

“Where Is God?”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Job 23:1-12
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
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“Today my complaint is again bitter,” says Job.

Have you ever had a day of bitter complaint? What about a complaint that lasted for several days? Weeks even. Months. Years.

“Today my complaint is again bitter,” he laments.” “I am weighed down because of my groaning.”

Do you know the feeling of being weighed down, too heavy to move? For me, emotional heaviness feels like a boulder sitting on top of my chest, constricting my breath, pressing in on my heart. Maybe for you it is a sack of bricks on your back or the feeling of lead in your stomach. Maybe it is tightness in your head, tiredness in your feet, or tension in your hips. Maybe it’s a locked jaw or a neck pain. But for all of us, grief and stress are felt in the body.

For Job it was literal boils and sores all over his body, from the soles of his feet to the top of his head (Job 2:7). The Bible blames the Adversary for Job’s sores but I blame the grief. Job lost all ten of his children in one devastating windstorm—not to mention all of his livestock—and if I lost ten children, I think my very skin would ooze from grief too. Even the loss of one child is more than any parent should ever have to bear. Many of you in this room have borne that kind of grief and carried that kind of sorrow. And it is out of such unspeakable grief that Job says to his friends, “Today my complaint is again bitter. I am weighed down because of my groaning.” Job says this in response to his friend, who, in an effort to comfort Job in his grief, said this: “Get along well with God and be at peace. From this, something good will come to you.”

Have you ever had *that* friend? They mean well when they say, “Everything happens for a reason,” or “God needed another angel in heaven,” or “At least you had the time with them that you did,” but really it would be more helpful if they didn’t speak at all. Have you had those friends? I still remember years ago, after my sister’s boyfriend died, when someone tried to tell her she had been grieving long enough and it was time to move on.

Job’s friends are those friends. They didn’t start out that way though. It begins this way, in Job 2:11: “When Job’s three friends heard about this disaster that had happened to him, they came, each one from his home.” This is Rule Number One in grief care. **Show up.** And they did. Verse 12: “They agreed to come so they could console and comfort him. When they looked up from a distance and didn’t recognize him, they wept loudly. Each one tore his garment and scattered dust above his head toward the sky. They sat with Job on the ground seven days and seven nights not speaking a word to him, for they saw that he was in excruciating pain.” That is good companionship right there.

It is after the first week has passed and Job is still sitting in his grief that the friends are ready to

move on to some answers, which is their first big mistake. Job breaks the silence first by cursing the day he was born, and he questions God, “Why didn’t I die at birth?” Instead of bearing witness to the full brunt of Job’s misery, his friends feel the need to find and provide answers, not discerning that grief’s questions are rhetorical and should be met with reverence and not explanations.

Job’s friends say *a lot*—way too much—but the gist of it is this: Job *must* have sinned in order for all of this bad stuff to happen to him and if only he would repent, God would be merciful again. Job, however, maintains his innocence. And he has a few choice words for his so-called friends. Just listen to this. Job 13:4-5: “You are plasterers of lies; ineffective healers, all of you. Would that you were completely quiet; that would be your wisdom.” And in Job chapter 6, he compares his friends to a stream that overflows its streambeds after a snow, but stops flowing in dry times and vanishes in heat, so that when traveling caravans come looking for water, they find none and they perish. Job says, “That’s what you are like. You see something awful and are afraid” (Job 6:21). In other words, when Job needs his friends the most, they fear his pain and their streams of comfort dry up.

So, next time your friends say unhelpful things to you in your grief, just quote Job back to them. Answer their trite religious cliché with a Bible verse and see what they say. In case you need to save these verses, that was Job 13:4-5 and Job 6:14-21. It may have been a while since you memorized a Bible verse, but these ones could come in handy. I digress.

Back to Job’s friends. What is particularly fascinating about their speeches is that they sound as if they have been ripped right out of the book of Proverbs. They are parroting that wisdom; all the while Job is vehemently opposing it.

Both the book of Proverbs and the book of Job belong to the same particular genre of Scripture known as wisdom literature. Unlike most of the other books of the Hebrew Bible that deal with big world events and Israelite history, wisdom literature deals with the minutia of everyday life. The wisdom of Proverbs mostly suggests that life follows a particular kind of order. Do good and good will come to you. Do evil and evil will find you. But the book of Job upends the conventional wisdom big time. In fact, when Job says, “Today my complaint is bitter,” in some ancient versions of the text, Job instead says, “Today my complaint is rebellious.” Job’s wisdom rebels against the conventional wisdom that says God blesses the righteous and curses the evil. Job’s life declares the opposite in every way. He is a righteous man who suffers more than anyone—good or evil—should ever have to suffer. It is important to notice that both Proverbs and Job appear in our Bible as part of our tradition and as part of our wisdom.

I think there is some truth to notion that God blesses the righteous, but good gosh, that is NOT the whole story. And if you don’t understand that, every sorrow in your life will become a theological crisis. “What did I do wrong to piss God off so much?” The answer is nothing, my friend. You did nothing to deserve this.

