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"Job's Blues"

A sermon by Alex Stayer-Brewington

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Job 23:1–9, 16–17; Psalm 22:1–15; Mark 10:17–31

My intention this morning is to say something meaningful in light of the Scripture passages we've just read about human suffering.

Talking about suffering is no small task. It's a moving target that often slips beyond the domain of words. What can I say that in some way will not fall short of the complete truth?

Also, I know it to be true that every individual is a unique authority on the suffering they have experienced. So what can I say that will apply equally to everyone? How can I speak in a way that transcends my personal experience?

With these tensions in mind, let us pray.

God of our weary years
God of our silent tears
You have brought us this far
Be with us now
Amen

How many of you here have ever cried so hard that your body was tired? How many of you have ever been stung so deep by grief that the tears wouldn't even come? That grief that goes beyond words—maybe beyond thoughts even—that

grief that enters into that realm of pure feeling like a bruise on your spirit! That's where Job is. That is the place our Bible has taken us this morning.

Job is grieving because in one fell swoop his livestock and the slaves tending them were destroyed. He's described as the richest man in the region. But all at once his empire—his livelihood—is suddenly gone. On top of this, his children—all ten of them—die in an accident where the house they're eating in collapses.

Subsequently, Job falls sick. We read that he was covered in "loathsome sores" from head to toe. So at risk of speaking in an understatement, Job is not just being dramatic when he tears his clothes, shaves his head, and sits down on a pile of ashes to cry. I don't think he's just putting on a show. I don't think Job is just being overly dramatic. I think that after all that tragedy, after all that loss, Job's groaning is authentic.

Job's three friends come to see him, and get this: Job 2:13 says they in turn shaved their heads and wept, and then they sit down with him on the ground for 7 days without saying anything. Now later on in the text, all three of Job's friends will speak at great length, but for now, while the wounds are still fresh, these three wise men have the insight, the self-control not to offer any of those tired platitudes that I know some of us in this room have heard too many times. Instead, they practice that sacred and essential ministry of being with. The ministry that is so humbling because it comes less from what we do, or what we know, and more from just being there. A warm body ready to listen, and just as ready to sit there and let a person be quiet if that's what they need.

And it was sometime after this that the conversation started. We don't know how long, but it must have been long enough that Job's friends had started to talk. Maybe they started saying things like: "It's been a year, is he still grieving?" "When is he going to get it together?" "I wish he would just move on with things."

The central action of the Book of Job records what Job's friends say to Job and what Job says back. Well meaning but unsolicited advice—this is where the trouble starts. I won't summarize all the arguments Job's friends make, but I do

want to reflect on the thoughts of Eliphaz, the friend Job is replying to this morning.

Chapter 22 of the Book of Job is Eliphaz calling Job out on what he takes to be a "what have I done to deserve this?" routine. Eliphaz is saying to Job, "All this piety and righteousness you talk about don't mean anything to God. You think God needs your righteousness? In fact, you're not all that righteous." He says to Job: "You have exacted pledges from your family for no reason, and stripped the naked of their clothing. You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry. You have sent widows away empty-handed, and the arms of the orphans you have crushed."

He seems to be pointing to the sins of a wealthy slaveholding landowner. Job has been stripped of his wealth, and Eliphaz is saying "Be glad, Job! You're alive and God has humbled you, so now you can go on and live a righteous life. This could be your 'Amazing Grace' moment!"

And in a way, Eliphaz is right. That's the thing about Job's friends—they're good theologians. The ideas they share are orthodox—sound doctrine. In this chapter, Eliphaz sounds like a good Presbyterian! It's not so much his doctrine that needs honing, it's his pastoral care skills. I imagine Eliphaz as a divinity school student. Better yet, a divinity school professor!

So what does Job say to this distinguished professor with his confident and complex systematic theology? Job says, "I have been looking and looking for this God you're talking about. I've been looking because I have so many questions and I know God's answers would bring me comfort and peace. I've been looking, but I've looked and looked, and the only God I've found is hidden—and silent—and I'm not sure what to do, and I'm not sure what any of this means."

Eliphaz' theology doesn't reach Job because Job is in that place where logical arguments, tradition, piety are not enough. Job is alone in the dark—Job is in that groaning place.

