

You are Job

Job 38:1-41

October 21, 2018

You are Job.

You are Job, living in a world filled with suffering and mystery, with bewildering grief and distressing uncertainty, a world you can never fully understand and a world that often breaks your heart.

You are Job, living in a world that doesn't follow the rules, where the righteous are not always rewarded, a world where doing the right thing is no guarantee of success or praise or love. In fact, choosing to do the right thing can sometimes earn you scorn and make you enemies and leave you at a disadvantage.

You are Job, living in a world where those you love suffer and where you suffer too for seemingly no good reason. No, not seemingly! You live in a world where you and those you love and those who are most vulnerable, those who are most undeserving, do suffer ... for no good reason.

You are Job. How do you live in a world like this? How do you reconcile your faith in God with a world like this? What answer can you make to the terrible reality of undeserved suffering? Or, more to the point, how do you live when there are no answers?

Some people have answers. Job's wife had an answer: "Curse God and die." Yes, that's an option. You can curse God and wait to die, but that is despair, giving up on God and giving up on yourself and giving up on life. Giving up is all too easy, it takes no courage, it's all too selfish.

Job's friends had answers, too, lots of answers. Oh, Job, dear Job, let's talk. Think carefully, look closely, there has to be something you've overlooked, some sin, some offense to God, some crime against humanity, you've done. God doesn't punish anyone without reason.

That's their answer. That's their assumption. Suffering must be punishment. They claim to be defending God's good honor, but in fact, they are defending the system, or rather, defending their dependence on the system, the system of rules and rewards, of actions and consequences, that allows them to make sense of their lives and allows them to believe they are in control of their own destiny. If they acknowledge the truth of Job's undeserved suffering, the system falls apart, and then what do they have left to depend on?

There are lots of Job's friends around still. You may remember some of them blaming the suffering of the people of New Orleans at the hands of hurricane Katrina on the city's welcome of gay pride events. Or blaming the Haiti earthquake on voodoo or some supposed pact with the devil. Or blaming 9/11 on the secularization of America.

I've been to New Orleans and felt the vibe of that city, the life-affirming, fun-loving, welcoming vibe of the city, and I've been to Haiti and seen the extraordinary faith and powerful joy of people who have very little material wealth, but much spiritual wealth, more than me, more than most of us. To blame them, to blame the people of New Orleans or New York for their own suffering? How vile. How cruel. How utterly hypocritical. Because what will you have to say, friends of Job, when suffering comes to you and to your city? Because it will.

What they do, what Job's friends do in our day, is to find somebody else to blame for their troubles: immigrants or leftists or the government or some hidden and sinister conspiracy. Because there has to be somebody to blame! Job's friends cannot live with uncertainty. They cannot tolerate any mystery or any loss of control. They cannot live without the system, the system that explains everything and leaves nothing to

Leaves nothing to what? To chance? To God?

Job's friends do not love God. They love the system. They cannot live without the system, but ironically, they can live without God, they do live without God, because they have put their faith in the system, in an idol, not in God.

So they have no answers for Job and he knows it. And you know it, too, because you are Job. You will not blame yourself for your troubles when you have done nothing wrong, and you will not blame somebody else, because that is not fair, that is not right.

You do what Job does. You go to God and you ask "Why?" You pray. You protest. You complain. You ask for a hearing. You ask God for an answer.

But there is no answer, only silence ...

So much of the life of faith is about dealing with the silence. Job complains, his friends offer him their cold comfort, and God remains absent. God remains silent. Until the storm. Until God answers Job out of the storm ...

Then out of the storm the Lord spoke to Job.

Who are you to question my wisdom
with your ignorant, empty words?
Now stand up straight
and answer the questions I ask you.
Were you there when I made the world?
If you know so much, tell me about it.
Who decided how large it would be?
Who stretched the measuring line over it?
Do you know all the answers?
What holds up the pillars that support the earth?
Who laid the cornerstone of the world?
In the dawn of that day the stars sang together,
and the heavenly beings shouted for joy.