One place I see God’s mercy evident in Job’s life is that somehow he is able to hold on to his innocence and integrity. He refuses to beat himself up by believing his suffering is his fault. His own friends want the suffering to be Job’s fault because that would be easier than admitting there is no good answer as to why it all happened. But Job won’t go there with them because he knows

himself and he refuses to give up the one thing he can know. Amidst all this pain and confusion he knows that he lived and loved well.

He says this to his friends, “Oh that I could know how to find God, come to his dwelling place; I would lay out my case before him, fill my mouth with arguments, know the words with which he would answer, understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me through brute force? No, he would surely listen to me. There those who do the right thing can argue with him; I could escape from my judge forever. Look, I go east and he is not there, west, and don’t discover him; north in his activity, and I don’t grasp him; he turns south and I don’t see. Surely he knows my way; when he tests me, I will emerge as gold. My feet have stayed right in his tracks. I have kept his way and not left it.”

Job is saying, “Look I would take this up with God himself if only I knew where to find him and I KNOW God would listen to me because God knows me and knows that I have kept God’s ways.” When his friends insist on his guilt, Job says this in 27:5, “I will not agree that you are right. Until my dying day, I won’t give up my integrity. I will insist on my innocence, never surrendering it. My conscience will never blame me.”

Friends, what a mercy it would be after bad things happen if we didn’t heap guilt and shame on top of our pain. What if, like Job, we did NOT blame ourselves for the sorrows that befall us? Job’s frustration is not with himself but with God’s absence. Job doesn’t even lack faith. He knows God would listen to him. What he lacks is access. God is nowhere to be found. Job is brutally honest about that. He does not pretend to hear God when he does not. He does not purport to feel God when what he feels is the void of God.

I want to back up for a moment to the second chapter of Job, before Job and his friends ever get into it. Before they speak, his wife speaks to him first. And she often gets a bad rap, because she says to him, “Are you still clinging to your integrity? Curse God and die” (Job 2:9). She is portrayed throughout history like an unsupportive, nagging wife, tempting him to abandon God. But this portrait completely misses her as a grieving mother. It treats her as the distant and detached wife of Job, like she is a bystander and not the mother of ten lost babies, who is as heartbroken, grief-stricken, and utterly devastated as Job.

Notice that unlike Job’s friends, she—who probably knows him best—does not question his integrity. Rather she tells him that if there were ever a time to abandon integrity, it is now. “Curse God and die,” she says, which is not the heartless advice of a bystander, but the raging pain of a grief-ridden mother. She is the only friend of Job whose theological and emotional honesty matches his. In fact, she is the first one to speak of Job’s integrity and God’s failure to protect them, so perhaps it is her blunt realism that frees Job to be equally real with his friends, despite their pressuring him to simply repent and trust God’s plan.

I want to lift up Job and Job’s wife as examples to us all because while I hope nothing so terrible as what happened to them ever happens to you, I know pain *will* happen, and I want you to feel free—as free as Job and his wife—to be real with God and real with your friends. Because there is nothing especially brave or admirable about pretending to be okay when you are not. And there is nothing particularly spiritual about pretending everything makes sense when it does not.

The book of Hebrews chapter 4 says this: “Before God no creature is hidden . . . all are laid bare.” God already knows if you are not okay, if you are broken, if you are confused. There’s no sense hiding it from her.

Where is God in our pain and suffering? The book of Hebrews also says this, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness”—in other words, Jesus has borne our grief and carried our sorrows—“but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

The problem for Job, of course, is that he couldn’t locate the throne of grace. God appeared to have packed his bags and left the scene. But Job spoke up anyway. He spoke into the void. He hollered into the darkness. He laid bare his soul in the emptiness. *If* God were out there somewhere, he believed God was listening.

Job was right. He was right about his own innocence, and, as he will come to learn, he was right that God was listening all along. Friends, I don’t have a lot of answers for you when times are tough and you are grieving. I wouldn’t be a very good friend if I did, because the answers would be forced, like trying to put a small Band-Aid on a wound that needs innumerable stitches. The answers would likely be my attempt to alleviate my own discomfort rather than sit with you in yours. But I do think I can say this: your grief, even your raging grief, is welcomed and held by God. Trying to stuff it down or suppress it will only make you sicker. *Feeling it* is sacred and brave and the mark of an honest man, an honest woman.

So if you are sad today, if today your complaint is again bitter, may we, your friends, pledge to sit with you and listen to you and consider it holy work to do so. May we refrain from offering cheap answers to fill the silence. May we hold your pain with reverence; may we sit in the void *with* you and not against you. Had Job’s friends been *with* him instead of against him, might he have seen God’s presence in them? Instead they dried up their comfort and contributed to the drought of God’s mercy. May we be Christ’s steady stream in the desert season of your life. Amen.