

“Wisdom in Mystery”

Job 23

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This morning we continue our sermon series on wisdom in the Bible. After exploring the wisdom found in Proverbs and Psalms the past 2 weeks, we turn this week to the book of Job. The story of Job is one that is familiar for many of us and has inspired numerous works of art, music, literature, and drama. The book opens and closes with 3 chapters written as a narrative that tells the story of this man named Job. He is wealthy both in material goods and family - owning 7,000 sheep and 3,000 camels, having a large family with many sons and daughter and great health. Not only that, but he is a model Jew who loves God and loves others wholeheartedly. Even God says “there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil” (Job 1:5). So when God has a conversation with this heavenly being called “the Adversary” about whose faithfulness might be tested it is Job that God suggests. And with that, Job loses all of his wealth and property, his children, and his health and is left sitting among the ashes of his former life.

This is where we often jump ahead to the end of this story where Job refuses to denounce God despite his suffering and God restores all of Job’s former wealth, family, and good health. It makes for a rather tidy story about staying faithful despite hardship, but it’s far from the whole story. Sandwiched between these 3 chapters of narrative are 39 more chapters of poetry describing a debate between Job and his friends about suffering in the world. It’s filled with rich imagery, deep questions, and it’s where we turn this morning to look for the wisdom of Job’s story in our own lives. This morning’s passage comes from the middle of that conversation with his friends as Job responds in chapter 23. Let us listen for the Word of God.

Then Job answered: “Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand 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 he 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. “If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him. But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold. My foot has held fast to his steps; I have kept his way and have not turned aside. I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have treasured in my bosom the words of his mouth. But he stands alone and who can dissuade him? What he desires, that he does. For he will complete what he appoints for me; and many such things are in his mind. Therefore I am terrified at his presence; when I consider, I am in dread of him. God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!

Of all of the wonderful poetry in this passage, the part that resonates most deeply with me is Job’s deep desire to *know*. “Oh that I knew where I might find God,” he says. “I would learn,” “I would understand,” “then I could reason with God.” Job would have fit in well in modern times and this era we call the “information age.” We now have more information available to us as a species than at any time before and the amount of information is growing exponentially. Any time a question pops into our heads - all we have to do now is pull out our smartphones and the answers to our questions are right at our fingertips.

While there are many advantages to technology and this explosion of information, there are also many challenges. As we become accustomed to having answers and information so readily available to us – so ingrained – we risk losing our ability to sit pondering the questions. While the research in this area is relatively young, studies have shown a correlation between the amount of time spent on a smartphone and our ability to reason.¹ With so much information, we risk “information overload” as our days become filled with emails, texts, Google searches, and distractions.² We spend so much time seek answers, we risk losing our ability to ask the right questions.

For Job, in the midst of tragedy that he experienced, all he wanted was more information so that he might find answers to his questions. Why has this happened? What does God have to say about this? Where is God? While I’m

¹ <http://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2015/03/09/391797518/easy-knowledge-can-be-a-dangerous-thing-maybe>

² <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/jan/18/modern-world-bad-for-brain-daniel-j-levitin-organized-mind-information-overload>

sure Job would've loved having a smartphone to help with these questions, I highly doubt it would have helped him find the answers he was looking for. Similarly, the questions of faith we ask in our own lives today can't be answered through any internet search or piece of information. The endeavor of faith requires a different approach, and it's in Job's lack of answers where we can begin looking not for the knowledge or answers to our questions - but for wisdom about how we too might wrestle with life's big questions.

The first thing Job teaches us about wrestling with those big questions is to do so honestly. Job does not hold anything back in his raw and honest questions, complaints, and charges towards God. After he experienced all of his losses – the first words he speaks are about the day he was born, saying “Let the day perish in which I was born...let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, or light shine on it!” (Job 3:3-4). Wow, why don't you tell us how you really feel, Job? Here are some more brutally honest words from him: “Why did I not die at birth?” (3:11), “Where then is my hope?” (17:15), “What is the Almighty, that we should serve him?” (21:15) Job was certainly not hesitant about sharing his deepest feelings and questions!

