

October 13, 2024

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Job 23:1-9, 16-17 (NRSV)

Then Job answered: ²“Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. ³Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! ⁴I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. ⁵I would learn what he would answer me and understand what he would say to me. ⁶Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me. ⁷There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.

⁸“If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; ⁹on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him. ¹⁶God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me. ¹⁷If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word...

IN THE CRUCIBLE OF THE QUESTION

In his wise and eloquent memoir, *My Bright Abyss*, poet Christian Wiman argues that change is essential to an authentic spiritual life. He writes: “Faith is not some half-remembered country into which you come like a long-exiled king, dispensing the old wisdom.... Life is not an error, even when it is. That is to say, whatever faith you emerge with at the end of your life is going to be not simply affected by that life but intimately dependent upon it, for faith in God is, in the deepest sense, faith in life—which means that even the staunchest life of faith is a life of great change. It follows that if you believe at fifty what you believed at fifteen, then you have not lived—or have denied the reality of your life.”

I wish someone had shared this wisdom with me when I was a teenager. It would have spared me a few decades’ worth of anxiety and self-condemnation. I grew up believing that change is *antithetical* to a devout Christian life. I grew up aspiring to certainty, to “steadfast,” rock-like faith, to “that old time religion” that’s “good enough for me.” I had no idea that change—the willingness to

wrestle, the humility to reconsider, the flexibility to evolve—is the beating heart of a vibrant relationship with God.

This week's reading from the book of Job offers a poignant affirmation of Wiman's claim. It confronts a belief we take for granted and turns it on its head. It wrestles with old, inadequate gods—the gods of convention, convenience, and even of common sense—and breaks through to a truer and richer conception of the God whom we worship. This morning, we encounter Job on the ash heap, surrounded by clueless friends, and suffering just about every misery known to humankind. One of his friends, Eliphaz, has just finished giving Job a lecture, and now it's Job's turn to respond. He does so in thundering indignation, each word testifying to the theological war raging within him. Who is God? *Where* is God? What can human beings reasonably expect from a life of faith?

Job's answers to these questions are shot through with ambivalence. God is nowhere: "If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him." And yet God is oppressively everywhere: "His hand is heavy despite my groaning... I am terrified at his presence." Job wants nothing more than to confront God face to face: "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling!" And yet he's desperate to leave God's sight: "If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!"

Elie Wiesel, a Jewish writer who has spent his life attempting to come to grips with the Holocaust he experienced firsthand as a boy in Nazi concentration camps, recounts his loss of faith in God as a result of that dehumanizing experience. He writes in his book simply titled *Night*:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. . . . Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust.

In his book *God's Universe*, Harvard astronomer Owen Gingerich calls experiences like these “questions without answers.” He includes an example of his own. When Gingerich was seventeen his only brother was killed by a car while delivering newspapers on his bike. Decades later, in one of the last entries in his diary, Gingerich's devout Mennonite father still agonized over why God would allow such a tragedy to befall his teenage son. Similarly, in his book *The Language of God*, Francis Collins, head of the human genome project, writes about his daughter's rape and how it challenges his faith even today. Why did God not intervene to protect his daughter? Why was the perpetrator never caught and brought to justice?

Whereas Wiesel lost his faith, Gingerich and Collins did not; they somehow held fast to their Christian confession. Ultimately, forfeiting your faith does nothing to solve the problem of evil. The problem of evil remains for every person and every world view. Some folks have even argued that whereas the problem of evil is difficult to reconcile with believing in a good God, the problem of *good* becomes impossible when we don't.

In *A Grief Observed*, awash in a sea of grief and pain in the wake of his wife's death, C.S. Lewis asks: “Meanwhile, where is God?” In previous times of happiness, Lewis claims that he found God present everywhere he turned. But amid his present anguish, searching for God is like knocking on the door of a house and hearing the door bolted in your face. What you are left with, he says, is silence, and the disturbing fear that maybe this is what God is like after all.

