

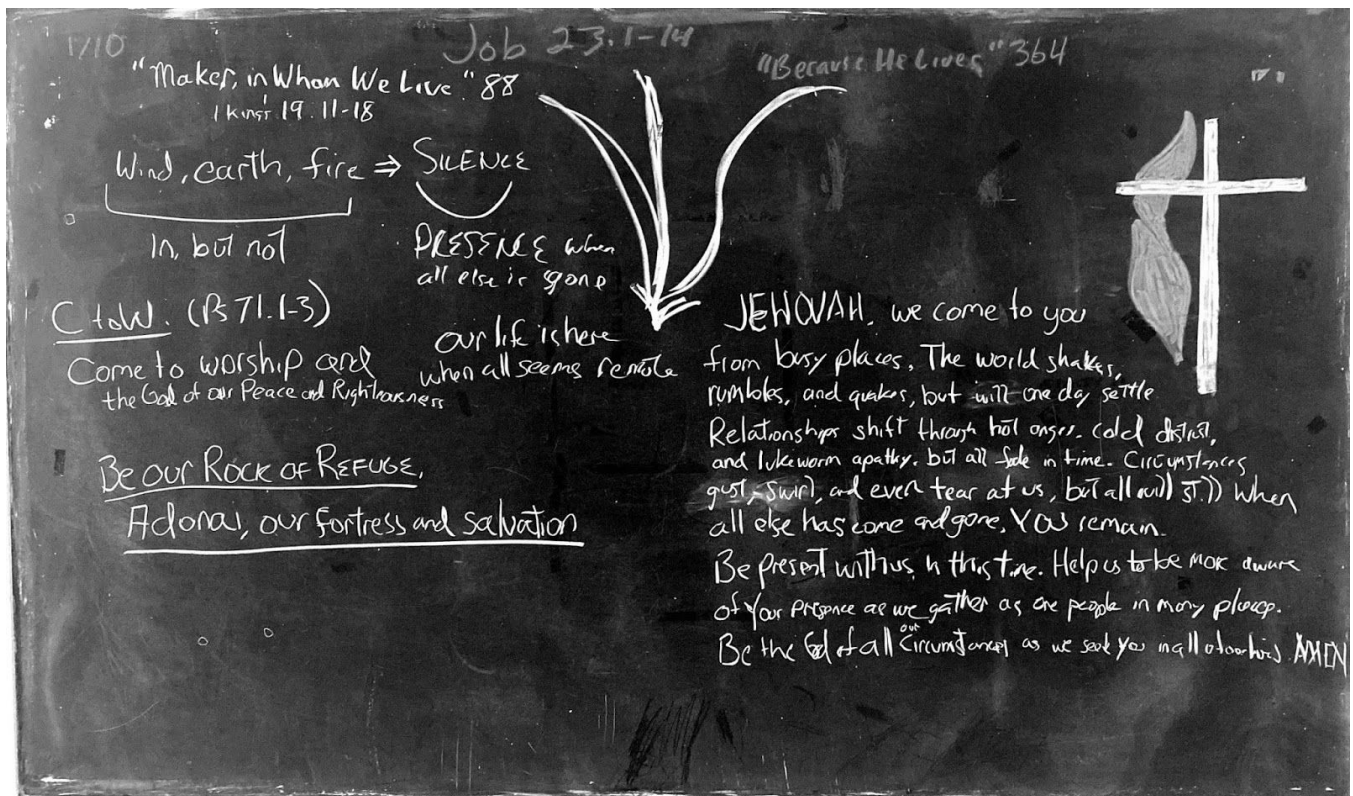
Title: "Through Everything"
Date: January 10, 2021
Scripture: Job 23:1-14
Preacher: Rev. Robert Dean

People sometimes wonder how a pastor comes up with their scriptures and themes for any given Sunday. A lot of ministers use a collection of scriptures called the Revised Common Lectionary. A lectionary is a list of scriptures with selections for either each week or each day of the year. You may wonder who decided what is in the lectionary and whether there is just one lectionary or many lectionaries. To answer that question, the Revised Common Lectionary was created as an ecumenical lectionary in the 1990s and there are plenty of alternative lectionaries like the Uncommon Lectionary, the Narrative Lectionary, and the African American Lectionary.

Whether a pastor uses a lectionary or not is a personal choice in the United Methodist Church. In my experience a lot of ministers wander off into the wilderness away from the lectionary pattern in an adventurous spirit, because the Holy Spirit is calling them out into the wild for a purpose, or for both reasons. In all honesty, today's selection is not from a lectionary. Was the call to the wilderness a desire for adventure or the Spirit preparing us for something interesting?

This Sunday marks the beginning of a series based on a question: "Where do we go in our faith when it has already been a long journey and the end is a long way off?" The concept behind it is a simple concept. How did Biblical figures live out their faith during difficult moments? The scriptures are selected, the stories are in a spreadsheet on my computer, and the map of our journey will go through a lot of challenging places.