Who closed the gates to hold back the sea
when it burst from the womb of the earth?
It was I who covered the sea with clouds
and wrapped it in darkness.
I marked a boundary for the sea
and kept it behind bolted gates.
I told it, "So far and no farther!
Here your powerful waves must stop."
Job, have you ever in all your life
commanded a day to dawn?
Have you ordered the dawn to seize the earth
and shake the wicked from their hiding places?
Daylight makes the hills and valleys stand out
like the folds of a garment,
clear as the imprint of a seal on clay.
The light of day is too bright for the wicked
and restrains them from doing violence.

Have you been to the springs in the depths of the sea?
Have you walked on the floor of the ocean?
Has anyone ever shown you the gates
that guard the dark world of the dead?
Have you any idea how big the world is?
Answer me if you know.

Do you know where the light comes from
or what the source of darkness is?
Can you show them how far to go,
or send them back again?
I am sure you can, because you're so old
and were there when the world was made!

Have you ever visited the storerooms,
where I keep the snow and the hail?
I keep them ready for times of trouble,
for days of battle and war.
Have you been to the place where the sun comes up,
or the place from which the east wind blows?

Who dug a channel for the pouring rain
and cleared the way for the thunderstorm?
Who makes rain fall where no one lives?
Who waters the dry and thirsty land,
so that grass springs up?
Does either the rain or the dew have a father?
Who is the mother of the ice and the frost,
which turn the waters to stone
and freeze the face of the sea?

Can you tie the Pleiades together
or loosen the bonds that hold Orion?
Can you guide the stars season by season
and direct the Big and the Little Dipper?
Do you know the laws that govern the skies,
and can you make them apply to the earth?

Can you shout orders to the clouds
and make them drench you with rain?
And if you command the lightning to flash,
will it come to you and say, "At your service"?
Who tells the ibis when the Nile will flood,
or who tells the rooster that rain will fall?
Who is wise enough to count the clouds
and tilt them over to pour out the rain,
rain that hardens the dust into lumps?

Do you find food for lions to eat,
and satisfy hungry young lions
when they hide in their caves,
or lie in wait in their dens?
Who is it that feeds the ravens
when they wander about hungry,
when their young cry to me for food?

Were you paying attention? What did you hear? Did you know God had a such a sense of humor? Or, at least, that the author of the book of Job thinks God has a great sense of humor? Does humor matter? In the midst of suffering and mystery and grief and uncertainty, does humor matter?

Absolutely! Because humor keeps us from taking ourselves too seriously. Humor puts things in perspective. Humor reminds us of who and what we are, and who and what we are not.

Did Job get an answer from God? Yes, and no. No, and yes. The crucial question in the book of Job is not the question of undeserved suffering, but the question of faith. In what, in whom, will you put your faith? In the system? In your own ability to make sense of the world and make sense of your life? Or will you put your faith in God?

The book of Job removes all the props, exposing the limits, and consequently, the ultimate failure, of the system. By the end of the book, Job has absolutely nothing except God. And that is enough. That is enough.

You are Job. You live in a world where God is. What does it mean to live in a world where God is? What does it mean to you to live in a world where God is? And what will your faith in the God who is look like?

It will not look like passive acceptance -- what will be will be. That's not faith! Job's faith, the faith for which he was commended, is not passivity.

Faith is believing God, trusting God, depending on God, expecting God to be God, expecting God to be good. And when faith is confronted with agony and terror and grief and injustice, faith cries out to God, the only one that matters, the only one that hears. Faith prays. Faith protests. Faith complains. Faith cries out for justice. Faith cries out for God to make things right. And faith believes that God will answer. Faith believes God will make things right.

Faith prays, "Thy will be done," and faith waits for God's will to be done and God's kingdom to come. And faith works to do God's will and to bring in God's kingdom today and tomorrow and for as long as faith has breath.

Because God is ...

God is the one who measures the world. God is the one who commands the day to dawn. God is the one who makes the lightning flash. God is the one who feeds the ravens. God is the one who feeds you ...