

Sunday January 23rd, 2022

PRAYER: Your law is perfect, O God; your ways are just. We praise you for Christ, who makes known your Word. Gold's value is nothing compared to the salvation you offer. The sweetness of honey is but a foretaste of the feast you prepare. Made alive by your mercy and renewed in your Spirit, we come adoring your goodness, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God of wonder and infinite grace. God who loves all souls, regardless of their history, their ethnicity, their struggles and even their sins, we marvel at how great your love is. How soon we forget that we can love others and others can love us because you first loved us. Without your love, no one could love their children or their spouses, or their friends, nor even love you.

Your love cuts through all the baggage we carry, all the nonsense we espouse as the truth, all the posturing, and anything else that demeans you or ourselves or others. How true it is that especially when contemplating your love, we see as though "through a glass dimly". So much distorts how we see you, and others and especially ourselves. In our anxiety, and fear we claim so called truths about your love that simply are false. We injure and push away so many people who simply want to know your divine love.

Even though Jesus declared from the cross "that it is finished", we demand more effort from others to reach our expectations of inclusion in your love. How presumptuous that is. How dare we put qualifications and expectations on your free grace.

We have distorted your gospel. Making it out to be about earning our way in. Making you seem so vengeful and angry, when your Son Jesus simply came and offered us, no pleaded with us to come and participate you're your good kingdom. Why O God, when Jesus describes your kingdom as a party, like a wedding, do we act and preach like it is a burden, or a somber thing like a funeral. Where, O God, is our joy. When O God will we cease to strive to gain something we already have; namely your love and acceptance?

Forgive us Lord, and help us to stop thinking we are the ones who are the gate keepers to your grace. Help us we plead, to urge those who are living in hellish situation to come and find the freedom, the peace, the hope they so long for.

Grant us wisdom and resources to make a difference in our community in moving it from darkness to light. End we pray hunger, poverty and addiction, that stalks so many places in our town. We read in your word that your coming will bring new wine and abundant grain, and so we pray that the instruments of death, like drug paraphernalia, will be turned to opportunity, and food, and hope.

Jesus said that the scriptures were fulfilled in the hearing of his home village; so why do we carry on like we are still waiting. We have good news for the poor, we declare release to the captives, recovery of sight for the blind and that the oppressed may be set free. Grant us a surety in our hearts that this time, this moment, is the year of the Lord's favour.

BENEDICTION: O Christ, you have blessed the members of your body with many and diverse gifts. Now send us forth to bear witness to the oneness of our God and the unity of your church. You have given none of us all the gifts for bringing your kingdom to earth. But you have given each of us some gift for bringing your kingdom to earth. Therefore, let us not hold back, lamenting the gifts we do not have; but let us press ahead, employing the gifts we do have. Amen.

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Job 2:11-2:26
“With Friends Like this...”

Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson go on a camping trip. After a good dinner and a bottle of wine, they retire for the night, and go to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes wakes up and nudges his faithful friend. "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see." "I see millions and millions of stars, Holmes" replies Watson. "And what do you deduce from that?" Watson ponders for a minute. "Well, Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets.

Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful, and that we are a small and insignificant part of the universe." But what does it tell you, Holmes?" Holmes is silent for a moment. "Watson, you idiot!" he says. "Someone has stolen our tent!"

Friendship is a funny thing. Most of us want friends, but often we want friends on our terms. We all seem to have fair weather friends. People who are quite willing to interact with us, as long as things are okay, but seem to disappear when the going gets rough. Friends who abide with us in the darkest of days are rare indeed. That is why the story of Jesus in the garden, before the crucifixion, is so painful to read.

He took Peter, James, and John (his inner circle) with him to pray, and they fell asleep. It portrays how utterly alone Jesus was at this moment. Our friend Job is utterly alone when we see him in chapter 2. We find him on a rubbish pile, alone. His wife is gone, and his only companion is a pottery shard. I suspect as he dwelled on the garbage pile, his mind would be flooded with painful memories of his children and his former glory.

What happens now, presses home the loneliness of Job as never before. The chapter begins well. Job's three friends have heard of this disaster that has befallen him. It took some time to get to Job, as there was a delay to get news to them, and then they traveled to the rubbish heap. The word friend in wisdom literature is a much richer word than we use today. Friends mentioned in Job are men who stuck closer than a brother. Much like Jonathan and David.

