

**50 Days of Easter – Becoming New
Reflections on the book of Job
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These are pretty much my journal entries that I shared with my covenant group (of 8 other clergy guys) each day. I didn't do much editing, so some of it is rough and raw. Maybe a little like the book of Job!

Introduction:

The book of Job is the beginning of wisdom literature in the Bible.

To this point we have the Torah (first five books) which give us the origin stories of Israel. The creation, the covenants God makes with Abraham, the multiplication of Abraham's family to become Israel, the deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the formation of the people in the wilderness and giving of the law.

Next the stories of conquest in which Israel occupied Canaan and began to deal with temptation to worship competing gods. Eventually there were some pretty dark times when as Judges narrates "the people did what was right in their own eyes."

The prevailing theology to this point has been: "If you do what is right in God's eyes, obeying all God's commands, things will go well for you. If you don't, you will die." (This is sometimes referred to as Deuteronomic Theology).

Of course it never is quite that simple. As the time of Israel and Judah's Kings came along in 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings and 1&2 Chronicles, we clearly see King David emerge as Israel's favorite king. He often inquired of the Lord for direction before going out and killing a lot of people. Whereas, most of the other kings just did what was right in their own eyes. The truth about David, though, is he was far from perfect. Notably, he had an affair with Bathsheba and murdered her husband Uriah to try and cover it up. Nonetheless, there is a refrain in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) when it comes to the Kings...."there was no king as good as David."

In fact, it was the bad leadership of most of the kings that led to Israel's destruction and exile at the hand of Assyria and later, Judah's destruction and exile at the hand of the Babylonians.

Much of the Old Testament was written down during and around this time of exile. The people were trying to make sense of who they were, how they got to where they were, and what to do next in the midst of ruins all around.

A big answer to these questions is this: You have not been faithful to God. You have not kept God's law. You have worshipped other gods. And therefore you see, you have reaped what you have sown.

Sometimes life is like this. There is no way around the bad consequences for making bad decisions. There is no one to blame but ourselves.

AND... sometimes life isn't that simple. Sometimes we do the right thing, and because of that we suffer. And sometimes there appears to be no rhyme or reason to suffering.

I think Israel's wisdom literature is about their wrestling with this reality.

Was Job written to document a particular person's life? Was there an actual dude named Job and this is his historical account. Probably not. But this story was written to help make sense of many people's actual lives, including ours.

Let the story, be the story. Ask yourself, what picture is this painting about who God is? Who people are? And what our relationship is like? Allow for "both/and" thinking as you read. Recognize that this story wrestles with the reality that life is not simply black and white. Some people want to sell us this simple theology that much of the Bible to this point has affirmed: Do good and good things will come to you. But the book of Job allows us to be more truthful. In this way, God gives us grace to "become new."

Day 1 – Job 1-5

The book of Job invites wrestling and questioning as a way of being in relationship with God.

Some questions:

What is the spiritual value of abiding in places of discomfort and suffering? What may God like to say to me in those places?

Could it be that my life of privilege isn't a result of my righteousness, but either random or even a result of my unrighteousness?

Suffering without clear reason is a mystery that I want to try and explain, but I never can.

Job is both patient and faithful in suffering and also curses the day he was born. Both/And.

I say, "God can use the white church with its slave holder theology designed to maintain unjust status quo with a personal salvation for the soul." And I say, "It must be destroyed- God will have to do a new thing from outside this corrupt system. How can fresh water ever flow from a salt well?"

Jesus seems to walk straight through these questions as God incarnate, revealing that God isn't afraid of the worst. And God wants to both call out the hopelessness AND insist that nothing is hopeless.

Day 2 – Job 6-14

Job spills his guts in lament.

It would be better to die.

Friends who are well meaning with their advice and offers in the midst of suffering cannot save someone from their pain. Seems like Job's truth to his friends is: "at least admit that my suffering terrifies you. That might help." 6:21

It is profound how Job includes God in his suffering - not at all an act of atheism - but of intimate faith. Who else can I be so honest with other than the ones I trust the most?

"What are human beings, that you exalt them, that you take note of them, visit them each morning, test them every moment? Why not look away from me; let me alone until I swallow my spit?" Job 7:17-19

When Bildad speaks I hear all the well-meaning people who say, “There’s a reason for everything. And just keep the faith. Keep doing good.”

Job answers recognizing that God is transcendent cannot be understood. I think I’m innocent but I’m probably not. I’m terrified of talking to God about this, and I’m still going to talk to God about this.

Job’s lament in chapter 10. Up to this point we don’t see anything like this in the Bible. Again, raw and honest complaint to God recalling both what he knows of God and questions about the reality he is seeing and experiencing.