Too often folks simply give in, resigning themselves to their misfortune: “It must be the Lord's will; I guess we will just have to accept it.” Others, like Wiesel, abandon their faith in God altogether. But Job seems to offer us a third way: he is unwilling to accept suffering passively, but he also refuses to abandon his faith. Perhaps we need to reencounter Job every so often to be reminded that arguing with God is an act of deep faith—deeper perhaps, than a passive acceptance of whatever happens as God's will.

You see, as Christians, we affirm that God exists and through the revealed word that we find in scripture we affirm that God is a God of justice who cares for the

poor and the orphan, whose mercy is vast, and compassion is deep. As exemplified in the Exodus story and in the words of the prophets, if we take the biblical story seriously, we must take seriously its claim of God's active role in establishing and preserving justice. Yet, when we find ourselves confronted by the violence of the world, a world filled with abandoned and abused children, where the rights of the innocent are often squashed by greedy oppressors, how are we to make sense of this contradiction of who God is and what is going on around us? How can we declare God's mercy and justice in the shadow of Auschwitz?

It's hard for us to live in the tension of this contradiction...on the one hand, what the Bible affirms about God's activity and presence in the world and, on the other, the atrocities that seem to be indicative of God's absence. Jewish philosopher Martin Buber refers to this contradiction as "the rent in the heart of the world." Although it may seem a contradiction in terms—and it is indeed a great paradox—we often come to understand the meaning of something through its absence rather than its presence.

German philosopher Martin Heidegger helps us to understand this a little better. He speaks of a carpenter who goes into his well-furnished workshop, with its stacks of wood, containers of nails, and racks of tools. Focusing solely on his project, the carpenter pays little attention to the individual items he uses. The wood, the nails, and the hammer are simply taken for granted as part of the carpenter's larger activity. But suddenly, the hammer breaks, the shaft snapping off at the head. For the first time the carpenter becomes genuinely aware of the hammer. It has never been as vivid in its wholeness as it has now become in its brokenness. The image of the hammer, what it does, how essential it is to the task of carpentry, are all inescapably present to the carpenter precisely because of its absence. And so, it is with Job. Prior to his catastrophe Job may have spoken with great fluency and conviction regarding God's justice and the moral order of the world. It is only when Job experiences the brokenness of that justice, and his perception of God's absence does he come to know justice and God.

As this inner battle rages on, Job maintains faith in his own spiritual credentials: “I have not departed from the commandment of his lips.” And yet he finds (to his bewilderment) that his credentials will not protect him: “But [God] stands alone and who can dissuade him? What he desires, he does.”

In this scene, Job is not a tame man seeking a tame God. He's a God-haunted man pursuing the passion of his life, only to crash again and again *and again* into the limits of his experience and knowledge. The God he thought he knew is no longer adequate. The formula he'd organized his life around (If I do A, God will do B) has failed. Either he must step into change and mystery or lose his faith altogether. This is faith at its most paradoxical—a journey towards the Presence that is Absence, the Safety that is Terror, the Knowing that is always, in this life, an Unknowing. It reminds us that faith does not mean having all the answers; it means being willing to live into the questions. Faith is having the security to be insecure, the security to live in another identity than our own and to find our value and significance in relationship with God.

If we read Job's story looking for coherence, we won't find it; it's a story at war with itself. In his book, *How to Read the Bible*, scholar James L. Kugel describes the Book of Job as a nuanced dialogue between traditional Israelite wisdom tradition and the realities of faith in a messy world. The wisdom tradition holds that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. In wisdom's worldview, prosperity is a sign of divine blessing, and deprivation signifies the withdrawal of that blessing. To suffer, in other words, is to experience God's displeasure.

It's this received "wisdom" Job must wrestle with when his life falls apart. It's the wisdom his friends attempt (and fail) to reconcile with lived reality. Interestingly, it is stale, unchanging piety that keeps Job's friends from encountering God. Strapped to the theology they know best; they find themselves sidelined when God finally shows up. And it's Job's “blasphemy”—his refusal to swallow any theology that doesn't jibe with the real-time truth of his own life—that finally earns him an audience with God. We will hear what God has to say about all this next Sunday. Stay tuned...