



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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“The Wisdom of Grief”

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Ben Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church

On September 15, 2024, from Job 1 & 2

“Obliterate the day I was born. Blank out the night I was conceived! Let it be a black hole in space. May God above forget it ever happened. Erase it from the books! May the day of my birth be buried in deep darkness, shrouded by the fog, swallowed by the night. And the night of my conception—[let] the devil take it! Rip the date off the calendar, delete it from the almanac. Oh, turn that night into pure nothingness—no sounds of pleasure from that night, ever! May those who are good at cursing, curse that day. Unleash the sea beast, Leviathan, on it. May its morning stars turn to black cinders, waiting for a daylight that never comes, never once seeing the first light of dawn. Why? Because it released me from my mother’s womb into a life with so much trouble. Why didn’t I [just] die at birth, so my first breath would be my last?”¹

These are the words spoken by Job after losing everything, breaking seven days and seven nights of silence. They are the words of a man who was grieving so hard, he came to curse the day he was born. Job lost his oxen, donkeys, and sheep, his servants, his sons and daughters, his wealth, health, his family, and even his wife to a degree, as he lost her respect. And for a time, Job lost his will to live. It can happen to any of us or the people we love, because life is hard, and the mind is a fragile thing. Hemmingway once wrote “The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.” A lot of preacher types like to end the quote here on a hopeful note. But Hemmingway continues, “Those that [the world] will not break it kills. It kills the very good, the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these, you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.”²

This year our church has experienced incredible loss. Beloved long-time church members like Franchaska Quick, Susan Zanghi, Stuart Dickson, Bill Snipes, Mary Lou Buck, Barbara Herring, Caroline Tate, and more, have died this year. And our summer has been bookended by the sudden and tragic deaths of two of our minister’s spouses: Neal Chewning and Tori James. It has been too much! We’re asking questions like “My God, why have you forsaken us?”, and “How long, O Lord, will this continue.” As a staff and a church, we’re grieving, we’re hurting, and we’re trying to come to grips with these losses that have changed our lives. Where do we turn?

No other story in the Bible, or history, has given voice to the grief, loss, pain and despair of human life more powerfully than the book of Job. It may be why Job has been described as the “defining myth of Western civilization.”³



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This epic tale has captivated imaginations for thousands of years, inviting countless people to wrestle with its themes of suffering, faith, doubt, loss, God's justice, the problem of evil, and the most confounding realities of human existence. Most prominent figures in Western thought have felt drawn to the story of Job.

Early Christians, like Augustine, saw the story as a metaphor for resurrection. Gregory the Great believed Job was about perseverance in the face of suffering. Maimonides saw Job as a critique of traditional religion. Aquinas used Job to extoll God's providence. Calvin, on the other hand, contended that Job demonstrated God's providence is unknowable.

The famous line quoted in Handel's Messiah, "I know that my redeemer lives," led Job to be used in burial liturgies, music, and folklore for generations and the story of Job has inspired great works of art and literature from Milton, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Kant, William Blake, H.G. Wells, Robert Frost, to Elie Wiesel, and "Fiddler on the Roof." Both Karl Barth and Carl Jung thought Job was a precursor to the gospels, foreshadowing the need for a messiah. Gustavo Gutiérrez argued Job is about the unjust suffering of the poor. And following in the footsteps of many before him, Rabbi Harold Kushner believed Job was a theodicy that confronted the problem of evil with the age-old question "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

While the story of Job has become many things to many people throughout history, it is first and foremost a book about wisdom that falls squarely within the ancient near eastern tradition of wisdom literature that dates to the Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures of the 3rd millennium BC. There are two genres of wisdom literature. The first consists of statements by sages and the wise that offer teachings about prudence, morality, and divinity as we find in the book of Proverbs. The other genre is existential works that deal with the relationship between man and God, reward and punishment, and the problems of suffering and evil. The protagonist is often a "just sufferer" or a good person beset by tragedy, who tries to understand their lot in life in relationship to the divine. Job is obviously the most famous of the second genre, but it was preceded by stories like the *Babylonian Theodicy*, the *Akkadian Poem of the Righteous Sufferer*, and the *Sumerian Dialogue Between a Man and His God*.

