuses to abandon his faith. Questioning and arguing with God is actually an act of deep and abiding faith. When we ask God questions, we are actually turning to God, not away from God. If sin is defined as that which separates us from God, then questioning, pleading, and arguing with God is not a sin.

We see this played out in the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. How many times did the disciples question Jesus – what he was teaching and what he was doing? And yet, Jesus loved them still. Jesus was with them. But like Job, we need to trust in the promise of God's presence, even in suffering. The apostle Paul reminds us that in Jesus, nothing can separate us from the love of God. Therefore, we need not worry. And when we are suffering, that is precisely when we should turn to God.

So when and how has God been there for you in your time of greatest need? What have you, like Job, protested the justice of God, or the lack of perceived justice? It is precisely stories like Job that remind us that doubt is not necessarily an expression of sinful pride. Jesus is inviting us in the Gospel message from Matthew today to discover how we, like Job, can trust God with our whole hearts. Jesus points out in this passage that seeking instant gratification in life is not going to alleviate our anxiety and our worries. Jesus, in this passage, is seeking to shift people to one's reliance on God – not one's self-reliance. The reality is that Jesus actually understands how humans work. We all have a desire to be in control, and if you think you don't, I want you to think a little longer. Be honest with yourself. I know I love to be in control, and when I'm not, it freaks me out, and I'm filled with anxiety in those moments. When we are feeling that our life is out of control, we experience anxiety, we become overwhelmed...more often than not, it leads to very unhealthy destructive behaviours, such as manipulation, self-medication, greed, passiveness, depression, among others. What Job had obviously figured out, and what we need to come to understand is that Jesus is inviting us to live our lives in a different way. What happens when we choose God? To be with God, to follow God? On this weekend of Thanksgiving, we might want to believe that by choosing God, we will be showered in God's blessings. So just have enough faith and you will be blessed. But really, what Jesus is inviting us to do is to shift our focus. Barbara Essex writes:

“In God's community, people look out for each other. Share what they have. People take what they need and leave some for others. In God's community, people think about their neighbours, even as they think about themselves. This is where the miracle of God's care for God's people is discovered.”<sup>1</sup>

Thanksgiving is about giving thanks for what we have, but it's hard sometimes to rationalize this when we know that so many people in the world do not have enough. Like most holidays – as a colleague shared the other day – there is a shadow side. Not everyone has a list of things that they can be thankful for.

One of the ways that I think we are being called to give thanks today is through what we do and how we do it. Believing in God and having faith is only one piece of what it means to follow Jesus. Job did trust and have faith in God; he was steadfast in his faith, and what makes the story of Job so compelling was how he acted in faith. When those things were happening to him, he didn't lash out at other people. He didn't take it out on other people. He didn't hold more stuff for himself. He turned to God. And even after losing everything and being tortured, he again turned to God. He acted on his faith. How? By actually arguing with God, which I love. The truth is, there are moments in our lives when we feel God's presence deeply, and there are moments in our lives when we feel like God doesn't exist, and we struggle to find and feel God's presence. I wonder if in those moments, we would have better results if we cried out to God, instead of suffering in silence. I wonder what would happen if we lamented, as the psalmists do. In the story of Job, do we actually learn patience? Is that the point of it: to have the patience of Job? Or maybe, is God trying to teach us something different? Is God hoping that we will actually speak up? That we will question, that we will reach out to God, and maybe,

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Essex, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 406

instead...work on our persistence? To never give up on God? To never give up on ourselves or each other?

On this day of Thanksgiving, I hope that your faith allows you to speak your truth, to speak freely to God. To say what it is that you need to say – whether it is about what you are thankful for or what you are upset about. Take it to God. When you are in a relationship with someone else – which we are with God and with one another – we need to be open and honest. We need to share what is actually going on in our lives, in order to create a deep and intimate relationship. That is what we are called to do, and I hope that you will do it with gusto. With the persistence of Job, not just the patience. Go out into this world and speak to God freely, friends. Amen.