

“Reasoning With God”

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Job 23:1-9, 16-17

You look like a law-abiding bunch. But maybe you know what it’s like to come up before a judge. You’re in a courtroom crowded with restless people, waiting, and finally the clerk calls your name and it’s like a shot. You’re up, and there you are standing before someone in a black robe, way up high, and he has a mean-looking hammer next to him, and it’s all you can do to keep your knees from shaking like a belt sander as you squeak out the words, *No, your honor, I really wasn’t speeding ...*

It’s a scary feeling, going before a judge. Nobody would want to do it if he didn’t have to, right? What about if the guy in the black robe were God himself – how would *that* make you feel?

But in today’s Scripture reading, Job is desperate to come before God in a court of law. There’s only one reason he would even contemplate such a thing. It’s that Job – a good man, a righteous man, a man who loves and serves God – Job has seen his whole world fall apart. And the worst of it is, his so-called friends are trying to convince him that his troubles are his own fault.

You remember the story. God and Satan make kind of a bet, because Satan is trying to prove that this good man loves God only because Job has been so richly blessed. Take away his family and possessions, Satan says to God, and he’ll turn against you. God – in one of his moods, apparently – accepts the bet, and before we get out of Chapter 1, Job’s great wealth disappears. All his oxen and donkeys are stolen; his sheep are burned up, along with his servants; his camels are taken by marauders. Then it gets personal: Job’s children, seven sons and three daughters, are killed when a house collapses on them. And in the midst of all this anguish, Job is afflicted with loathsome sores from head to toe.

It all seems so *unfair*. A loving God, a God who cares about us, should *lift* our burdens, not inflict them, right?

Of course, our friends should lift our burdens, too, but Job is denied even that small comfort. His friend Eliphaz, for example, has just finished arguing that God is always impartial and fair, and that Job must have sinned terribly somehow – otherwise God wouldn’t allow such miseries to fall upon him.

Job doesn’t buy it. He knows he’s a righteous man. And more than that, he just doesn’t understand. Here is a man who has come to a good station in life by being smart about what he does. In the ancient world, one didn’t come by 7,000 sheep and 3,000 camels by being a bad businessman. Job is a shrewd operator. He has played by the rules his whole life. And now those rules have been turned topsy-turvy on him.

In the midst of his misery, Job does the right thing – he tries to turn to God for reassurance. And then comes the worst misery of all – worse than the loss of his fortune, worse than his broken body, worse even than the grief over his lost children. The worst of all is that Job thinks God has abandoned him. He’s all alone in his despair. He looks forward, back, left, right – God isn’t there. Or rather, he can’t perceive God. God is there, all right, but God seems to be concealing Godself from Job, like a terrifying game of cosmic hide-and-seek.

If you’ve ever lost your car keys in the house, you can start to understand the feeling. You look and you look, and it’s frustrating because you *know* they’re here somewhere, you just can’t figure out where. If you thought they might not be there at all, it would be less frustrating: You’d look, and if you didn’t find them, you’d know why. But knowing that they’re there, and you just can’t find them, that’s the worst. For Job, God is there; God is lost.

But there’s a sense in which Job is lost as well. Job knows that he’s truly home only when he’s in the palm of God’s hand. You’ve heard those radio commercials for the Onstar system in cars, right? They’re “always there when you need them.” The commercials play little snippets of conversation from motorists in trouble, and you can hear the relief in their voices when the Onstar operator finds

their stolen car or unlocks the door so the mother can rescue her trapped baby. Job could have used Onstar, I guess. He needs help and assurance, and he's getting nothing but static.

But let's look again at the tail end of today's Scripture reading. In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Job just wants to disappear: "If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!" But this is a corrupted translation of the original Hebrew. A better one says this: "Yet I am not reduced to silence by the darkness or by the mystery which hides God."

This is a crucial difference, I think. Job's words are not a cry of suicidal despair. Instead, they're a faithful affirmation that God is present, even if unseen. And Job won't be silent. He chooses to make himself present to God in the confidence that God will eventually become present in his life in a way that he can understand. He is not reduced to silence; he is present to God. This is an act of faith.

It's the same act of faith that we perform when we come before God in prayer. In times of crisis, there's a temptation to make our prayers a kind of bargaining session. "God, if you'll just get me out of this situation, I promise to come to church every Sunday." Or we argue like Job: "What have I done to deserve this? Let me plead my case and surely God will hand down a not-guilty verdict."

But the lesson that this passage brings us to is that good prayer isn't about bargaining or pleading – it's about being present before God, even at those times when God seems far away or absent altogether. It's when our hearts are breaking and we feel most alone that we need to lean most on our faith that God *is* there and *is* listening and *is* feeling our hurt.

There *is* suffering in the world, and Job is right, life *isn't* fair. Hear the cry of another righteous man suffering the torments of the damned: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus' death on the cross is not about fairness. It's about God joining humankind in our suffering, and taking it on Godself. In the face of suffering, sometimes all we can do is stand at the foot of the cross and weep. But God is there; God is there.

I think one of the dangers we face in times of suffering is that we're afraid our faith won't stand up to the pain. If we've got it pretty good, we worry that if things go wrong, we'll end up like Job seems at times, raging at God and maybe even doubting that God is there, or that God cares about us.

Sometimes we hold our faith like a Faberge egg, precious but fragile. We hold our faith with two hands, close to the body, kind of sheltering it. We're afraid that any ill wind that blows through our life will shatter it. New parents sometimes have that same mistaken impression of a newborn baby.

But do you know what? Babies are tougher than we often think. Sometimes they get dropped, and they bounce back. Faith is tougher than we might think, too. In fact, it gets tougher the more it's tested. It's when the black demons of despair shadow our lives that God is closest to us. When we want to say with Job, "God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me" – it's at those times that our faith can really and truly save us.

Remember the words of the Book of Hebrews: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." We don't always see God or feel God's presence. But when we reach that absolute low point in our lives, when we cry out in despair, that's when the soul is laid bare to God's healing grace. It hurts; then it gets better. God is on the job. The baby bounces.

The story of Job has become almost a cliché for human hurt, and that is because we wish for a well-ordered world. We have this idea, maybe just an unconscious idea, that if we work hard and play by the rules, keep our lawns mowed and come to church on Sunday, everything will probably work out pretty well in the end. It's only fair, right? And a lot of times that's the way it does work out.

But then the doctor calls and says, Sit down. I have bad news.

Or the bills are this high and the money is this high, and the phone is ringing again.

Or you wake up at 3 in the morning and it's as black as a tomb, and your mind is racing.

Or your wife or husband says, This is the end of the road.

Or the beloved child looks you full in the face and says, I hate you.

Or there's a knock at the door and it's a state trooper saying, There's been an accident.

In those times, in the black night of the soul, there's no point in joining Job in that imaginary courtroom. Life isn't fair. But God is there – guiding us, holding us up, giving us the strength and courage we need to take that next feeble step. Doubt always comes, but faith overcomes. And sometimes it's difficult to remember in those hard times, so I'm going to repeat it: God is with you. God is with you. God is with you.

Amen. ■