

**October 13-14, 2018**

## **"With Friends like These"**

**St. Lucas UCC, St. Louis MO**

**Dr. Keith D. Herron, Senior Minister**

**The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost**

**Job 23:1-9, 16-17**

**Amos 5:6-7; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31**

Old Testament scholar Karla Suomala compares this long middle stretch of Job to "fly over" territory. That's us here in the Midwest. Between the bookends of Job, between the initial set-up and the dramatic end, are long chapters we know little about. The opening and closing portions of Job's story are the prose passages of Job while the long middle chapters are mostly poetry. This squishy middle of Job is absolutely contrary to what we really want: story, plot, and action. Like most unwanted advice from people who think they know better, the speeches of Job's friends are written as poetry and are repetitive and tedious.

Poet Elizabeth Alexander, in a conversation with Krista Tippett on the NPR program "On Being," suggests that reading and writing poetry are often ways to get at hard and true things that other forms of language and literature can't quite do, especially in ways that allows both poet and reader to formulate and nurture questions of depth. Perhaps this is the reason poetry is the primary vehicle of communication in the Book of Job, which is essentially about tackling ultimate questions, from the angles and perspectives of pain.

Nevertheless, we are forced to admit reading through this poetic middle, with all these interminable speeches, is hard work. We are drawn to stories and the familiar three movement structure of a good story as Aristotle defined it as having, a beginning, a middle, and an end.

This is, by the way, exactly what happens when we try to give unwanted advice. We miss the story that is actually at work in someone's life. We would do better to join Job sitting in the dirt, living with him in his pain, sharing his despair. There's a familiar saying, "Don't just sit there, *do* something!" For a good number of circumstances, when we want to be helpful to our friends we could flip that saying around, "Don't just do something, *sit* there!"

Two things have happened to Job in between last week's reading and this week's. First, he has these ... friends. "Job's friends," have you ever heard that phrase? Have you encountered any of them? At first, Job's friends are reduced to silence by the enormity and gravity of his plight. So much loss! They step away, and wait in silence, accompanying him in that manner which is so often the best of all – a quiet, sharing of grief, a stunned stillness of wonder that so very much can go wrong.

But then these friends of Job begin to get restless. They, like most of us most of the time, believe that life should be just, should be fair. In our presumptive ideal world, bad things do not happen to good people. And so they begin to accuse Job: "You must have done something wrong. You must have made some terrible mistakes. You must have engaged in evils about which we do not know." The only possible explanation for the calamities that have befallen him? They're his fault. "*The righteous are not cut off,*" they tell him; the wicked are punished. Job must have deserved what has happened to him.

We know those feelings and ideas, don't we? Every one of us. Have you ever heard about a teenager's bad behavior and muttered, "Those parents ... I thought they were all right, but there must be something wrong going on in that house." Have you ever thought, "That wouldn't have happened to her if she'd dressed decently." Or, "It wouldn't have happened to him if he stayed out of that neighborhood?" Have you ever wondered, when something terrible has happened in your own life, whether God is punishing you for something? We want life to be fair. We want God to be just. And we want to understand when things appear otherwise.

And that's the second thing that has happened between the readings for this fly-over part of the story: Job has begun to speak of his anguish and frustration with honesty. Job has begun, even, to speak to God. His so-called friends? He describes them as "*miserable comforters with windy words.*" But God? God he wants to hear from.

*"I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. I will say to God, 'Do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me. Does it seem good to you to oppress? ... Do you see as humans see? ... you know that I am not guilty ... [and yet] you turn and destroy me.'"*

"Where is God?" That's what Job wants to know, and in crying out for an answer, he echoes the long biblical tradition of lament. Sometimes we think, or perhaps we've been told, that it's somehow wrong, incorrect, inappropriate, to express our deepest anger and fear and sadness to God. I don't know where we get that idea, but we do. We think we are only allowed to express gratitude to God, or that we are only allowed to ask God nicely – that we are somehow rejecting God if we give voice to our hurts and sorrows.

Job cannot find or see or hear God, but he remains undeterred. What is the great grace, the great gift of God, reflected in Job's words? That he longs for God. That his hope in God, and his belief in God's care for him, will persist. That he is certain that the silence of God is not the last thing he will hear.

The silence of God – it's very silent, indeed. And it's difficult for us to interpret. We are people of story, of narrative, of proclamation, of conversation – people of a multitude of words. We know, from the first verses of Genesis, that God spoke creation into being. We know, from the first verses of the Gospel of John that Jesus is The Word, God-spoken and speaking into humanity. And we know when we, like

Job, experience that vast silence in which God resides in times of trial, that we, too, long to know God is there.

And, if we have the integrity of Job, we say so. If we have a remnant of hope, even in the face of the destruction of all we love, we say so. Wendell Berry, the great writer of the natural world whom I've mentioned before, says, "The distinguishing characteristic of absolute despair is silence."

Many of those voices are heard in the psalms, the songbook and prayer book of the Jewish people, and most particularly in the specific psalms of lament. There's even a book in the OT entitled Lamentations. Other laments are heard in the voices of the prophets, and in the words of Jesus himself. As he died upon the cross, he called out in agony, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (the words of the first verse of Psalm 22). His words echo the lament of human beings for centuries before him. Where are you, God? Why have you abandoned me?

Those words continue to be heard today. Have we not watched as incredible numbers of families and individuals whose homes were destroyed by the hurricanes that plowed across our Southeastern states? Or those in California, Oregon, and Washington, where hell itself blew through the canyons and valleys and the smoke and flames engulfed the homes who wondered, *"Why have you forsaken us?"* When a young girl in Pakistan is shot in the head for speaking out for the education of girls, or when a child we know dies of cancer or is catastrophically injured, do we not wonder, in the words of the Psalmist, *"O God, why do you cast us off?"* (Psalm 88).

At the end of the lament, when the words and the music have stilled themselves, and the one suffering from the silence and despair of God's empty absence, there yet remains a slender thread of hope. Job found this hope by dwelling in the depths of despair where he turned his voice to God. In that emptiness he clung to a thread of hope and proclaimed, *"I know my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another"* (Job 19:25-27a).

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