

“They Ate With Him”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Job 42:7-17
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on October 28, 2018

Today’s reading concludes the book of Job, stating that the Lord restored Job’s fortune to him, including ten more children. Of course, we all know that no number of new children can replace children who have been lost, and while Job’s house was filled once more, there would forever remain a void in his heart. That being said, I want to take a look at all the things that happened leading up to the return of Job’s happiness and wealth.

First of all, God rebukes Job’s friends. Did you notice that? God says, “I’m angry at you because you haven’t spoken about me correctly as did my servant Job.” God rebukes them and vindicates Job, which, after forty-one chapters of debate must have been a good thing for Job’s tired heart to hear. The friend’s religious advice is *so* bad they need someone to intervene to stop God’s wrath against them.

Now imagine all the people who’ve given you bad advice about God and imagine God feels that same way about them. Sort of satisfying, isn’t it? Only, the story doesn’t stop with God’s anger. God wants Job to pray for them. I’m tempted to write the bad advice givers out of my life, but God’s plan is for Job and his friends to stay in relationship with each other, with God, and with God on behalf of each other. It is not material fortunes alone that are restored to Job, but friendships too. But this restoration requires group participation. Job’s friends must repent by taking seven bulls and seven rams to Job, and Job must accept this apology by offering prayer on their behalf. It is not just Job who experiences restoration here, but the community around him. And the text says, “Then the Lord changed Job’s fortune *when* he prayed for his friends . . .” as if the change in fortune in some way hinged upon Job’s reconciliation with the Friends Who Give Bad Advice.

This communal restoration continues beyond Job and his immediate circle of ill-spoken friends. V. 11 includes Job’s brothers and sisters and even acquaintances all coming together to eat with him in his house. I would like to suggest this act of eating together and being together is just as much—if not more so—a part of the restoration as the return of Job’s wealth.

Just think back to a time in your life when you experienced great loss or tragedy. What was it that restored a glimmer of hope, occasionally provoked a smile or even laughter? Was it all your things or your people?

When tragedy strikes, people gather. V. 11 states, “They comforted and consoled Job concerning all the disaster.” I find it interesting that after page upon page of the friends’ speeches, we don’t know a single word any of these comforters and consolers spoke to Job. Perhaps if you asked Job what they said, he couldn’t tell you, because all he remembered was that they came. They came and they brought food and they sat with him and ate with him.

This community gathering takes place in just one short verse, but we know their presence must have paved the long road to Job's healing and recovery. V. 11 also says they each gave him a piece of silver and a gold ring. It couldn't have been enough to make up for all his losses, but I think this is how poor Job first began to rebuild his resources—through the generosity of his family, friends, and even acquaintances. Everyone came together, giving something, and while they couldn't give Job his kids back, they could give their presence, their time, their food, and their resources, and so they did. This is always how the pieces of a broken life come back together—with company and with help.

This, I would say, is the very presence of God ministering to Job. This is where God shows up—not with words and answers but with presence and with comfort, with a shoulder to cry on and a casserole to nibble on. This is church without the label. Church is not so much in the theology but in the showing up and in the breaking of bread.

Side note: This is why you can't go to church online. Because church happens in real time *with people*, not over a sermon or the exchange of intellectual ideas, but over a table where love is shared and comfort offered to the grieving. It is over the table and in the company of one another that lives are restored. Church happened inside Job's house, amongst friends and neighbors when God showed up in a way Job could see with his own two eyes and feel with his own body wrapped inside the embrace of a Sibling Who Came.

I hear God more loudly in Job 42:11 than when God speaks from the whirlwind. The whirlwind was cool and all—awe-inspiring even—but otherworldly. All the people at Job's house? They are tangible, unmistakable, down-to-earth, flesh-and-blood real. V. 12 says that the Lord blessed Job's latter days more than his former ones, but even if God had not, I take it Job still would have been okay in the end because he already had sustenance in the presence of his people.

