

The (Im)patience of Job

*Sermon prepared by the Rev. Douglas Clark for October 11, 2015 – Ordinary 28
First Congregational Church, Haddam, CT*

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Scripture: Job 23:1-7

Then Job answered: “Today also my complaint is bitter; the hand of God is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what God would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me. There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.”

(image: “The Discomfort of Job,” by Bob Booth)



The Revised Common Lectionary for today and next Sunday offers us a brief visit with the Hebrew Bible Book of Job. Today we hear Job speaking; next Sunday we will hear God speaking.

Seen from one perspective, the book of Job has a simple plot. Man has everything. Man loses everything. Man perseveres through a time of trauma and anguish. Man gets everything back, and then some. And the moral of this simple folk tale? Faith rewarded.

Seen from another perspective, however, the book of Job is a complex story that raises more questions than it answers. It is a story that has no simple moral. In spite of what the letter of James says about the “patience of Job,” as the story unfolds, what gets revealed is the impatience of Job—and later the impatience of God. Today's reading and sermon are about the impatience of Job; next Sunday's reading and sermon will be about the impatience of God.

The story. There once was a man from Uz, which is both nowhere and everywhere. This man was the poster child for the prosperity gospel. He was righteous and he was rich and he had a wonderful family. When he woke up in the morning, everything was going his way. Then, one day, everything began to fall apart. The center could not hold. Even though Job believed he had done nothing wrong, even though he was convinced he had lived his life with the utmost integrity, he lost everything. He lost his riches, he lost his family, he lost his health, and he lost his faith in the goodness of God.

But Job was not completely bereft. He had some friends who heard about his suffering and who came to comfort him and to support him. And you know the best thing they did for him? They sat with him in silence for seven days. Seven days! They didn't try to cheer him up. They just sat there in unspoken solidarity with their friend. They were the embodiment of what we like to call a “ministry of presence.”

Seven **days** is an awful long time to be silent. Many of us are uncomfortable with a silence that lasts seven **seconds**. When Job finally breaks this seven-day silence, he fills the air with a torrent of words, cursing the day he was born and longing for death to bring an end to his suffering.

Just as Job's friends were horrified when they first saw the extent of suffering, so too are they horrified when they hear him curse the day he was born. So they try to talk him out of his despair, using the faith resources that mean the most to them—and, they assume, to their friend. They urge Job to turn to God in prayer, seeking comfort. They urge him to search his heart, and see if there is any wicked way in him (cf. Psalm 139:23-24). They urge him to think about the light at the end of the tunnel, to believe that God will eventually restore to him everything that he has lost.

But Job will have none of this. Just as the many well-intentioned words of his friends bring him no comfort, he is convinced that prayer will not bring him comfort. If there is a moral arc in the universe that bends toward justice, Job cannot see it from where he sits. After one of his friends accuses him of being a rich man who ignored the needs of the poor, he does not respond to his friend's accusation but instead gets caught up in his own thoughts.

What Job in his own thoughts seeks and wants and needs is a kind of courtroom encounter with God, where he can present his case before God and, he believes, receive God's vindication. As he says in this morning's reading, "I would lay my case before him...Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me. There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge."

Biblical scholar Kathryn Schifferdecker has noted that Job makes two important moves in his response to his suffering. First he makes a move from silence to speech. Then he makes a move "from speaking only **about** God to speaking directly **to** God....Job speaks to God directly, honestly. He speaks in all his anger, pain, grief, and despair because he knows that God is big enough to handle it. He holds on to God with a fierce faith. He calls on God to answer him, to help him. He laments, in other words, and through that lament, something like hope is born."¹

As some have said, Job is Everyman—or Everywoman. Although his descent from happiness to despair is extreme, it's the kind of thing that could happen to any one of us—or has already happened to some of us. Bad things do happen to good people. Even though the moral arc of the universe is long, and it bends toward justice (Martin Luther King Jr.), there is still far too much injustice and suffering in the world. Think of the millions of refugees who have been forced to flee their homes and live in crowded tent cities in refugee camps. Think of someone you know whose life was taken far too early by cancer.

