
Job: A Witness to Suffering

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Proper 24 – Year B

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up your loins like a man,

I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it? (Job 38:1–5)

Our community reads from the Bible every week, according to a schedule we call the lectionary. Today, the Bible brings us the Book of Job.

Job.

Even if we have not read the Book of Job, we know that name. Job: the very name means suffering. Indeed, it means innocent and undeserved suffering. And, worse, the major part of the Book of Job never provides an adequate answer as to why Job suffers.

Why is this book even in the Bible?

By way of approaching an answer to that question, let me start with something lighter, a lighter story:

A few days ago, a guy saw a woman in the grocery store with a three-year-old girl in her cart. As the mother and daughter passed the cookie section, the child asked for cookies and her mother told her, “no.” The little girl immediately began to whine and fuss! The guy heard the mother say quietly, “Now Ellen, we just have half of the aisles left to go through; don't be upset. It won't be long.”

The guy passed the mother again in the candy aisle. Of course, the little girl began to shout for candy. When she was told she couldn't have any, she began to cry again. The mother said, “There, there, Ellen, don't cry. Only two more aisles to go, and then we'll be checking out.”

Then, the guy again happened to be behind the pair at the checkout counter, where the little girl started clamoring for chewing gum and burst into a terrible tantrum yet again. The mother patiently said, “Ellen, we will be through this checkout counter in five minutes, and then you can go home and have a nice nap.”

Well, the guy followed them out to the parking lot and stopped the woman to compliment her. He said, “I couldn't help noticing how patient you were with little Ellen...” The mother broke in, “My little girl's name is Tammy... I am Ellen.”

Ha! Yes, the mother was talking to herself the whole time! Now, now, don't cry. We only have five minutes left. Soon we

will be home and you can have a nice nap. The mother was telling herself to be patient.

Many of us think that the Book of Job is meant to teach us patience. That woman had the patience of Job, we might say.

But, if we actually read the Book of Job, we don't read much about patience at all. The Book of Job is forty-two chapters long, with a small introductory section of two chapters, and an even smaller conclusion that is only one chapter. The vast bulk of the book, thirty-nine chapters, is poetic. It is a long poem, in verse, with striking and overwhelming images. And all of those images, all those lines, are about lament and moaning and complaining and suffering. It's a painful poem to read.

And there is no example of patience. At Job 3:3, Job says "Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, 'A man-child is conceived.'" And then at Job 6:11, Job asks "What is my strength, that I should wait? And what is my end, that I should be patient?" At Job 10:1, Job cries out, "I loathe my life," and therefore, "I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul."

His three friends, trying to offer advice and justification, end up making things much worse. They try to justify God, and they fail. Job knows that they fail, too. No words, no justification, no answer serves to satisfy Job, or the reader, for that matter.

Job, understandably, becomes quite impatient. He demands an audience with God: "Oh, that I knew where to find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments" (Job 23:3-4). In chapter 31, Job does make his case, listing all the sins he might have done to merit such suffering – but he is innocent of all of them.

The Book of Job is not much about patience at all. It is about endurance. In the New Testament, when the Book of James talks about suffering, James 5:11 cites the "endurance" of Job – not his patience.

There is no way I can adequately describe the pain and suffering that Job undergoes. Just as there is probably no way for any one of us to describe innocent suffering, whether that suffering is being experienced by our friends, or by us. Words rarely explain suffering. Just ask Job's friends. Richard Rohr, the jolly Franciscan, said in one of his meditations this week, that "Ultimately, our objective tools for analyzing and interpreting pain will always fail us because there is an aspect of suffering that is not within our rational reach" (October 19, 2018).

Yes, the very nature of true suffering is that it has no adequate description, and no adequate justification. Instead, in the Book of Job, we hear the powerful and cutting poetry of truly innocent suffering, including both sarcasm and lament.

Job suffers. Can there be anything worse than lamenting to God and hearing nothing in reply? Can there be anything worse than pouring out our pain to God and getting no answer?

Yes, there is something worse! Job suffers. Job does pour out his lamentation to God, and –here's the worse thing—God does reply, but he replies in sarcasm and almost anger!

What?! Yes, Job suffers, and then God, God himself, as if to add to Job's suffering, rails back at Job. This is the passage that we heard this morning:

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:

"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up your loins like a man,

I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

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Wow. "Who are you to complain back to me?" God asks. "Who is this who darkens counsel without knowledge?" The voice of God is dominating and powerful and seemingly insensitive.

Why is this even in the Bible?

Well, I believe all this is in the Bible, because this is exactly what suffering is! Suffering would not be suffering if it had an easy solution. Job is a beautiful poem, a beautiful piece of literature, because it gets suffering right. The Book of Job probes the physical and psychological depths of suffering, and even the spiritual depths of suffering. Job is abandoned by his friends, and he is even chastised, for no reason, by God. Job is so innocent that even God rails against him. Wow.

There is a reason, an important reason, that the Book of Job is in the Bible: because the authentic community of faith, in this case the Hebrew community of faith, acknowledges that innocent suffering does exist. Job represents innocent suffering. That suffering is authentic, because it is not covered up, or solved, or answered, or tidied up, at the end. (Remember: the prose conclusion is not part of the poem! Poetry says that God does not guarantee happy endings; prose says God does.) Authentic, healthy, communities of faith acknowledge pain and suffering.

Could there ever be someone who suffers as much as Job? Well, some of us have. We Christians present Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ, as the answer to Job. We might even say that Jesus of Nazareth is the New Testament version of Job. Both suffer innocently. Both cry out, moaning and lamenting to God.

Remember how Jesus cries out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus was actually quoting another piece of poetry there, the twenty-second Psalm.

And that lament of Jesus, to God, my God, is exactly the comparison point with Job. Job and Jesus demonstrate a critical element of suffering, spiritual suffering: They stay in relationship with God.

Stay in relationship with God. I don't want to offer that advice this morning, because it would seem shallow in the face of real suffering. But I do want to note the similarity of Job and Jesus in this regard. They both suffer spiritually by staying in relationship with God, even when God is absent and even when God seems angry.

And, even when they are angry, they stayed connected. Maybe my advice this morning is this: Please be angry with God! Please moan and yell out to God! Your anger is evidence that you are in relationship.

That woman in the grocery store, with the whining and suffering daughter, stayed in relationship with her daughter, by staying in relationship with herself. When the people around her thought she was speaking to her daughter, she was really speaking to herself. She was speaking to herself.

I believe that is why the Book of Job is in the Bible. It is not God speaking to us, giving us advice and counsel about the problem of innocent suffering. The Book of Job is in the Bible, because it is the words of authentic community speaking to itself.

Authentic communities acknowledge pain and innocent suffering. They don't try to avoid it or explain it away. They bear witness to suffering.

We read from the Book of Job this morning. Make sure you belong to a religion, an authentic community, who reads the poetry of the Book of Job. Make sure you belong to an authentic community who keeps sacred literature like the Book of Job. Make sure the Book of Job is in your Bible. Make sure you bear witness to suffering.

AMEN.

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