After generations of other interpretations, it is difficult for us to think about the story of Job as a form of wisdom literature. We wonder, "What does wisdom have to do with death and loss, grief and mourning, pain and suffering?" Smack in the middle of the book of Job, there is an entire chapter dedicated to wisdom—an ode to wisdom, which uses beautiful poetic language to proclaim that wisdom cannot be searched for or mined like gold, gems, or precious metals. It cannot be found in the depths of the earth or the depths of the sea. In addition, wisdom is not a commodity that can be bought and sold or stored up like wealth and riches.



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Even more disconcerting, the poem in chapter 28 contends that only God knows the way to wisdom and where it can be found. Wisdom is inaccessible to human beings, hidden from our eyes, impossible to find in the land of the living. So, Job is a story of wisdom and a critique of wisdom at the same time, because traditional wisdom cannot hold up in the face of suffering and death. Grief makes traditional wisdom into nonsense.

The writer of Job sings out, ‘But where shall wisdom be found? Where does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding? Mortals do not know the way to it, and it is not found in the land of the living. It is hidden from the eyes of all people and concealed from the birds of the air. Death and Destruction say, ‘We have heard a rumor of wisdom with our ears’... Truly, the reverence of God, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil, that is understanding.” There is a curious line in this beautiful poem. Why would death and destruction hear rumors of wisdom that only God knows how to find? Perhaps it is because of their causal relationship to grief and suffering. The father of the Greek tragedy, Aeschylus, was instructive on this. “The one who learns must suffer,” he wrote, “And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, wisdom comes to us by the awful grace of God.” (repeat) It is not that grief can lead to wisdom, but that grief itself is its own kind of wisdom that transcends the wisdom of the world and brings us as close as we can get to the inaccessible wisdom of God.

The Peruvian poet, César Vallejo, was considered by some to be “the greatest twentieth century poet in any language” and Thomas Merton called him, “the greatest universal poet since Dante.” Vallejo crafted an extraordinary poem about the God who weeps for Creation and who grieves with all of us:

I feel God journey with me,
when the sun sets on the sea,
together we walk as it grows dark.
We are all together but walk like orphans.
But I feel God and he gives color
to my life. He is kind and sad,
like those who attend the sick and dying.
He whispers like a lover in distress.



His heart must hurt for his creation.

Oh, my God, though I have just come to you,

I love so much as it grows dark,

and in the balance within the heart,

I weigh and weep for frail Creation.

And you, what do you weep for...you who love

with your immense and whirling heart?

I consecrate you, God, because you love so much.

because you never smile, because your heart

must ache as time continues.

If God is love, that necessarily means that God grieves, because grief is just another word for the love we have for that which is lost. If God is love, that means that God's grief is greater and deeper than anything we could ever imagine. If God is love, then our grief does not separate us from God, but draws us more closely, because no matter how deep our grief, God's love is deeper still.⁴ It is because of God's grief that the Psalmist can say, "God is near to the brokenhearted" There no answer to the problem of suffering other than this: God is always with us in our grief.

After tearing their robes, covering themselves in ashes, and weeping aloud, Job's friends sat with him in silence for seven days. In so doing they were the presence of God with Job amid his suffering and grief. If only they'd kept their mouths shut or heeded the advice of Ludwig Wittgenstein who ended his magnum opus with the words, "Where one cannot speak, there one should be silent." But those of you who know the story will remember that for the next twenty chapters, Job's friends proceeded to theologize and philosophize about Job's suffering, which is exactly the opposite of what people need when they're grieving. His friends imagined that they were wise enough to explain his suffering, but they only added to his pain.



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Job's friends did not throw around the trite or horrifyingly insensitive clichés like we do today like “Everything happens for a reason,” or “God needed an angel,” or “When God closes a door, he opens a window,” or “God never gives us more than we can handle;” forms of theological malpractice designed to make us feel better that do nothing for the grieving. Job's friends were serious scholars who developed well-formed arguments rooted in the most advanced theology of the time to explain why Job lost everything. In their day, the highest form of wisdom was that our relationship with the divine was determined by system of reward and punishment, therefore all the arguments of Job's friends came down to one point: Job or his ancestors must have sinned or done something to deserve this. Today we'd call this the “prosperity gospel” of health and wealth that proclaims if you believe the right things and do the right things, God will grant you material blessings. It is the same old religious system of reward and punishment that existed in the ancient near eastern world thousands of years ago, and the entire book of Job was written to prove that this is not true wisdom at all, but toxic nonsense that has no word for those who are suffering, but simply justifies the status quo and sanctifies the powers that be.