We are heartened to know that Job had friends like this, and we read that they came together to see Job; meaning they first arranged to meet and then came. It could have been weeks before they got there, do to distance etc. They come together, perhaps, because they know it will be challenging to comfort Job as just one individual. These three men were not fair-weather friends, and until they begin to speak, everything is a great comfort to Job.

They come to show him sympathy, which means to enter into his grief and comfort him as a way to ease his pain. These men were sincere in their desire to help Job. Just to clarify; the Hebrew word for comfort *nachem* is not the same as empathy. Empathy means to try and feel as the other person is feeling. *Nachem*, means taking action. It primarily means speaking to the one suffering. To their heart and mind.

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When Joseph comforted his brothers in Genesis, he did so as a way to lessen their fearfulness. We know very little about these friends. The most we can deduce is about Eliphaz from Teman, which is an Edomite town. It may be important to note his hometown as Edom was renowned as a place of wisdom. In Obadiah 8, God states to the prophet that he will, “destroy the wise men of Edom.”

There are many things to know as they approach Job. They found him in the rubbish pile near the city. They struggled to recognize him. He was so pale, and thin, and racked with guilt. Some of us have experienced this visiting a friend or family member who has experienced a tragedy and being shocked how they have changed. There was no friendly embrace as there had been in the past, and instead he seemed like a stranger to them.

We read that their first response was, they wept. Not with sad tears, but in shock at the fact that their dear friend was now in a far-off place they could not reach. Job has torn his robe, so in solidarity, they tear theirs as well, and pour dust on their heads as a symbol of death. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes. Then they sit on the ground; not on carpets or cushions. Being on the ground symbolically represents being close to the place of death (Sheol).

They sit for seven days and seven nights like the Jewish wake called Shivah. Job, this great man, has been reduced to this unrecognizable heap on a rubbish pile. If, for the most part, Job’s friends get it wrong, at least at the beginning, they get it right in being there for Job. The seven days of silence, indicate that the three friends already saw Job as dead. You do not talk to a dead man; you simply mourn over one.

Whatever this silence means, it just underscores how very alone Job is. The three friends can sympathize to a point, but they will fail to comfort Job. Suffering does that to us. It cuts us off from others. Even a shared loss is experienced differently by each person. It is one reason that couples who have lost a child often end up separating. They cannot comfort each other. They suffer differently.

Job’s suffering, foreshadows another person, who begged his friends to sit and wait with him while he was in anguish. Jesus said, “My soul is very sorrowful, even unto death. Remain here and watch”. Then on the cross, echoing Job centuries before, Jesus cries out, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” Jesus suffered, but his deepest suffering may have been his loneliness.

In response to the pain he is experiencing, Job undertakes a soliloquy expressing his grief and the depth of suffering. Job is not speaking to his friends or even to God. He is speaking to himself. We begin to see the heart of the matter in the book of Job. A big question for all of us is can we be absolutely devastated to the point of sitting on a rubbish heap of dreams and aspirations and still claim we walk closely with Christ.

It’s not an idle question. In today’s Evangelical church there is a strong and enticing trend that people of true faith will never hurt or suffer and will prosper as never before. Have faith in Jesus and you will never be: poor, suffer depression, anxiety, or physical distress. The challenge to this idea comes from this chapter of Job.

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Job suffers, precisely because he was consistently faithful. He was “blameless”, remember. Satan wants to go after him because he is godly, not because he is not. So, Job is at the end of his rope. He curses the day he was born. Chapter after chapter, Job, the God-fearing man, laments and protests. We must dare not soften this and we must remember that at the end of the book, God says Job has spoken correctly about him.

Satan has done a thorough job going after Job. His property, his children, his physical body, but we often forget he has also gone after Job’s heart. Here in chapter three, and several times later, we finally hear from Job. His pain is real, and it is dishonest to say it isn’t, or to water it down in any way. Job’s words include a curse. Not a curse of God, as Satan said he would utter and his wife encouraged him to utter.

He curses the day his was born. He even curses the night he was conceived. Job takes words that express darkness, and heaps them on the day of his conception and day of birth. The darkness is not about the number of lumens, but it speaks to the darkness of death. It is a darkness like being in a mineshaft. In Amos 5:8 we read that when God brings salvation, he “turns darkness into morning.”

Job wants this all-consuming darkness to take the day of his birth, so he can avoid all this deep heart wrenching pain. He longs for the Leviathan, the creature of chaos, to rise up and wipe his day of birth out. Remember in Lord of the rings, when the fellowship of the ring makes their way through the mines of Moria and awakes that terribly beast in the lake. It causes such havoc. Job wants to see this come upon his self.

