

Sunday March 13th, 2022

Lent II

Job 22:1-11; 23:1-7

“Oh That!”

A woman asked the priest to forgive her because she committed the sin of having plenty of pride and that she looked in the mirror and say to herself that she is beautiful. Then the priest said that it's not a sin, it is a mistake.

A couple had two little boys, ages 8 and 10, who were excessively mischievous. The two were always getting into trouble and their parents could be assured that if any mischief occurred in their town their two young sons were in some way involved. The parents were at their wits end as to what to do about their sons' behavior. The mother had heard that a clergyman in town had been successful in disciplining children in the past, so she asked her husband if he thought they should send the boys to speak with the clergyman.

The husband said, 'We might as well. We need to do something before I really lose my temper!' The clergyman agreed to speak with the boys, but asked to see them individually. The 8-year-old went to meet with him first. The clergyman sat the boy down and asked him sternly, 'Where is God?' The boy made no response, so the clergyman repeated the question in an even sterner tone, 'Where is God?' Again, the boy made no attempt to answer. So, the clergyman raised his voice even more and shook his finger in the boy's face, 'WHERE IS GOD?'

At that the boy bolted from the room and ran directly home, slamming himself in the closet. His older brother followed him into the closet and asked what had happened. The younger brother replied, 'We are in BIG trouble this time. God is missing and they think we did it.'

We enter the last cycle of speeches by Job's friends, and today Eliphaz takes another crack at it. At first read, Eliphaz' words seem to be a gracious invitation to repentance, but the truth is much more sinister than that. All through the book of Job we have seen where words are important, but the context is often the truth. It is why when Job is quoted by preachers, it is often misquoted. Verses from the friends' speeches are taken out of their context and misapplied.

Eliphaz is not giving a warm invitation to Job to repent here. His words amount to a cruel and very hostile accusation that Job is not just an unrepentant sinner, he is a gross sinner of the worse kind. In Eliphaz' mind, it is the only explanation for what transpired to Job. Just a reminder that it is not a casual arm's length accusation Eliphaz is making. It is upfront and personal, spoken to Job's face. This is a specific charge leveled at Job.

Eliphaz begins by oddly stating his opinion that no person can be of a benefit to God. The word for man here, really means a strong man like a warrior. There is no way anyone can put God in debt. However, righteous and “blameless” we may be, we cannot guilt God which results in God owing us anything. Eliphaz is concluding that God is dispassionate to any individual. God is not affected by our piety, or our sin.

It seems a fitting idea, this one of Eliphaz, but because we know about the beginning reasons for all this, God's glory does seem to depend on Job's piety. If Job is proven by The Satan to be superficially pious, the honour of God is impugned.

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Eliphaz however doesn't know about the throne room debate. Eliphaz continues, but the tone has changed significantly. At the beginning Eliphaz made the charitable assumption that Job was pious. (4:3,4) Now Eliphaz states clearly, he thinks Job is an impenitent and guilty sinner. Not only a sinner, but an "abundant" sinner. He is a massive, overwhelmingly gross sinner. But it's not just his harsh conclusion that spills from Eliphaz' mouth. Oh, no it's not.

To somehow back up his claim, Eliphaz then begins to list some of Job's supposed sins. The basis of most of what he charges Job with, are that Job abused his power. He denied the basic needs of other people to maintain his own family's good life. Job held all the cards and he refused to lift a figure to help anyone. Job went after the most vulnerable people in society; namely widows and orphans; two groups essential to God's covenant with Israel.

Eliphaz claims Job had it all, and he threw his weight around, controlling everything and everyone. No wonder then that God is punishing him. Your sin, Job, explains the hellish life descending on you. Perhaps we have heard similar words as these spoken to ourselves or someone we love, who are experiencing monumental struggles. "You brought this on yourself" they say". Ministers have been known to say similar things.