One of the places I see this same sort of honest questioning is every year with our confirmation classes – we can learn a lot from our 8th graders. Every year in confirmation we spend time talking about questions of faith. All of the confirmands are given some slips of paper to write down whatever questions they have, and then we spend time sharing our questions with one another. Here are some of the questions they've shared over the past few years:

What does God look like?

Does God hear our prayers?

How do we know God is with us?

Why are we here?

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Why do good things happen to bad people?

Why does God not show him/herself more clearly or by actions?

Why do innocent people come down with diseases?

What happens after death?

Where are you, God? Why don't you help me?

Why do you take those we love away from us?

What is God's plan for me?

Is God real?

If that's not honestly asking the deep questions of life and faith, I don't know what is! Imagine what our life together would look like if we regularly raised these sorts of questions that our 8th graders are pondering. It's something the church hasn't always done a good job of fostering. We spend so much time on answers, on knowledge, on certainty, that we can forget to be honest with our questions. We put pastors with fancy degrees up in big, solid wood or stone pulpits that convey certainty and truth. We read liturgy and sing songs with big words and terms that require a dictionary just to figure out what we're saying. We Presbyterians often wear robes with roots to the academic tradition of the church. So much of what we do says "we have all the answers!" when in fact there's so much more we don't know than what we do.

What this means is that we don't often have enough spaces in our faith communities for the pure honesty found in the words of Job. I hear from so many people who express fear of going to a Bible study because they feel like they don't know enough. We so often feel like we need to have all of the answers and expressing questions or doubts can feel awkward or even taboo. Yet Job reminds us of the deep faithfulness that comes when we express our deepest questions of faith. It's okay to not know – none of us has all of the answers. Admitting our questions and doubts doesn't mean we aren't faithful, just as Job so faithfully expressed his questions while still remaining a model of faithfulness. God can handle whatever questions or doubts we have – we just have to be willing to share them.

The second thing Job teaches us about wrestling with those big questions is the importance of doing so in community. Immediately after losing everything in his life, three of Job's friends come to be with him and "console and comfort him". When they come to Job sitting in the shattered remains of his life, they don't even recognize him at first. They shout out and cry when they see him – and tear apart their robes in anguish. Then, powerfully, they simply sit down next to Job, and stay with him for seven days and seven nights, not saying a single word to him (Job 2:11-13). This is what Job's friends did right – they were there for him in the midst of his suffering, his questions, and his doubts. They recognized the value of simply sitting there, not having to say a single thing or give any answers.

Following that week of silence, Job and his friends begin an exchange back and forth – almost the entirety of those 39 chapters of poetry. His friends keep suggesting possible reasons for his suffering – the central argument being that Job must've done something wrong, since God wouldn't punish something who is innocent – reflecting a common belief at that time that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. Most scholars believe that this is the central question the book of Job wrestles with. It takes a common answer of the time about the reason for suffering - and raises some deep questions about whether or not that's how God actually works. It's this very idea that Job keeps challenging over.

It's here that Job's friends don't offer the most helpful presence – yet I get where they're coming from. When we hear those honest life questions being asked, it's so easy to want to jump in and give answers or impart our “sage” advice. I have to bite my tongue every year when the confirmands share their questions, or when a friend or family member shares about a particularly challenging day or event. It's easy to jump into problem-solving or answer-seeking mode, which only ends up frustrating the other person and not being helpful. This is because the point is not about me showing my knowledge or great advice, but about simply being there listening to those questions. Job didn't need answers from his friends – he needed comfort.

I'm reminded of a story told by Mark Yaconelli - a well-known author and speaker in the youth ministry world. It began at a youth group gathering of high schoolers. That evening at their Youth Group they were discussing the challenge of talking about their faith with others who aren't Christians. To help foster discussion, the youth played a role-playing game where one person in the group played the role of a Christian, and the other was someone hostile to Christianity. They were playing out a scene at the school cafeteria where the two characters struck up a conversation about faith. At any point, they could raise their hand and someone would swap out with them taking over their role.

