

The Arrows of the Almighty

Job 6:1-13; 42:1-6

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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We've arrived at our second last sermon in the 2020 Faith Questions series.

Here's where we've been and where we're going. As you can see, today, we're looking at the story of Job. Next week, it will be the story of Rahab, and that will be it for another year.

Just a quick reminder that if you missed any of these questions, you can always find them online. Occasionally, people ask me to send them copies of my sermons. I'm glad to do this, but you can also go to our church website and get either the audio version or text version each week. Thanks to Ernie for doing this each week!

One more housekeeping item. At our worship committee meeting on Friday, we were discussing this sermon series and we made the observation that of course faith questions occur throughout the year, not just during Advent when I put the call out for questions.

So, before this series ends, I want to say that if a specific question of faith occurs to you at any point in the year, feel free to send me an email or drop an anonymous note in my church mailbox or tell someone on the worship committee.

I will keep kind of an open file of questions throughout the year which will then help as I plan next year's Faith Questions series.

So, today we're looking at the story of Job.

There are, broadly speaking, two places that people approach this story from.

Some ask questions about Job from a place of detached, intellectual curiosity. Job is a theological puzzle to solve.

These tend to be younger people who haven't lived as long and who haven't suffered much. This was how I read the book of Job as a university student.

Others—the majority, I would suggest—read Job from a much more personal and existential perspective.

These people come to this bewildering book about the mystery of unjust suffering because they or someone they love is suffering. Or, because they're wondering if God is the source of their suffering. Or, perhaps they're wondering if, in the end, God can be trusted at all.

Job is a book that evokes deep emotional responses.

- Anger (how could God do this to Job?!)
- Fear (will God do this to me?)
- Confusion (Isn't righteousness supposed to lead to blessing and disobedience to punishment? Isn't this what God says elsewhere in the OT? What do we do when the rules seem to change in the middle of the game?).

I decided to approach this sermon from the latter perspective, not the former.

You'll notice that the two sections from Job that were read aloud this morning were very different and from different parts of the story.

You probably felt that it was a big jump between chapter 6 and chapter 42, like you had missed a big part of the story. You were right to feel this way.

So, let's just have a quick look at the big story of Job and then we'll focus on the two passages and the role they play in the story.

Job has it all—money, land, livestock, servants, a wife and kids. He's living the dream. He's a devoted religious man who is faithful to God. He's "blameless and upright," to use the language of Scripture.

Satan and God are having a chat one day and God can't help but brag about his prize student. "Have you seen Job? There's no one like him out there! He's faithful and true in every way!"

Satan snorts and says, "Well, yeah! Of course he's faithful! He's got it all. He's the 1%."

Who *wouldn't* be faithful if they had life as good as Job? He loves you because of what he gets out of the deal! Take all of his goodies away and then you'll see how faithful Job is."

So, God takes the bet. "You're on." Go ahead, take your best shot."

Satan does just that. Job suffers calamity upon calamity in rapid fire. He loses his livestock, his labour force, his children, and eventually his own health.

It's pitiful scene in the end: Job, having lost everything, sitting on a pile of ashes scraping his itchy sores with a piece of pottery.

But through all of this he keeps the faith. He is devastated, but he stays true to God.

"The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21)

This preliminary section is followed by thirty-five or so odd chapters that oscillate between Job's lament and an extended theological argument with his "friends."

Job's friends rehearse the piety of the day, a formulaic view of how God and human suffering fit together. Righteousness = blessing; sin = punishment. Simple.

They insist that Job is suffering because he did something wrong. They know how the religious formula works. They know that innocent people don't just randomly suffer.

Job's suffering is a direct challenge to their system of understanding and "managing" God.

If Job is right, and his suffering is not connected to sin, then their whole worldview is threatened. And so, they are relentless in their attempts to get Job to admit that he is somehow to blame.

Job insists upon his innocence. He doesn't really dispute their view of God so much as insist that his story doesn't fit the formula. He cries out for an audience with God, to make his case, to try to make sense of his pain.

