

I Will not Restrain My Mouth

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
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First Sunday of Lent – Year B
Job 7



When I was pastoring a church in Alabaster, Alabama, a horrific thing happened. Kim and I and our two young children were vacationing on a beach when we got a message that Scott Yancy, a young adult in our church, had been shot and killed in a mass shooting in his work place. A disgruntled former employee had returned to the place where he was fired from only a few days before. Scott was one of the people he killed.

We rushed back to Alabaster, and I walked into a house full of people in complete shock. My seminary training kicked in. I remember my pastoral care professor saying over and over again that in the foothills of that kind of grief, tread lightly and quietly. I cried with them. I embraced them. When they asked how such a thing could happen, I did not answer with anything other than, "I don't know." When they were angry with the murderer, I listened and offered words of understanding. When they were angry with God, I granted space for that anger to find expression and did not try to change or explain. I felt, under the circumstances, I did as well as I could.

Many weeks later, Scott's mother came into my office at the church and asked if she could talk. We sat across from each other, face to face, and she said, "I want to know why this happened. You've been wonderful to us, but I'm done with the church and I'm done with God if I can't get an answer to why God would allow such a thing to happen. I don't want to hear 'It's a mystery.' I don't want to hear silence. I need an answer."

I sat across from her scared to death. My professors had not prepared me for this. I remember answering her with a statement that the one thing I believed about God that was most true was that God is love, but I could not answer how one can square that belief with the fact of her son dead in the ground from a gunshot, and I wouldn't dare try. I don't know that it was enough; in fact, I'm quite sure it wasn't, but she hugged me hard after the conversation and kept showing up to church.

But the look in her eye and that conversation never left me, and it lies at the root of this project I am doing for my doctorate. It is based on faith and suffering and assumes that sooner or later, the next day is going to come for those who suffer, once they have had time to get over the shock, if they are persons of faith, they are going to want to know where God is in all of this. And it is part of the calling of the church, its ministers and members, to be able to create space for those questions, and to try, humbly and carefully, to venture a response.

But this is not easy. There are so many wrong things you can say in the face of Job, so many ways to be one of Job's friends, full of explanations, but no real comfort. Kate Bowler, in describing her struggle with Stage IV colon cancer, talks about many of these responses she heard first-hand. "The minimizers are those who think I shouldn't be so upset because the significance of my illness is relative. These people are very easy to spot because most of their sentences begin with, 'Well, at least...' My sister was on a plane to Toronto to visit me in the hospital and told her seatmate why she was traveling. The stranger explained that my cancer was vastly preferable to life during the Iranian revolution."

Closer to home for me, Bowler says some people minimize spiritually by "reminding me that cosmically, death isn't the ultimate end. It doesn't matter, in the end, whether we are here or there. It's all the same, said a woman in the prime of her youth. She emailed this message to me with a lot of praying-hand emoticons. I am a professor at a Christian seminary, so a lot of Christians like to remind me that heaven is my true home, which makes me want to ask them if they would like to go home before me. Maybe now?"

And even closer to our text for today, she describes someone who told her she hoped she had a "Job" experience. "I can't think of anything worse to wish on someone. God allowed Satan to rob Job of everything, including his children's lives. Do I need to lose something more to learn God's character? Sometimes I want every know-it-all to send me a note when they face the grisly specter of death, and I'll send them a poster of a koala that says, "Hang in there!"

Rabbi Irving Greenberg was a survivor of the Holocaust, and had witnessed first-hand the atrocities of the Nazis against the Jews and many other groups of people considered undesirable. He also had heard all manner of explanations for this devastation, reasons why God would allow, or stay silent, while God's own people were being slaughtered. In a book called "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire," he wrote, "Let us offer then, as a working principle, the following: No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children."

That's a high bar. It reaffirms my professor's admonition to walk with people who are suffering, treading lightly and quietly.

Job's presence in the pages of our scriptures issues a similar set of invitations to anyone who takes seriously the problem of suffering. The problem of suffering can be stated simply – if God is all-powerful and God is good, why is there suffering in the world? Either God is good, but does not have the power to enact that goodness in the world God created; or God is all-powerful and therefore chooses not to stop suffering in the world, which means God is not good. That is the problem, and millennia of efforts to resolve it have not succeeded, nor do I believe I will solve it in this series of sermons.

But I think we must eventually speak. I think many people – not all, but many – do want to place their suffering, as they do every other aspect of their living, in the context of God.

Looking back, if I had the conversation to do all over again, I would have said a little more. I would have said, "Let's read Job together. I think his questions are your questions and his prayers your prayers."

Job is the place to start when considering suffering. It is a book that takes on a belief that remains with us in many ways: that if you are holy and righteous before God, God will reward you with health and life and good fortune, but if you are not, God will punish you for your sin. Job stands as a counterpoint to such a way of thinking about God, since Job is a righteous man who endures suffering. His friends come to him to reinforce the theology that says he is suffering because he has sinned.

Job does not have the answer to his suffering and he seeks it by engaging in the rawest, most honest prayers you can find in scripture. He rejects his friend's easy, theologically correct but cruel answers. He names his pain before God and in the hearing of those who seek to give him comfort. He sees his life not as a child of God "a little lower than the angels," as Psalm 8 puts it, but rather as a slave, a day-laborer, who lies down and tosses and turns in the night, and whose days are toilsome. He watches his life speed away, and fears it will come to an end without hope.

In the midst of that honest cry, he makes a bold statement to God – "Therefore, I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul."

He uses irony to turn Psalm 8 on its head. Who are human beings, that you are mindful of them? asks the psalmists, "yet you have made them a little lower than the

angels and crowned them with honor.” No, says Job, “What are human beings, that you make so much of them, that you set your mind on them, visit them every morning, test them every moment? Will you not look away from me for a while...?”

“Why have you made me your target?”

If I were Job’s pastor, I would want to find a way to say that his theology is lacking, in the mistaken assumption it would bring comfort. But perhaps the greatest comfort for him, and the first step toward words for the next day, is not to distance ourselves from him through platitudes or sound theology, but to sit with him in his pain, and, better yet, to let his prayer – visceral, honest, painful – become ours on his behalf. Maybe the first step toward words for the next day is to not restrain Job’s mouth, or ours, to name the pain before God, and the doubt, and the anger, and see it as a form of prayer.

In his forward to Ann Weems’s book of lament psalms, Walter Bruggemann, calls such language “protest spirituality.” It acknowledges that things are not as they should be, and names that before the God who we still acknowledge to be love and light.

This past week, the words “thoughts and prayers” were trending on Twitter, and not in a good way. In the aftermath of the mass shooting at a high school in Florida, when others expressed “thoughts and prayers,” there was a big push back, saying we don’t need thoughts and prayers. We need action.

While I understand the sentiment, I think we as people of faith do not need to dismiss the power of prayer – what we may need to do is expand our understanding of prayer. Job is praying here, and his prayers sound a lot like the cries of anguish coming from Florida. They are directed to a God who hears our prayers, who can take our lament, our anger, our longing for action, and use it to deepen our connection to God and one another. In that way, prayer is a form of action, the root of action.

I don’t have the answer. I didn’t that day long ago when a grieving mother demanded one. But I believe that Job’s voice may be the beginning of a conversation on the way to a word for the next day for a world longing to hear it. Let us not restrain our mouth in these days, for the sake of the world, for the sake of Christ. Amen.