Some saw AIDS is punishment for homosexual activity. Hurricanes destroy cities as God's judgment. You are sick because you did something wrong. Eliphaz tells Job that his situation, and his thinking, are as old as time itself. By denying Eliphaz' view of God's relationship with the world, Job is only revealing further, how wicked he is. The way we talk about the nature of God reveals our heart's true status.

Eliphaz declares that he refuses to walk in the counsel of the wicked, and that includes Job. God is dispassionate, and God punishes the wicked whoever they are. Then he suggests that Job, if you agree that you are wicked, you will be at peace with God. If you do that Job, God will give you good things. Again, this was The Satan's idea from the beginning. Job only honours God because he gets something from it.

If he repents, Job will experience four blessings from God. First: God will bring his presence back into Job's life. Then God will once again hear Job's prayers. Thus, whenever Job makes a decision about anything, it will come about. That leads to blessing number three. If Job repents, He will enjoy prosperity again. Then the final blessing is that Job, because of his own experience will be a source of blessing to others.

What are we to say about Eliphaz' words? It reads like a well thought out logical explanation of the way the world works. Like all the speeches in Job, there are fragments of truth. God does want men and women to humbly repent, and he will bless them with a right relationship with him. It sounds right, because that is how we deal with each other. Treat me right and I'll treat you right. Quid pro quo.

The problem, however, is still the same. Job is penitent. He has been all along. Job has daily given prayers and sacrifices to ask for forgiveness for himself and his family. To pressure someone to confess sins they are unaware of, is to ask them to compromise their integrity. It is beyond cruel and a miscarriage of authority.

Job's response to Eliphaz is based on what are really two hopes of the Gospel. Job longs for vindication of the righteous, specifically for himself, and punishment for the wicked. Every week we pray this same longing in the Lord's prayer, designed to get us to align our desires and affections with God. Once again Job depicts himself as he is; a broken man. Life itself tastes bitter to him. It is so bad; he cannot even raise his own hand to do the simplest things.

Job's desire is finally boiled down to one heart felt task. He longs to find God. In chapter 14 he asked God to hide him in Sheol until his wrath was passed, but now, he longs to be near to God. He wishes his case before God could be written down for eternity. Job again takes great comfort in the fact he has a mediator. Someone who could tell God of his great love for him. Tell God of his desire to live a "blameless" life.

More than getting his wealth back, or his family back, he wants God back in his life. Job admits that his biggest problem is that God is invisible. He looks to his left or right, forward or back, but Job cannot see God. It is interesting that this inability to locate God, is really about control. When you know where someone is, you can control them. God cannot be seen; therefore, he cannot be controlled.

However, even though Job cannot see God, he has confidence that ultimately, he will be vindicated. He has not wavered in his faith. Even if he does not see God, he loves him and his words. God is refining him and he will be found of purest gold. This is familiar to the refining mentioned in 1 Peter 1:8. As confident as Job is, however, he still has within his heart a great fear. As pure as Job is, he knows God will do as God does.

Job wants an encounter with God but he fears it. The bible has several references to the idea that if we actually saw God we would immediately perish. Believers are warned in Hebrews 12:29 that "our God is a consuming fire". We might also remember Isaiah's visit to God's throne room which he describes as literally ruining him. "I am a man with unclean lips living among a people with unclean lips", the prophet said.

In chapter 24 Job talks about his second hope that the wicked will be punished. I should point out to you that many commentators think that chapters 24-27 are scrambled up. Sometimes the words of Job do not seem to align neatly with what he has already said. The problem with not thinking the passages is in sequence, is that we assume an emotionally charged debate that is unfolding would proceed in an orderly logical fashion.

Likely the passages are not scrambled by the speakers but a reflection of their emotions. Job is getting tossed to and fro by his: feelings, his fears, and his faith. We understand why he may change his mind on a few things.

Job begins by claiming that the wicked will be punished, because it will be a vindication of those they victimized. But just as God is not seen, his judgment on the wicked may also be unseen. Job lists the crimes the wicked have committed, which center on the powerful victimizing the weak. The wicked move boundary markers, stealing flocks. They take a widow's ox as collateral on money owed, meaning she cannot farm. The poor take to hiding their possessions from the wicked who covet them.