In the end, God finally speaks. But the answer is nothing like what Job wanted or expected.

Job was looking for an explanation for why he was suffering. He was looking for vindication, for justice. What he got was a rather stern (and lengthy) divine tour of creation.

"You want answers?" God says. "You want to hear from me? Okay, well brace yourself because here it comes!"

What follows is an extended tutorial on the "bigness" of God and the "smallness" of Job!

- Were you there when I did this?
- Can you do that?
- Did you make this?
- Do you determine the limits of that?
- Do you have the wisdom to know this?

On and on and *on* it goes for a full four chapters (Job 38-41).

I can imagine that Job must felt like he was standing in front of a fire hydrant when all he wanted was a simple drink of water!

What Job hears is this: "I am God and you are not." I am in control here, not you.

God doesn't *answer* Job so much as *overwhelm* him.

The book ends with Job repenting in humility, God vindicating Job in front of his friends, and restoring all that Job had lost in the beginning of the story.

That's a *really* quick summary of the story of Job.

Our first Scripture reading this morning is taken from the immediate aftermath of Job's losses. Job is in despair. He is clinging to his faith by a thread.

These thirteen verses are like a howl of pain from a wounded animal.

Job's misery is so deep that it cannot even be calculated, he says. He wishes that God would just finish the job and crush him. At least he could die knowing that he had not denied God in his pain.

(The implication is perhaps that Job is on the verge of doing precisely this!)

Job feels like the very arrows of God himself have dug into his flesh and are poisoning him from the inside out. God feels not like a comforter or a good shepherd but an enemy who is terrorizing him.

This is strong language.

How many of us, I wonder, would have grown up feeling like it was safe to speak of God in this way?

The church has not always understood faithful lament or modeled it very well.

I was out at CMU in Winnipeg this week for a conference on faith formation in a secular age. One of the sessions was a panel of young adults presently training for ministry. Each one was invited to share about how faith was formed (or malformed) in their church experience.

Almost all of them spoke from places of pretty deep pain.

One young man spoke about how he always felt socially awkward, out of place, like he didn't fit in—even (or especially) in the church youth group.

"I knew I wasn't likable," he said, "but I didn't know why. I felt like my presence was objectionable to my peers." His was a heartbreaking story of isolation, confusion and loneliness.

Another one spoke of being sexually assaulted by a Christian pastor and all the pain that rippled out from that horrific betrayal.

Another spoke about how her young husband had recently been diagnosed with an acute form of pancreatitis and nearly died.

This last young woman spoke about how well-meaning Christians would tell her to just trust God and have faith and pray harder.

All she wanted, she said, was permission to lament, to scream at God about the unfairness of it all. "I wasn't asking for a lot, in hindsight," she said. Why do we find it so hard to give each other permission to be mad at God? We have the Psalms, right?

Indeed. We also have Job.

One of the things that Job absolutely gives us permission to do is argue with God, to shake our fist at the heavens, to vent, to give expression to our pain honestly.

To *lament*.

We don't have to censor our prayers or sanitize our grief or pretend we're not bewildered by the pain of the world or the pain of our own lives.

Sometimes, a more faithful response is to simply howl.

Yes, God comes down hard on Job in the end. Yes, Job is kind of put in his place.

But God also says that it is Job, not his three friends who insist that God and human suffering works like a math equation, who has spoken truly of him.

Each of the three young people who spoke in Winnipeg had stayed in the church—they were speaking to a bunch of pastors at a Christian conference, after all. In fact, the young man who felt ostracized in youth group was now a youth pastor!

But I wonder how many young adults have walked away from the church never to return because they felt like it wasn't a safe place for their pain?

I wonder how well we lament in our church? I suspect we agree, in theory, that this is ok.

But would anyone get up during prayer time and say, "Today, I'm pretty angry with God! Today, I feel like God is my enemy, not my rescuer!"

I wonder.

Our second passage this morning comes from near the end of Job, after Job has drank from the fire hydrant, as it were.

He has been reminded that God is God and he is not. He has been brought face to face with the sovereignty of God.