There is an egotistical hubris in the certainty of Job's friends, who overestimate their wisdom. Their arguments fall flat in the face of Job's grief and suffering, and they are not the ones who God speaks to out of the whirlwind. Through their prideful theologizing, Job's friends speak about God. But in grief, Job speaks to God, like a prayer. This is the wisdom of grief, which no theology or philosophy can contend with or explain. Grief is the primal, raw, and unrefined truth of human existence, which is a deep and profound wisdom that all the libraries, encyclopedias, philosophy, religion, and self-help books in the world can only scratch the surface. Grief knows what nothing else can know, because grief knows what God knows.

Grief knows that death and loss are an inevitable part of human existence and that life itself is fragile and fleeting, a precious gift. Grief knows that we are not in control of our lives, other people, or the universe, so we must humbly acknowledge our limits and dependence on others. Grief knows that life cannot be forced or hurried, and that our body's rhythm is the only path. Grief knows that what is most important in life cannot be bought or sold, our relationships are everything and compassion is paramount. Grief knows that we are not promised another hour, so we should be present in every moment and seize the day. Grief knows there is not one way to live, all of us are flawed and imperfect, and forgiveness is our only salvation. Grief knows that we should be true to ourselves because everyone else is taken. Grief knows that our past must be reckoned with in the present or our future will be more of the same. Grief knows that when everything else is stripped away, love is all that remains, because love is the only force that has the power to transcend death.



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There's a film from 2017 called *The Meyerowitz Stories*, which follows a group of estranged and dysfunctional adults who are trying to live in the shadow of their grumpy and disinterested father who happens to be a famous professor and renowned sculptor. They gather in New York City for an event celebrating their father's artistic legacy, which does not go well and eventually during their trip their father is hospitalized with chronic subdural hematoma. Even after a life in which this father has caused so much pain and suffering, hurt feelings, estrangement, and bitter resentment, at the very end, a grieving son whispers into his dying father's ear the ho'oponopono prayer: a simple Hawaiian practice of reconciliation and forgiveness. He repeats it over and over again: "I'm sorry, please forgive me, thank you, I love you. I'm sorry, please forgive me, thank you, I love you. I'm sorry, please forgive me, thank you, I love you." Grief gave this son the wisest words that could be spoken, which are often both the simplest and the hardest words to say.

Job was vindicated as the wisest human being in this story because of the way he grieved, but there was one thing he got wrong. It would not have been better if he had never been born. Despite all his sufferings, Job's life was a gift to the world. The same is true of each of us. The world would be a lesser place if any of us had never lived or were not here. Every single human life that has ever existed on this earth is a sacred, unique, singular, irreplaceable, unrepeatable creation of infinite value, worth, and dignity; fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of the living God. Every one of us is a beloved child of God in whom God is well pleased, and the world would not be the same without us no matter who we are, what we've lost, how much we've suffered, where we've faltered, or when we've failed. Every person has a story and a song that must be honored because it bears unparalleled gifts for us and the rest of the world. We are here to bear witness to each other's lives and to celebrate the beautiful diversity and goodness of all our fellow human beings.

Grief unites us with God and the sufferings of the world, which is why Rumi said, "Grief can be the garden of compassion. If we keep our hearts open through everything, pain can become our greatest ally in your life's search for love and wisdom." All the theology, philosophy, in the wisdom of the world can't stand in the face of pure unadulterated grief. It is a wisdom that transcends all other modes of knowledge because it is the school of love for the people and things we've lost. Words fall deaf before it, whirlwinds bow down to it, and the world must respect it. Grief is the wisdom we practice with God and each other as we walk through a life of suffering and death, chaos and destruction. We don't try to pretend we're not grieving. We don't try to philosophize our pain. We don't try to explain it away. We try to hold on to each other, to weep with each other, to sing with each other, and to dance with each other through the painful mystery of life while repeating the same ten words over and over again: "I'm sorry, please forgive me, thank you, I love you."