

**“I am not reduced to silence by the darkness
or by the mystery which hides him.”**

Job 23:17, Revised English Version

God is Good, says Jesus, and with God all things are possible. The story of Job stirs up enough of our own sense of the injustices of this world to want to ask Jesus to explain himself a little better. Job didn't ask for the evils that were heaped upon him; and he certainly wasn't given a choice like the wealthy person in the gospel lesson. The tsunami of all life's tragedies washed over Job, leaving him just alive enough to experience the fullness of pain emotionally, physically and spiritually.

If there is anything with which we should argue it is a mistaken theology of a puppet God holding court with mischievous angels. I suspect a hint of allegory, as the writer tries desperately to understand their own suffering, perhaps even the suffering of the Hebrew people, in spite of God's promise of a plan for blessing and not curse. The author is telling a story less about cosmic forces in an epic chess match than the story of a very human (and mistaken) perception of God's absence.

It's hard enough to live in a world with suffering and tragedy, but to do so without reason, and to do so alone, is too much. Job's bold faith is a model. When for no apparent reason our life dives into a tailspin, we too can dare to stand up and ask God to show face. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews invites us to “approach the throne of grace with boldness.” Job is bold, calling on God to show up and let him have his day in court. What is most disturbing to Job is this perception, this unreality, of the absence of God. Looking ahead and behind, looking to either side, Job cannot see God.

This must be feels like suffocating, gasping for air, looking around seeking a source of life and finding none as you feel your life slowly slipping away. But Job is audacious and he refuses to let the light fade around him. In the last verse of our reading he begins a shift that is carried out in the next chapter of the story, he displays a confidence only a person set on living can offer. The NRSV that we read this morning doesn't highlight that shift adequately; it says in verse 17, “if only I could vanish in darkness.” The Revised English Version translates that in way that suggests more of a confidence, “I am not reduced to silence by the darkness or by the mystery which hides [God].” Job refuses to let God off the hook, a defiant act of faith against despair.

The truth about God is that God is with us in our suffering, and always has been. Even God knows what it is like to feel abandoned. Even on the cross God felt abandoned by God's self. The divinity of Jesus cried along in his humanity, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!" And yet, God's nature is Emmanuel, God with us.

On Palm Sunday in 1994 as folks at Goshen United Methodist Church was worshipping God, a tornado struck, causing the roof to collapse. Twenty were killed that day, and another ninety were injured just at that church – and other tornadoes were ripping through other parts of Alabama that same time. The pastor suffered not only a catastrophe for her community, but among the rubble and dead was Hannah, her four-year-old daughter. She must have known the despair of Job. Job's life, in the matter a few moments, became her life. Pastor or not, it's not easy to pull one's life back together. I wondered how she found the strength to go on serving her community – saying "God" seemed a little to cliché (though we know it isn't).

The news, of course, didn't track the church's story much after a couple of days, and their tragedy became one more in the ever growing list of natural disasters that seem to be getting worse and worse each year.

It happened that a year later, I sat next to that pastor at a conference, and though I wanted to know more about her story, I dared not trespass on those memories. I did get a little glimpse as I looked at my hymnal – the conference had given us commemorative hymnals, and I had folks I hung around those two weeks sign on their favorite hymn so that over the years I could recall them and pray for them. As I flipped through the hymnal after the gathering, I noticed she had signed her name by a hymn that is quite simple – childlike – but lovely. One of the verses says:

You are the dawn that will bring a new day,
You're the wheat that will bear golden grain;
You are a sting and soft, gentle touch

In these words are metaphors of death and resurrection, and of pain and healing. It cannot be the absence of God in such suffering that sustains that kind of faith. It can only be the presence of God, whether perceived or unperceived, at work within us.

The story of Job invites us to refuse to let the perception of God's absence drown out the promise of new life in God, and gives us courage to stand up to that absence, with boldness to approach God's throne.

Think of a time when you had a Job-moment - moment when you knew that seeds broken open would toil their way through dirt to bear fruit, when suddenly you found yourself noticing the presence of God?

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There is another character worth thinking about in the stories today – another wealthy person. This one does not have everything swept away. This one has a choice, although it seems a painful one. He doesn't know what it's like to be abandoned, as far as we can tell; we can see that he enjoys the blessings of this life. We do know that he seems to abandon God, at least for as long as it might take him to decide to accept Christ's invitation. I can imagine him looking all around at the glass house he'd constructed - the glass walls of faith in himself, faith in his prosperity, in his property, perhaps even his dependence upon them. He assumed that there was something he could do – "what must I do" he asks. With one invitation, the man sees a rock thrown at his glass house, but it doesn't shatter – at least not then. A small crack does start to form, and he realizes he is faced with a choice, and he sees how painful it will be to let go of things, and the illusion of control.

We don't know if he comes to accept that invitation, whether he returns to follow Jesus, but I like to think that he does. Regardless, we have that important invitation, and it seems to speak to us today – go, sell, come and follow. There is that invitation to divest ourselves of whatever it is into which we have misplaced our trust, or our sense of safety or salvation. There is that invitation to enter into a freedom from things and relationships that hold us back from joyful service as a disciple of Christ. We too are given that invitation when we run out to meet the pilgrim Jesus walking by on his way to the cross – we see his eyes looking into ours, whispering to us across these two-thousand years, saying with love, 'just... one... more... thing' – 'you lack just one more thing.'

What is that one more thing for you? I found out what it was for me in the second semester of my first year at seminary, on a cold February day, standing in the kitchen of my friend's rented house in Durham, North Carolina. I had spent the weekend polishing a delicate glass house of myths I had created about myself – myths of protection and safety, myths of career plans that I could assume, myths of pretenses.

As I was opening a drawer to look for some utensils, a sudden flash of love pierced my heart and, without warning, without any

dramatic scenery or effects, Jesus looked me in the eyes and said: 'just... one... more... thing'. I looked back over a long period of thinking my life was like Job's, a righteous man (not perfect as Job protested, but still a good boy). I suddenly discovered I was more like the rich person – and I had to watch the glass house of my illusions shattering around me. Before I knew it, Christ's invitation to freedom took hold, I felt God's hand reaching out, pulling me up out of the rubble of my old glass house, dusting me off, and guiding me along a new road.

I closed the drawer, walked out of the kitchen, and started my new life among the rag-tag bunch of disciples of Jesus Christ. When has Christ walked by you, and invited you to come and follow? Did you ever hear those words, "just one more thing"? What is Christ asking you and me to give away today so that we can free for joyful service?

Each of us is Job, and each of us is the unnamed wealthy person. Some days we experience losses that cause our families and us deep pain. Some days we experience anew that call to a deeper commitment to discipleship. Sometimes these moments are all wrapped up in each other.

Like those who did leave house and family and job to follow Jesus, we can kneel before Christ, God's living and active word, unhidden from God's loving gaze, and hear the invitation, "come and follow me," assured that with God, "all things are possible." And like Job, refusing to be vanquished by the darkness, we can approach the throne with boldness to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Amen +

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