All of these stories and sources were selected before this week's service began to be put together. The story of Job was selected, the prayers were written, and the songs were sketched out on the board on Tuesday. There is proof of this claim as I have a picture of the chalkboard I was sketching out prayers upon from this Tuesday. Indeed, if you look at the manuscript in the eNews later today, you can see that Job was on the docket for this morning before the events that took place in our nation's Capitol on Wednesday.



Yes, it is true. During a week that saw unprecedented weirdness and violence inside of our nation's Capitol, I selected a passage that was written by someone who was at the very least bitter, at the most spiritually broken, and more than likely someone who was incredibly depressed. Yes, in a week when many of us were horrified by events, the scripture selected was written by a man who was dealing with extreme trauma and grief.

Yesterday I was texting our Lay Leader and pointed out that: "I really picked a great one this time." I had this great image running through my head upon reading through the scripture that involved me reading the scripture, grabbing a big bowl of popcorn, and sitting in the front pew while watching the pastor struggle his way through this one with a huge grin on my face. It was a lovely image until I realized that I was the one who would be in the pulpit. I can still imagine myself sitting in the pew elbowing someone and whispering "Wow, this is going to be like watching someone run into a pole in slow motion. Who would pick that scripture today?"

There is a difficult challenge in front of us today. There are people who desire a word of comfort, people who want to hear that everything will be okay, and people who need something solid that will be easy to stand upon during the storms of life. As pastor, I know all of these things, see how much people desire them to be true, and have to say with a smile a simple truth: "I cannot give you those things you want."

You may want comfort in a time of chaos, but I cannot promise you the comfort will be the comfort you desire. You may want to hear that everything will be okay, but I cannot promise

you that anything will go back to the way it was. You may want me to tell you things will be fine, but I can only offer you something that is beyond the ability of anyone to see.

Let's start with the idea that everything will be okay. In all honesty, I do believe things will eventually be okay, but I cannot tell you that everything will go back to where it was four years ago or even last week. What's more, I cannot even promise to you that everything will feel fine again. Why? I cannot tell you these things because of this really frustrating story in our Bible called the story of Job.

Who was Job? Job was a really faithful man who according to the scriptures was unlike anyone else. Job was wealthy, a parent of many children, and conscientious of not only his own behavior, but was also focused on the behavior of his children. Job was pious, thoughtful, and wise. Job had the favor of many people, including God! God thought so highly of Job that God literally bragged about how faithful Job was as a person. Job was effectively God's number one follower: God was a huge fan of Job.¹

God and the great tempter known in scripture as Satan get into a contest over Job. Job loses everything in this world after God gambles with Satan that Job will remain faithful as long as he is healthy even if he loses all of his wealth, all of his property, and all of his children. When Job remains faithful, God doubles-down on the gamble and Job loses his health as well. Our story takes place while Job is talking about what has happened with his friends and neighbors after his wife tells him that he should just go ahead and die.²

As this is not an extensive analysis of Job set over several weeks, I will tell you the end of the story. In the end, Job is blessed by God again. Job's illnesses and troubles are lifted, Job has more children, and Job grows even wealthier than he was before the gamble began. In many ways, Job ends up with a life that is physically more prosperous: a life that is even more full of family, health, and wealth...³

Still, we have to be clear about something. While Job does receive a multitude of blessings after the story we read today, Job also lives through his day with a couple of realities that do not make things okay. Job's children have passed away: while our faith tells us that Job may see them after leaving this life, there's a very real moment in time where Job will wake day after day without seeing the children he loved, provided for, and cared deeply for in this life.

Job losing his wealth is rough. Even the most callous of us would likely agree that Job did not have a good day on the day his cattle were stolen by bandits, his sheep were incinerated by what sounds a lot like a burning meteor falling from heaven, and his servants were killed. Even ignoring the grief that must come with losing not only your wealth but the lives of all of your

¹ This background can be found in the first chapter of Job

² This background can be found in the first ten verses of the second chapter of Job.

³ The end of Job's story can be found in the forty second chapter of Job.

servants, that is a terrible day. Job's circumstances go from terrible to horrific as he loses his children.

Job may have more children and they may be the best children in the world. Each new child may be sacred and special in their own way, but Job only receives those blessings after his first blessings, the children he loves, are gone.

I cannot tell you everything will be okay because even the people in scripture have moments when everything is far from okay. There is nothing wonderful about the situation faced by Job and there's nothing wonderful about what happened in our nation's Capitol this week. What's more, there's nothing wonderful about the rampaging nature of the pandemic that has set new milestones in mortality this week. A year ago many of us were simply going about our lives and it has been so long since things were normal that it simply feels at times as if nothing will ever be normal again. Nothing about any of this is normal and it can be hard to feel okay because in many ways the experiences we have gone through with people both this week and this year have not been okay.