Job then undertakes an anguished lament divided in two parts. Both sections begin with the central question, why! One image that emerges, is Job’s desire to go to the place of the dead (Sheol). Job acknowledges that no matter how powerful, or how rich you are, everyone ends up there. Job has nothing, so why not go there now. End this suffering. If I had to be born, he says, why could I have not been stillborn.

Job knows no rest, or peace, because he has now fully identified with the weak and powerless. He is wallowing in his pain, because he cannot understand why this is happening to him. Why does a man who is a believer, a man of godliness and piety, suffer with such mind-numbing intensity? This shakes the very foundation of how Job believed the world worked. So, Job ends his speech with a desperate question.

Job’s question is not about Job individually, but all people. It is from God we receive good things and bad things. There is a “bitterness of soul”, which means deep distress that crushes us. Death is now the treasure Job seeks. He figures that at least in death he might understand all this. In verse 23 he says that he himself, and others, are walking on a way that is hidden from God’s blessing. It is a God-forsaken walk.

Job feels hedged in. His world is shrinking and he is trapped. He says poignantly, “For my sighing comes instead of my bread, and my groanings are poured out like water.” Job is shouting with everything he’s got. “Why God?” The application of this chapter for you and I is very important.

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We need to recognize that into the life of a believer when the future looks bleak and we can only look back with regret. Like Job we have looked heavenward and asked, “Why God?” But even in the deepest darkness you cannot avoid God. C.S. Lewis wrote a wonderful personal book about his experiences in losing his beloved wife called *A Grief Observed*. He finds himself echoing Job in asking “Where is God” in this darkness?

Lewis writes, *this is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing him...if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be-or so it feels-welcomed with open arms. But go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. And after that, silence. You may well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once.*

Yet Job cannot turn away from the door. He is restless. Job cannot abide the way things are. He gushing forth energy to discover why God has done this to him. A restless man is not a defeated man. If there is no hope why bother asking why? And Job asks why; over and over again. Chapter 3 ends with Job sitting with his three friends, who want to comfort Job but do not know how.

Job’s experience foreshadows another great man, the greatest man, who understands the deepest of darkness because he experienced it for all of us. The cross is a testament to the emptiness of those who shout to us in our distress “Cheer up! Pull yourself together!” Such sentiments only add to our pain, making us feel guilty that our faith does not lead us to smile even when the roof is crashing in.

What is most beautiful are those believers, who despite the torment of life, rise out of the ashes to do something profoundly incredible. I am not sure you have ever heard the troubling story of William Cowper, the noted poet and hymn writer. His life was full of tragedy from an early age. His mother died when he was six. His father sent him off to boarding school where he was cruelly bullied, likely effecting his mental health for years to come.

His fiancée’s father forbade his marriage to his daughter. He had several mental breakdowns and three times he tried to take his own life. He was committed to an asylum where he met a Christian who six months later led him to Christ. It was an amazing change in his life, yet four more times he fell into deep depressions. One of the last things he is said to have uttered before he died in 1800 was, “I feel unutterable despair.”

Despite it all, no one doubts Cowper was a believer. He left to the church some of its more beloved hymns, like “O For a Closer Walk with God”. The hymn talks about how his personal despair was like an idol keeping him from God. Cowper’s despair had nothing to do with backsliding, nor was Job’s despair. At play here is the painful reality that all of us, at some point, despite our faith, look back at somethings in our lives with regret.

So, Job, sits with his friends but he is alone. Alone in his misery and his dark thoughts. Why? Why? Job shouts. It is at the end of chapter 3 we have this sort of pregnant pause.

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Job is still holding onto some hope and we know this because of the restlessness he displays in his words. After seven days of silence, Job now hears his friends clear their throats, preparing to speak. To say something to ease his torment. The reader waits with anticipation that some insight, so pearl of wisdom might be dispensed to one who suffers like Job. But what we are about to see, is not comfort, but actually a growing anger and resentment from his “friends”.

For seven days they said nothing, and only after Job expresses his anguish, do they pontificate or they sermonize Job. It is so odd that when meeting such a deeply distressed friend, they actually get angry at Job, and we will delve into why this is beginning next week. The only thing I will say now in preparation for the next part of our journey is that the friends’ response to Job just further underscores how utterly alone he is.

Like Jesus on the cross, Job is forsaken. Forsaken by his friends, and at the heart of it all, he feels forsaken by God.