

Family Stories

finding OUR STORIES
in HIS STORY

Although today's passage gives us some pause, there is Good News – the gospel- in the Book of Job. This scripture included in our Canon to help us reflect upon who we are and who God is. We have question after question – and so few answers. It almost makes me want to ignore the text as being too removed from my life. Not relevant. Maybe back then but not today.

Most of us gathered here today have had a pretty good life. Sure, we have had our troubles. We have had our sorrows. We've smiled when things aren't going so well. We've responded "I'm fine" when we're really not – because that's what you do in public- and even with your family sometimes.

Yes, each of us has troubles and disappointments. We have lost a job- or not gotten - a job. We have watched our parents, siblings or spouses die and not all of those deaths were what we euphemistically call easy. We live with chronic pain and doctors who tell us that there isn't anything else they can do for us. We have struggled with wanting this or that even as we intellectually know that we have so much more than most other people on earth. We have watched our savings decline in value through no fault of our own but simply in reaction to wild swings of the market. Our sense of security has been punctured by things outside of our control.

Job and his troubles seem so far away- so far removed from our life that we can shrug it off as "that's nice" – and it remains an intellectual exercise rather than a gut-wrenching experience.

Perhaps the Book of Job is a bit like algebra. I have to learn it because somebody decreed long, long ago that it was to be part of the curriculum. It's just there as part of what you have to learn in 9th grade. Almost no one, except math professors, believes they will have to use it again – it's irrelevant. Or, if it is relevant, we now have computers who can figure out all the variables and solve the equations. It becomes something to sit through until we get to the good stuff.

Algebra comes from Arabic and means "the reunion of broken parts."¹ It also means "bone-setter." Job's story is about both of these definitions, really. Job's life has been shattered and is in many broken parts. Job needs a bone setter. A bone setter is someone who sees brokenness and helps realign the broken parts so the brokenness is back to the original straight limb. Then, the bonesetter wraps or casts the broken pieces and tells us to let them heal. And, in time, if we pay attention to the instructions, the bones knit together and we are able to walk or throw a ball –

¹ <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=algebra> (October 13, 2012).

or do what we used to do, as well as we were before the bones were broken. And sometimes, if we don't get good help or we don't pay attention to the bonesetter's instructions- the broken bones don't heal straight and we're left forever after with a limp or a crooked arm. We're left with pain that reminds us daily about what was broken and did not heal correctly.

Job's story reminds us that life is not always fair. God is not always fair or just *at least as we define it*. God is not someone put in a box and stored on the top closet shelf while things are going right only to be taken down when things go wrong. Hebrews reminds us that the word of God is living and active and is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Thomas Frank reflects that "the Christian life presents no greater challenge than finding one's way forward with integrity and responsibility in the dark."² Job cries out that *if only* he could confront God and present his case, then God would surely respond. After all, God is merciful and just. We are called to approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

Where is justice, though, if Job's situation is a result of a bet between God and the Satan? A bet in which God responds to the Satan's taunting by saying, "ok then- you can mess with Job and take all that Job has- just spare Job's life." What did Job do to deserve this? Nothing. Job is the pawn between God and the Satan in their discussion about whether Job- and human beings in general- can remain faithful to God when God seems to be absent.

Job looks for God and does not find God. Job goes forward but God is not there – or backward and he cannot perceive God- or turns to the left and God hides- and turn to the right and God cannot be seen (Job 23: 8-9). When, in the words of Psalm 22 "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And are so far from my cry and from the words of my distress?"

And does this passage- or even the whole book of Job really have any relevance when our life is going well? Maybe it is really just something I'll put aside until – *if* – the day comes when life turns upside down. And then I'll pray that I never experience the situation that Job does. That's a nice lesson for other people but not for me.

One of the cultural lessons that many of us were taught that it is **not ok** to be mad at God. We are to bow our head and accept whatever is handed to us- and to smile and respond "the will of God, thanks be to God!"