I know that this phrase, “the sovereignty of God,” is one that people have a hard time with. Many people struggle—intellectually and existentially—with the idea that suffering is caused or even *allowed* by God.

It can be psychologically and spiritually crippling to think of our worst miseries as coming directly from the same God who is “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, rich in love” (Psalm 145:8-9)

But conversely, the idea that suffering is random and takes place *apart* from God’s control is also considered intolerable by many.

I’ve told this story before, but I always think of it when I read this part of Job’s story.

The hardest funeral I have ever done was that of a ten-year-old daughter of a friend of mine who died of an asthma attack at her brother’s soccer tournament.

I had many conversations about suffering with the girl’s parents, at the time of her death and after.

One thing that they *clung* to—fiercely, at times—was the conviction that God had some higher purpose in this, that their pain had *some* explanation. It was all that kept them going.

They took refuge in views of God that I would personally have trouble accepting (“God needed another angel” or their daughter’s death was a part of a larger puzzle that God would use to bring others to Christ, etc.).

But the idea that their daughter’s death and their pain was random or had no meaning was intolerable. They preferred “the arrows of the almighty.”

Not everyone goes this far. Some would prefer to say that while God doesn't cause our pain, God can always redeem it.

But I think the example of Job reminds us that as Christians we have to hold two important things together, even if it is difficult:

1. We don't know everything, and we certainly don't always understand the meaning of suffering or the role God plays in bad things in our life. Like Job, we often have no idea what is going on "behind the veil."
2. We are convinced that God is sovereign over his creation and that he is guiding the story—the big story of the world and *our* own personal stories—to a good future.

I want to end a sermon about Job with Jesus. Not because I feel like I have to forcibly tag Jesus on to the end of an OT sermon, but because I think that Jesus is final Word of God and the interpretive key to any faithful reading of Scripture.

Meghan Larissa Good puts it this way in *The Bible Unwrapped*:

[T]he Bible has a clear center. The Bible is a solar system in which every piece orbits a single radiating Star. Some planets may orbit closely and others at further remove, **but all of them trace a path of meaning by their relationship to Christ...** What we have seen in Jesus surpasses in clarity and brilliance everything that came before. They are the candle, but he is the sun. They are the echo, but he is the originating call.¹

All of Scripture in some way is defined by Jesus, points to him, finds fulfillment in him.

And so, I think that Job, the innocent sufferer, points ultimately to Jesus, the final innocent sufferer. In Job, we see the expression of the *human* desire to understand suffering. In Jesus, we see *God* entering into suffering personally.

[image]

¹ Meghan Larissa Good, *The Bible Unwrapped* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2018), 186.

Some of you might recognize this image. This is on the wall of the CMU chapel where I spent the first part of the week. I spent a lot of time looking at it this week.

But to me, this image seemed to symbolize the story of Job.

The tree in the background symbolized, for me, the goodness of creation. It speaks to me of a world of beauty and order, a world where water and sunlight reliably produce beautiful trees, a world where faithfulness and justice and peace are rewarded, and their opposites are not. It's a world that works like Job's friends insisted it did.

Over this, is a crude, ugly cross.

It speaks of the reality of human pain, the pain we cause and the pain we endure, the pain that makes sense, the pain that doesn't. It speaks of the rupture into the created order that human sin introduced.

It tells the truth about suffering and gives us permission to lament. It also points beyond lament to the hope of resurrection.

Most importantly, it insists that God takes on the pain of the world.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus enters human suffering—your suffering and mine—not as an explanation, not as the solution to a logical puzzle, not as the decoding of a philosophical riddle, but as the true innocent sufferer, the lamb of God who takes away the sin and the suffering of his broken world.

Job felt that the arrows of the almighty were in him and poisoning him from the inside. Jesus takes the poison, absorbs it, breaks the cycle, forgives the world, defeats the power of sin, death, and the devil, and holds out the hope of new life, even in the midst of suffering.

This is good news. This is the sun around which all else orbits. This is our originating call. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