Both the ancient book of Job and our lived human experience make clear that there are no easy answers to the question of why bad things happen to good people—or where God is when these things happen. What we can learn from the book of Job is how to make a journey with our friends from silence to speech to lament. There are bridges to cross that can bring us closer to God, even when it feels like we must abandon all hope, even when God seems to be at a great distance from us.

I think that Job's friends have often gotten a bad rap because Job rejects their theological explanations about the causes—and possible cure—of his suffering. But today, I want to honor Job's friends. After all, they came and sat with him in silence for seven days. When he was ready to speak, they heard him into speech. They gave him that bridge from silence into speech. Even though they were horrified by what Job said

¹http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching_print.aspx?commentary_id=1420.

when he burst forth from silence into speech, they stayed with him and did not flee from his anger and despair.

Job's friends did the best they could with the theology they had available to them. But their theology was not adequate to Job's experience of his situation, and so Job became impatient with both the words of his friends and the silence of God. He yearned to go beyond the realm of **theology** and into the realm of **theophany**: from words **about** God to a direct experience **of** God. He believed that he could present his case directly to God, that he could reason with God, who would give heed to him and acquit him forever. Just as Job had broken his silence, he wanted God to break God's silence: and he was impatient for this to happen.

I would call Job's impatience a kind of holy impatience. Even though we may not be able to fully identify with Job's intense suffering, with his profound anguish and despair, we can certainly identify with his holy impatience. We like to affirm that God is still speaking—and yet what we often experience is the silence of God.

Consider what's been happening in recent years in the experiences of so many churches like ours: declining worship attendance, declining Sunday school attendance, declining pledge income, declining energy among those who are still committed to the church. We've all been doing our best to be the church together. You've been trying your best to be good church people. My colleagues and I have been trying our best to be good pastors. Yet it seems that our labors have not been rewarded. And when we ask God, "What then shall we do about our situation?" it seems that God is silent. When we ask God what she expects of us in today's world, it seems that she chooses to remain silent.

Our anxiety about the present and future of our church is certainly not equivalent to Job's anguish about his unmitigated suffering. What we do have in common with Job, however, is our sense of the silence or even the absence of God. What we may also have in common with Job is a holy impatience with the way things are. And this could be a good thing.

A holy impatience with the way things are could move us to address God directly with our fears, our frustrations, even our anger about the decline of the church we care about. Remember: it's OK to get angry at God. God is big enough to handle all our anger, pain, grief, and despair.

A holy impatience with the way things are could move us to learn the language of lament: to be unafraid to give voice to our sense of the silence, even the absence, of God.

A holy impatience with the way things are could move us to call on God to answer us, to help us, to chastise us, to inspire us.

A holy impatience with the way things are could move us to take some risks, to try some new things, to be less fearful about the possibility of failure.

If, as I hope and expect, you and I and the Higganum church and the Middlesex Association will soon enter into a covenant for shared ministry during this time of transition for all of us, we will be doing a new thing together. (It will be a new thing for this town's Congregational churches, though certainly not a new thing in the wider church. Forty years ago, in my first full-time pastorate, I served a three-church parish in Williamstown.)

This new thing might be only a short-term partnership. This new thing could well evolve into a long-term partnership. There are no guarantees at this point—only hopes and expectations and uncertainties. Yes, there will be risks and obstacles along the way—as there always are when people are motivated by a holy impatience. But we clergy, and the congregations we serve, can't continue to do things the way we've always done them and expect different outcomes.

So on this fine October morning in the land of steady habits, may the word of God for us from the biblical book of Job give birth in us to a holy impatience. And as this holy impatience is being born, let us nurture it with the tender care we would give to a newborn son or daughter.