The Hebrew word that is translated as “groan” comes from the root that describes the vulnerable state of a person with no control over their circumstance. A person oppressed by forces beyond their control. It comes up a lot in reference to the captivity in Egypt.

So when we read that Job is groaning bitterly, we see that this former slave owner, the wealthiest man in the region, has been brought to the same low place, the same level of vulnerability, the same suffering perhaps that his slaves felt.

The certainty of Job’s work, his wealth, his family, his religious beliefs, and his health has fallen away all at once. So when Eliphaz brings a theological argument to him, Job can only shake his head and express his doubt.

I like Job. I like the man, and I like the book. It’s a big book by biblical standards, and it’s placed about midway through the Old Testament. In a way, Job is a doubter’s interlude where so much of what has been taken for granted or glossed over is called into question. Job is more like a modern reader than he is his biblical contemporaries. I think about Abraham, and I have some trouble relating to him. I think about him taking his son up to Mount Moriah to offer him as a burnt sacrifice, and I struggle to connect with that kind of faith—I don’t know that my God offers me that degree of clarity.

But when I consider Job, I think I can understand where he’s coming from. Some really terrible things have happened to Job, and Job wants to know why. Job isn’t the biblical character who accepts his fate quietly. Job makes me think of Daffy Duck and how sometimes when things aren’t going his way, he turns to the camera and pleads to the animators or the audience.

There is something deeply human about openly expressing suffering. And for Christians, there is something faithful about honestly asking hard questions. Which brings me finally to the question, “What does Job’s suffering—Job’s groan—Job’s blues—mean for us today?” What can this man’s situation—his words—do to help us make sense of our own suffering and that of those around us?

When I look at the words of Job's friend Eliphaz, I am reminded of all the times in my life when I have said the right thing at the wrong time. I'm thinking about times where I've been so confident in what I knew or what I thought that my focus was on myself rather than the person I was talking to. That's an important lesson from Eliphaz: check in with yourself to figure out, "Am I saying this for me or this person? Who is this for?" Eliphaz reminds us of the importance of living as if *people matter more than ideas—even important ideas*. Emotions come before doctrine. The suffering of others is not a thing to be used as an ideological battlefield.

I don't mean to dismiss the importance of rigorous theological and intellectual debate. I think it's very important. But there is a time for debate, and that time is not the sickbed or the funeral. An extreme example of this would be our Christian sisters and brothers at the Westboro Baptist Church who fly all those angry and hateful signs at funerals.

I'm thinking right now about the cross and how Jesus' mother sat there crying after her son had died. It would not have been prudent for one of the apostles to sidle up to Mary and attempt to put the crucifixion into theological context. So let's keep that in mind.

But finally, and most importantly, what to make of the disheartening words of our friend, Job? "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." Troubling words to be sure. Words perhaps that we wouldn't want to hear from the pulpit. Job's words are frightening, and they don't sound like words we're used to hearing from faithful people.

I think that's too bad. I think we could use more people like Job: people willing to give voice to the complexity of living faithfully in the midst of a life full of suffering. We need people who are willing to talk about God in ways that aren't typically considered "theologically correct." We need these people because too often our society wants us to have it all together—everything we do is expected to exude, "Everything's alright."—"My faith is alright, my body is alright, my family is alright, my teeth are all white!"—when in fact, rarely is *everything all* right!

People who talk like Job, people who express the doubt and frustration that comes with suffering, remind us that everything isn't always all right.

We need Job because Job is honest. Bluesman Henry Townsend said, "When I sing the blues, I sing the truth." When the interviewer pushed him to define the blues, he defined it as a "true feeling."

Job's true feeling transcends the truth of his friend's doctrine. It transcends the logic and systems of religion as he knew it. Job's truth was messy, and he contradicted himself sometimes because it didn't come out of a book. It wasn't taught. It was felt.

My dear sisters and brothers, I am here this morning to tell you that you, too, possess this deep truth. I exhort you to pay attention to the truth that you experience. And I beg you to share that truth. We need your truth. This church needs you.

Job is groaning with this "true feeling." And on the cross when Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" he was moaning this true feeling, too.

Our God suffers with us. Our God cries with us. If there is any comfort in the message this morning it's in this: God knows the complexity of your doubt. God knows the depths of your suffering. And God is there with you.

Let us pray. We have come over a way that is watered with tears. Help us to find you even in these tears…

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