One young man named Daniel immediately volunteered to play the role of the person hostile to the faith. A young woman named Sarah volunteered to play the role of the Christian. Immediately, Daniel begins making fun of Sarah's faith, challenging her, and arguing that Christianity is nothing but a

psychological crutch. Sarah tried to respond to his arguments, but quickly became flustered and raised her hand to be replaced.

A freshman named Julie volunteered thinking she might be able to respond to Daniels' arguments. Yet he only became more aggressive saying things like "The Bible was made up just like all myths are made up. How can you believe in a God you've never seen? How can you claim this God is good when there is so much suffering in the world!?" (p112). Julie also became flustered, raised her hand, and Sam volunteered to take her place.

Sam too tried to respond to Daniel's questions yet again the situation escalated – now the youth leaders were getting worried. Daniel finally burst out saying "Listen, I was born in South Central – one of the roughest parts of Los Angeles. When I was four years old, my best friend and I were walking to the park when a gun fight broke out. We stood frozen – just watching these gang kids shooting at each other. My friend Benjamin got hit in the chest by a stray bullet. I sat there screaming and crying and watched him die. Now you tell me God is good and loving! What kind of God allows a four-year-old kid to die like that?" (p113)

Everyone became quiet – nobody knew what to say to that. Sam raised his hand, and a young man named Jake slowly took his place. Jake was a big and strong, and had a troubled past as well – not the sort of person you'd expect to volunteer for this. He'd been in trouble with the law, and was at church mainly to get away from his parents. Here's how Mark explains what happened next:

"After walking up to the makeshift stage, Jake removed the table, turned his chair, and sat facing Daniel with open, steady eyes. There was a minute or so of silence as Jake continued to sit, relaxed and patient, just gazing at Daniel. Many of us felt awkward, and I stood there, unsure whether I should interrupt. Finally, Daniel spoke up and began to accost Jake, "So what do you have to say? That my friend Benjamin went to a better place? That this was part of God's plan? That God makes us suffer so we'll turn to him? How can you possibly believe all that [stuff] about God being a God of love?"

"Jake just sat there. I assumed he was planning a response, when gradually Daniel quieted, sat still, and returned Jake's gaze. And then something broke. Daniel's hard expression softened, his eyes searched Jake's,

and then I noticed what he was looking at. There were tears on Jake's face. Quietly, without looking away from Daniel, Jake let tears fall down his face. Daniel gazed at Jake in wonder for a moment, then his eyes swelled with tears, and he lowered his head. Slowly, Jake stood up, raised Daniel from his chair, and hugged him. After a few minutes they both stepped down and returned to the group. Jake never spoke a word." (p113-114)

This brings me to the third and final thing we can learn from Job about asking those big question: sometimes we have to just embrace the mystery of God. When God finally appears and speaks to Job, God appears out of a chaotic whirlwind and speaks of the vast creation – the vast expanse of galaxies, the depths of the oceans, and the diverse array of creatures and life. God gives no answers to the questions Job was asking – and likewise we often don't get any easy answers either. Instead, it's as if God is saying "Look at this vast creation. There is so much more here than you know." It's a reminder that God is beyond anything we could ever imagine – we can't sum God up with an easy search on our phones or conversation with a friend.

Just as Jake sat there silently with Daniel and let the questions and accusations flow, sometimes we have to sit with our questions of faith and life, and recognize that we don't know the answers – and perhaps never will. Yet it's in those unanswered questions, the doubts and uncertainties that we might actually get closer to the mystery of God than any of the moments of certainty or clarity that we might have. When we look at the world around us, we get a glimpse of the complexity and vastness of God's presence – even if it's just a tiny sliver of who God is. Yet when we're honest with our uncertainties and questions, when we sit and be with others in community in the midst of those questions, and when we dwell within those deep mysteries, we also dwell in the presence of God. Amen.