“Your hands fashioned and made me; yet you want to destroy me utterly.” Job 10:8

It may not get more honest than this...

“Why did you let me emerge from the womb? I wish I had died without any eye seeing me. Then I would be just as if I hadn’t existed, taken from the belly to the grave. Aren’t my few days coming to an end? Look away from me so I can brighten up a little” Job 10:18-20

Job feels like a fool. His faith in God has born the fruit of suffering. Jesus could relate to this. A faithful life isn’t supposed to bear fruit of humiliation. It is supposed to bear the fruit of great wealth, prosperity and power like King David.

“I’m a joke to friends who called to God and he answered; the innocent and blameless one is a joke,” Job 12:4

Job longs for death, but he won’t take his life. He believes that mortals die and do not live again. At least then he would not suffer anymore at a result of his own sin or anything else.

There is something beautiful and disturbing about being in the kind of relationship with God where you can say this:

“Water wears away boulders; floods carry away soil; you destroy a people’s hope.” Job 14:19

Day 3 – Job 15-21

I think about Jesus having read and known this story as he dealt with death threats and ultimately suffering and death while innocent.

Both God and the ungodly are implicated by Job in his suffering. A true lament as in Psalm 22.

“Now God has surely worn me out. You have destroyed my entire group, seized me, which became grounds for an accusation. My leanness rises to bear witness against me. His anger tears me and afflicts me; he slashes at me with his teeth. My enemy pierces me with his eyes. They open their mouths at me and strike my cheek in a taunt; they gang up on me. God delivers me to a criminal and forces me into the hands of the wicked.” Job 16:7-11

It is stunning how this abrasive friendship plays out between Job and his three “friends.” There has to be a high level of trust or a kind of sick sadomasochism going on between them. What a “covenant group?!”

This exchange from Job right before he marvels at how God lets the corrupt politicians of the world get away with all that they do...

“Bear with me so I can speak, I myself; and after my reply you can mock.” Job 21:3

The trouble I have is that people just leave me when they don’t like what I’m saying. In some ways that is a relief. I don’t welcome the mocking as much as Job I guess!

Day 4 – Job 22-31

Job’s friends cling to their Deuteronomic theology, insisting that if Job were to “return to the Almighty he would be restored.”

Job says, “Really??!! Tell me where I can find God ...

“Look, I go east; he’s not there, west, and don’t discover him; north in his activity, and I don’t grasp him; he turns south, and I don’t see.” Job 23:8-9 CEB

Given this, I’d think Job may just give up the conversation altogether. He doesn’t. Job believes that even in this mystery God is somehow present.

Isn’t it interesting how it’s possible to accuse God of being absent and also believe he is present?

Right after saying he doesn’t know where to find God Job says, “He carries out what is decreed for me and can do many similar things with me. Therefore, I am scared by his presence; I think and become afraid of him. God has weakened my mind; the Almighty has frightened me. Still I’m not annihilated by darkness; he has hidden deep darkness from me.” Job 23:14-17

Again, Job implicates God with evidence that God is ignoring the oppressed in chapter 24. This made me think about the things I’ve read from Ta-Nehisi Coates who sees no hope for faith in God leading to justice, given the 450 years of oppression black people have experienced.

“The orphan is stolen from the breast; the infant of the poor is taken as collateral. The poor go around naked, without clothes, carry bundles of grain while hungry, crush olives between millstones, tread winepresses, but remain thirsty. From the city, the dying cry out; the throat of the mortally wounded screams, but God assigns no blame.” Job 24:9-12

Austin Channing Brown, who is a Christian, says in her book *I’m Still Here*, she has no hope that this oppression towards people of color will get any better, so she says, “I don’t live in hope. I live in the shadow of hope.”

Seems like Job is living in the shadow of hope here.

Then, as if snapping back towards the Exodus narrative buried deep in his bones, Job says in Chapter 27...

“This is the wicked’s portion with God, the inheritance that the ruthless receive from the Almighty. If their children increase, they belong to the sword; their offspring won’t have enough bread. Their

survivors will be buried with the dead; their widows won't weep. If they store up silver like dust, amass clothing like clay, they may amass, but the righteous will wear it; the innocent will divide the silver. . . . Terrors overtake them like waters; a tempest snatches them by night;" Job 27:13-17, 20

Again, Job is oppressed and living in the shadow of hope. It's like he doesn't have any and he can't escape its shadow.

Chapter 28 is an interlude on wisdom. This is where we see this familiar verse: "Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding."