God also blesses Job with ten more children—seven more sons and three more daughters. (God bless his dear ever-pregnant wife.) We've already noted new children cannot replace dead children. Still, these children are a gift all the same, as children are. Interestingly, v. 14 tells us what Job named his daughters—Jemimah, Keziah, Keren-happuch—but it does not say what he named his sons, which is a highly unusual way for the Bible to record family history. Furthermore, v. 15 states that Job gave his daughters an inheritance along with their brothers. This tells me that the restoration that visited Job's house included something akin to gender equity, which is an unexpected but delightful addition to the story.

Usually when I hear someone tell the end of Job's story, they talk about his fortunes being restored, doubled. But it seems to me you cannot read Job 42:7-17 without seeing that for Job, restoration is deeply relational—not only in the way God ministers to Job through people but also in the way God ministers *through* Job to his friends and family. The story ends on the note that Job lived to see four generations of his children. The emphasis is not that Job died with a full bank account but with a full heart.

In his book, *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer writes about a difficult period in his own life, what he names the “dark woods called clinical depression, a total eclipse of light and hope.” He tells his story in this way:

“I do not like to speak ungratefully of my visitors. They all meant well, and they were among the few who did not avoid me altogether. But despite their good intentions, most of them acted like Job’s comforters—the friends who came to Job in his misery and offered ‘sympathy’ that led him deeper into despair.

Some visitors, in an effort to cheer me up, would say, ‘It’s a beautiful day. Why don’t you go out and soak up some sunshine and look at the flowers? Surely that’ll make you feel better.’ But that advice only made me more depressed. Intellectually, I knew that the day was beautiful, but I was unable to experience the beauty . . .

Other people came to me and said, “But you’re such a good person, Parker. You teach and write so well, and you’ve helped so many people. Try to remember all the good you’ve done, and surely you’ll feel better.” That advice, too, left me more depressed, for it plunged me into the immense gap between my “good” persona and the “bad” person I then believed myself to be.

Then there were the visitors who began by saying, “I know exactly how you feel . . .” Whatever comfort or counsel these people may have intended to speak, I heard nothing beyond their opening words, because I knew they were peddling a falsehood: no one can fully experience another person’s mystery. Paradoxically, it was my friends’ empathetic attempt to identify with me that made me feel even more isolated, because it was over-identification.

. . . One of the hardest things we must do sometimes is to be present to another person’s pain without trying to ‘fix’ it, to simply stand respectfully at the edge of that person’s mystery and misery . . .

Blessedly, there were several people, family and friends, who had the courage to stand with me in a simple and healing way. One of them was a friend named Bill who, having asked my permission to do so, stopped by my home every afternoon, sat me down in a chair, knelt in front of me, removed my shoes and socks, and for half an hour simply massaged my feet.

Bill rarely spoke a word. It is impossible to put into words what my friend’s ministry meant to me. He never tried to invade my awful inwardness with false comfort or advice; he simply stood on its boundaries, modeling respect for me and my journey—and the courage to let it be . . .”ⁱ

Friends, we may never have the answers about why good people suffer. But may we be the good people who show up when suffering strikes, bringing not answers but God’s very presence, whether that presence be in the shape of a hug, a handshake, a foot massage, or a casserole.

In closing, hear now these words of blessing for the suffering by John O’Donohue:

May you be blessed in the holy names of those
Who, without you knowing it,
Help to carry and lighten the pain.

May you know serenity
When you are called
To enter the house of suffering.

May a window of light always surprise you.

May you be granted the wisdom
To avoid false resistance;
When suffering knocks on the door of your life,
May you glimpse its eventual gifts.

May you be able to receive the fruits of suffering.

May memory bless and protect you
With the hard-earned light of past travail;
To remind you that you have survived before
And though the darkness now is deep,
You will soon see approaching light.

May the grace of time heal your wounds.ⁱⁱ

Amen.

ⁱ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (Jossey-Bass 2000), 61-64.

ⁱⁱ John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us* (Convergent Books 2008), 124.