So, no, I cannot tell you it will be okay. I can tell you the words that I often share with individuals while they are working through the grief of losing a loved one: "Things are not okay and may never be okay again, but they can still be good again one day." Indeed, I like to believe that the Job in our story one day held one of his newborn children one day long after the moment in our story, cried remembering his lost loved ones, and (pardon the phrasing) baptized that child with tears of love. While he has ten children, his three daughters are described as beautiful and when Job passes, each is left an inheritance: not a single one of Job's children would ever go without the things they needed for life as each was provided for regardless of their birth order or gender, which was very progressive for the culture in which Job was set as a tale.

Getting back on point, Job's story does not tell us that everything is okay in the world. Things are very difficult at times in this life of ours. I cannot tell you that everything is okay or will be okay because I am neither a magician nor a miracle worker. What I am is a preacher and I can tell you that I have been taught and I have seen that there is a way to make it through these things.

Unfortunately, the only way forward is not an easy way forward. As Christians, we stand upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. To be clear, that foundation is a powerful foundation. Those who build upon the foundation of Christ are like those who build a house upon a rock.⁴ The storms may come, the winds may gust, and the house may shake, but it will not fall. In many ways this sounds easy: simply rely on God and you will make it through.

⁴ Matthew 7:24-27

I truly believe that anyone who relies on Christ will make it through, but I think that having that trust in Jesus is neither easy nor simple. One powerful thing about the parable Jesus told about a person building a house on the rock is that the house on the rock stands even while a house built on the sand will collapse. Another powerful reality that is often overlooked is the fact that both the house on the rock and the house on the sand go through storms.

When life becomes stormy, the way forward is neither easy nor calm. Just as the house on the rock faced the wind and rain, the faithful live through times of challenge. Watching the news this week may have had you ask yourself tough questions. “When will this end?” “Won’t someone stop them?” “What’s happening to our nation?” “What can I do when I am far away and feel helpless?”

In many ways, we are in a similar place to Job. Job shares from his grief these words starting in verse 8: “If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on he left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him...” Job casts around looking for God and God is not there. Although Job believes and says that God knows the way Job will take and “when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold,” Job still admits that even in the midst of the chaos, Job cannot find God.

Perhaps Job’s words express where your heart has been this week. Perhaps you are wondering where God is as you look around the world. In front, behind, on your left, and on your right have all come up empty. Perhaps you wonder where God might be in this odd and broken world.

Friends, the one thing that I have seen work well in times such as these is to remain close to our foundation. The winds gust, the rain comes, but our foundation in Christ is a place where we can stand through all of the madness. Our opening prayer today referenced the story of Elijah hiding from the angry queen of Israel by withdrawing to a cave in the wilderness in 1 Kings 19. In that story, Elijah waits for the Lord and watches while a storm, a fire, and an earthquake pass by in power. When they have come and gone, Elijah finds God in the stillness. For me that is one more example of a simple truth: the world may through chaos and madness against us, but if we hold fast, we can find God in the stillness that follows.

If you have not read the whole story of Job, it is a good story that can inspire a lot of reflection. There are worse ways to spend time than in the forty two chapters of Job. Thankfully, Job does find God again at the end of the journey. Job is not found by God to be as perfect as the purest gold, but Job does make it through the chaos of his challenges. Even when it seems like all is lost, Job finds a way forward with God. Job is chastised a bit in the journey he treads, but Job also makes it through.

Ultimately, the way forward may be incredibly difficult. Whether you are torn by the madness of the pandemic, the behavior in our nation’s Capitol, or by circumstances that nobody around you may know about in our community this morning, there is hope that there is a way forward.

You may not be able to see it, but that's something many of us hold in common with people like Job. As Hebrews 11:1 would tell us, faith is the evidence of things unseen. Sometimes the only way forward is to walk down an unseen path with our faith in Christ.

I wish I could tell you that it would be as easy as sitting in the front pew, eating popcorn while watching other people do the hard work. Life is not always that easy. Trust me, if life were always easy, I would be eating popcorn in the front pew. Sometimes, what is most important is not that we know the exact way forward. We occasionally just need to know that there is a way forward before we take the next step down the road.

Friends, I cannot tell you exactly what the future holds today. I cannot tell you what things will look like or how things will turn out. I can tell you that you are not alone on this journey. Like Job, we may reach the culmination of our journey to find that nothing will ever be perfectly okay again. If that happens, the only assurance I can give you is that you are not alone on this journey. May God give us the courage to put down the popcorn, pick up the walking stick, and to journey forward into an odd world with the faith that we too will find a way through the oddness just like the man Job in our scripture today.

Let us pray...