Or as someone said this week when a hoped-for participation in a search for a new bishop in another diocese didn't materialize: "That's a blessing." *Really?* Wow, that's an interesting way of looking at disappointment. Now, maybe it really is a blessing but it seems to me that acknowledging and processing the disappointment might be a truer first step.

In the Gospel reading, did the young man respond to Jesus saying "sell all you have, give the money to the poor, and then come, follow me" with "That's a blessing." Somehow, I doubt it.

² Thomas Frank in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 148.

We're told the young man was shocked and went away grieving (Mark 10: 21-22). Other translations are that the young man was sad or gloomy. Shocked, sad or gloomy: what Jesus said was not expected and was not welcome.

One suggestion is that Jesus is asking the young man "where is your focus" or "what is your identity?" What are the factors that go into who you are and the image you present to the world? When who you understand yourself to be is torn away from you, who do you turn to as you create a new identity.

Some of you may have experienced a disconnect when you retired or left a job that defined who you were in the world. Who are you now that you are no longer a business executive or a professor or a spouse or a parent? Who are we when our faith has been shaken to the core?

A story is told of a professor at a seminary whose spouse died and with that death he lost his faith. He did not know who he was now that he was single. He went to the President of the seminary and handed in his resignation as he no longer had faith so he did not see how he continue to teach theology. The President refused his resignation, telling the professor: We will have faith for you at this time in your life. Let us be your community while you grieve and while you learn who you are now. And, over time, the professor's faith did return. He did continue to teach and with a deeper understanding of Job's feelings of loss.

Job looked to the right and to the left and in front of him and in back of him. For a time, Job could not find God anywhere. But by the end of the book of Job, the relationship between God and Job is restored. The relationship, now, though, is not what it was before the events we read about. Job came to a greater and different understanding about God's place in our lives and the mystery of faith.

Job challenges God – in fact, he really rants and rails at God. Where are you, God? Why is this happening? What did I do to deserve this? The hard part is that, at least at this point in the Book of Job, God doesn't answer.

My complaint is bitter. I look to the left- I look to the right- I look ahead of me and behind me – and there is no God. If you aren't here, God, then I wish I could vanish in the dark. Job is right to be befuddled and confused and angry. What has happened to Job isn't the way his society said life would be. It isn't fair. It isn't just. It isn't how he understood the relationship between himself and God to be. Job's life is broken into many pieces. Job needs a bonesetter – someone who can reunite those broken pieces.

When we believe that we are in control, we can be deaf to other ways of doing things. We can be deaf to our own faults and our own limitations. Sometimes a situation needs breaking in order to become stronger. Sometimes we need a bonesetter who works with us in our pain and our confusion. Ranting and railing against an unfair situation can exhaust us.

You've seen it – the young child who screams he isn't tired when you see the heavy eyes and the cranky behavior. He insists he doesn't need a nap. And then in the next instance is sound asleep.

The emotional temper tantrum has worn him out. Now he can take that nap he so desperately needs.

Ranting and railing to God when God seems to be absent. I cannot find God when I look to the left and to the right. I cannot find God when I look before me or behind me. I exhaust myself with my demands that God do what I want. Only then does God appear. God's been waiting for me to wear myself out with my demands that God behave in a certain way. Maybe it isn't today. Maybe it isn't tomorrow. And maybe for some people it will never be.

But for many of us there has been or there will be that dark night when we need a bonesetter and when we need our community of faith to help us through our grief. The Book of Job and the Psalms remind us that we can rant and rail at God. It is ok to feel lost and lonely. We do not have to deny that we are in pain.

My prayer is that this congregation be like the seminary faculty was to the professor who had lost his identity as a spouse and lost his faith. Let us have faith with and for those who are struggling. Let us be the ones who hold up our brothers and sisters within our community until they find their way again. After all, there is a bonesetter on call so let us reach out and make that call, knowing that the bonesetter will come and help us learn to live again. **Amen.**