Chapter 29 is Job reflecting back with fondness and grief ... "remember the good old days before this meaningless suffering came upon me... remember the influence I had and amazing things I did??"

Chapter 30 is Job reflecting on his current reality of suffering and social isolation.

I thought about how Jesus would have identified with these two chapters... particularly these two verses:

"And now I'm their song; I'm their cliché! They detest me, keep their distance, don't withhold spit from my face." Job 30:9-10

In Chapter 31 Job spends some time sharing how blameless he is. I am not as blameless as Job is!

Day 5 – Job 32-37

Elihu, the youngest of the Job Covenant Group, finally speaks up. He is mad at Job for trying to justify himself and mad at the other three (Bildad, Zophar and Eliphaz) because they had no real answer for Job's suffering- even though they all had declared Job to be wrong.

I get the sense we are going to get more self-righteousness theological opinions from Elihu... but maybe not?!?

I hear young Elihu from people who say: "I'm not mad, nor do I question God. I'm just hurt. I trust God is working things out in ways that are beyond my understanding." (I wonder: "Is it ok for me to be mad and question God?")

Wait... this is interesting! 33:23 Elihu imagines "an angel, a mediator, one of a thousand who declares a person upright."

With this mediator praying and interceding to God for him, Job could say, "I sinned, and perverted what was right, and it was not paid back to me. He has redeemed my soul from going down to the Pit, and my life shall see light." 33:27-28

Certainly the early Christians read this and thought of Jesus, the mediator who has declared the sinful righteous through faith in him.

Elihu goes on to say that no one is righteous before God. The reason God doesn't answer your cries for justice is the pride of evildoers 35:12.

I hear echoes of Paul's letter to the Romans in Elihu. Our righteousness comes not from ourselves, but from the righteousness of God through Jesus.

I do love that Elihu calls for a spiritual openness in the midst of suffering... a movement from bitter anger and defensiveness ("Explain yourself God!") to wonder ("Help me see what I don't yet see; I trust you God.")

"God delivers the afflicted by their affliction, and opens their ear by adversity." Job 36:15

I think what Elihu says is fine and dandy. I think arriving at his place may be a journey though. A journey where we have the freedom to lament the way Job has for many chapters (the way many of the Psalms do). I hate it when my honest questions get minimized by well-meaning people of faith who "know better." Part of getting to wisdom in the midst of suffering is the gift of space to say aloud to God the things that you really feel, but "aren't supposed to say."

Certainly the bitter cries of grief and injustice are scary. I don't want to be trapped in them. And I certainly don't want to be afraid that God will punish me for saying aloud what I'm saying in my heart. I figure God knows what is in my heart already. Can I trust God enough to say these terrifying things aloud and move through the other side of them? I see this as the invitation of Job rather than "put a cork in your complaint and trust God."

Day 6 – Job 38-42

After a long dialogue between Job and his three friends (plus a fourth), we see that God does exist and has something to say.

God speaks in these chapters.

In the midst of my work, my struggle, my suffering, I cry out to God. I work for God. I think about God. How often do I actually practice sitting in silence to listen for what God has to say?

A friend of mine, Derrick Scott, will often ask his students and staff: What's the last thing you heard Jesus say to you?

Wait. What?

Job was written centuries before Jesus. It would have been read by Jesus. It would have awakened people's souls and given permission for people to pour out their hearts to God, wrestle with "unmentionable" questions in the midst of suffering, and wait upon God who apparently does exist and has something to say.

How much more than Job can we who walk with the risen Christ, share our hearts with God? I think about the road to Emmaus story in Luke 24. Jesus meets these two disciples on the road in the midst of their suffering, disillusionment and deep questions. Jesus doesn't immediately give them a long speech. Jesus lets them talk and lament for quite a long time along that road. That is a wonderful gift of grace. Then, as if that long lament somehow tills the soil of their souls, these disciples are ready to hear what the risen Jesus has to say. And only later, as Jesus breaks the bread and serves the cup, their eyes are

opened and they see what they didn't see before. Jesus is right there with them in the midst of their sorrow and questions.

I found myself thinking that the end of Job, with its "they all lived happily ever after", feels a little contrived. All stories don't have a happy ending.

But here is what I take from this in light of our hope in resurrection. God's future is the end. My lifetime may not see it fulfilled. But we have been given a glimpse of God's future in the resurrection of Jesus. We know that there is another way than fear, sadness, despair and violence. The way of self giving love is movement towards Gods future- even when it makes no sense in the present moment. God's future draws us forward.

In a similar way, perhaps we can say, Job's future draws us forward. Even if we don't see it fulfilled in our lifetime. Job's future is God's future....our future too.