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Job goes on to describe the impact of this wickedness. How the poor have to scrounge for food or hunt wild game just to feed themselves. Today we might find such children in the garbage heaps of major cities digging through the trash for something useful. Their clothes are rags, and they bed down under rock outcrops to have some shelter. These poor souls are in Job's opinion not in this situation by their own hand. They are there, because of the exploitation of the wicked.

But the very worse crime is that in their poverty, the poor end up selling their own children as slaves to get loans they need to survive. Today children labour in sweat shops doing dangerous work, or third world mines digging by hand, or being conscripted as child soldiers. Not only then, do the wicked snatch animals, they also snatch children. The poor indentured slaves tread on grain or stomping grapes but they go hungry and thirsty.

I am mindful of John Steinbeck's story *The Grapes of Wrath*. Judgment is necessary according to Job because of the misery the wicked have perpetrated all over the world. This is a big part of what Job would see if he was praying, "Thy Kingdom Come." The wicked have reversed the world order. Humans were never created to commit such atrocities on each other. Yet infractions continue, both in the "daylight", meaning in the open, and at night, meaning in secret.

Job just piles up the list of wickedness, and the ultimate punishment they will receive. Sheol will devour unrepentant sinners. The wicked will die, never having been remembered. But not yet, despite what Job's friends think. The wicked may indeed rise high, but their lives are unstable. As Job pointed out earlier, you can see plainly how some wicked people do alright for themselves and some "blameless" people suffer.

Even though they are enjoying a sense of security now, does not mean God's eyes are not on them. God does see, and God does care about what is going on in this world. As the bible often admonishes us, we must care for the poor, and the downtrodden. Just like in the time of Abraham "the iniquity of the Amorites" was "not yet complete" (Gen. 15:16) so the same holds for the wicked in Job's time.

And also, in our day, as the parable of the wheat and tares makes plain. (Matt. 13:30) It sounds like Job is agreeing with his friends here, and in some ways, he is, but with one major difference. Job is stressing the delay. The patience of God to wait. This seems like a tenet of our faith that God is patient, because "he desires that not one shall perish", but for Job it was a revelation. His friends made it seem that God's judgment was immediate and without mercy.

But Job pointed out that all need do is look around at the lives of people known to be wicked and you know it isn't true. So, Job prays that God's kingdom would come. He knows full well that it hasn't happened yet. God's will, is not yet prevailing in every corner of the globe. But in praying these words, he is testifying to his hope that one day it will be true. No wonder Jesus calls us to pray the same prayer.

All through this terrible experience, Job is looking for assurance. He wants to know that his faith is not in vain. He is confronting an issue most of us confront that our faith often makes life even more challenging. The rock group U2 is fronted by its lead singer Bono. As a rock star he is an icon to many young people.

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Bono has for many years been active in responding to poverty in Africa and what may surprise some of you is that he does his charitable work because of his faith in Christ. Bono has therefore inspired millions of Christian young people to put their faith into actions. His foundation's motto is "Make poverty history". Bono's faith is rarely questioned, so it puzzled a friend when U2 released a song entitled "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For".

His friends wondered how Bono could make such a declaration in his song considering his faith. How can you experience the transforming grace of God and then ask such a question? "Doesn't your relationship with Christ answer the questions for which you have been seeking answers?" Bono replied to his friend, "Oh, coming to know Christ didn't answer all my questions. In reality, it raised a whole lot of new questions." (Stories to Feed Your Soul, p.184)

This is the same truth Job is facing. It is through his suffering, and knowing God, that has made his struggle even more intense. If Job did not have faith in God, much of his inner turmoil would not exist. A faith that wrestles with God is a living faith, not an intellectual exercise or simple tradition. Job is inviting all of us to get into the ring with God, like Jacob did, and even though we can never prevail, we can grasp our creator and know whatever happens he shall always love us.