

With Friends Like These...
Job 23:1 – 9, 16 – 17; Hebrews 4:12 – 16
Sunday, October 14, 2018

Last week we started a month-long look at the book of Job. It started off with God boasting to Satan about his servant Job, saying, “He is blameless and upright. He fears me and turns away from evil. There is no one else like him on the face of the earth!” And Satan says, “That’s only because his life is so good. If he lost it all, he would curse you.” God says, “Let’s find out,” and Job loses his home and his livestock and his servants and his children and his health.

And what we saw was that the book of Job is not about *why* all of that happened to him. The story is about how Job remained faithful to God *when* it happened to him. He says, “Shall we receive the *good* from the hand of the Lord and not receive the *bad*? The Lord *gave* and the Lord has *taken away*; blessed be the name of the Lord.” And so for *us*, the question is not *why* bad things happen; why there is suffering and pain in this world. The question is *when* bad things happen, *when* we face suffering and pain, how do we remain faithful; how do we hold on to God and trust God to lead us through it to something good?

That was last week – Job persists in his faithfulness. This week, we find Job in a very different place, voicing a bitter complaint against God; saying that he has no sense of God’s presence; crying out, “If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!” It sounds like Job is giving up. *What happened* between last week and this week?

Well, what happened is that Job’s *friends* showed up – Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. And they *tell* Job that the reason this happened to him is because he must have sinned. His *children* must have sinned. *Someone* had to have done *something* wrong, because God is *just*, and this wouldn’t happen without a *reason*. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar...the three best friends that

anybody's ever had. More than half of the book of Job is Job's friends trying to explain to him why this has happened. And the thing is, Job's friends are still among us today.

Years ago, a teenager in the church I was pastoring lost her father in a farming accident. At the funeral, someone said to her, "God just needed another angel." To which she replied, "I need my father *more*."

Or there is the person who was just diagnosed with cancer, and their friend says to them, "Oh, my uncle had that. It was awful. He suffered for about two years before he died." *Thanks?*

Or when Jen and I lost our daughter Maddie, and someone said to her, "Well, it's probably for the best. Next time watch what you eat or what medicines you take...."

Or the man who said to me at her funeral, "I know exactly how you feel. This one time my son got really sick. He had to be in the hospital for a few days. We didn't know if he was going to make it. It was really scary." Right, so you don't know *exactly* how I feel, because your son's still *alive*.

Or the woman who said to Jen, "You can have *another* Maddie!"

These weren't bad, mean, malicious people. They weren't *trying* to hurt us. They were trying, in their own way, to *help*; to *comfort* us, to *relate* to us and help us feel like we weren't alone. They just didn't know what else to *say*. There is something about us as human beings that, when we are faced with tragedy and suffering and pain, we need to make sense out of it. We need to explain it, rationalize it, make it fit in our boxes, our understanding of how the world and God

and life and faith all work. We need to make ourselves and others feel better – we have to *fix* it – because we can't bear to deal with the incongruity of this experience. We need to bring *order* to the *chaos* of life. We have to *say something* in the face of what we perceive to be the silence of God.

And the funny thing about it is that our attempts to rationalize and explain *only make things worse*. Look at what happens when Job's friends first show up. At the end of chapter two it says, "When Job's three friends heard of all the troubles that had come upon him...they met together to go console and comfort him. When they saw him, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads (all traditional acts of mourning and grief). They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great." Job's friends don't say a word for seven days. They just *sit* with him. They *grieve* with him. They are there *with him* in his suffering.

Then, it says, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. He says, "Why did God even give me life if *this* is what it was going to be like?" He is not cursing God or giving up. He is simply lamenting – expressing his grief and his pain. His friends *hear* that, and that is where everything starts to go wrong. Not in the fact that he is *lamenting*, but in the fact that they can't handle it, and they feel the need to *respond*. And I love the way it starts – his friend Eliphaz says to him, "If one ventures a word with you, will you be offended?" Like, "If I say something, will it offend you?" (Good rule of thumb: if you have to *ask*, don't say it.) He says to Job, "Don't blame *God*. God is righteous and just. This happened because *you* must have sinned. Just *accept* that and ask for *mercy*."

This begins the whole back and forth between Job and his friends that brings us to our reading today, where Job says, “If I knew where to *find* God, I would make my case, and I would be found innocent! But I can’t *find* God! If I go forward, God is not there; if I go backward, I cannot see God; on the left, God hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.” Job feels *alone*. He feels completely abandoned by his friends (who don’t *get* it) and by God (who is not there).

And, you see, that’s the thing. All those people who tried to *explain* to us and *relate* to us and help us feel like we weren’t alone, all it did was make us feel more alone. Because you *can’t* make sense out of suffering and pain, and you *can’t* understand it unless you’re living it. But you know who *did* help? Those friends who simply *sat* with us. The friends who brought us dinner and ate with us. The friends who said, “I’m going to call you every day to see how you’re doing. You don’t have to pick up if you don’t want to, but just know that I’m going to call.” The friends who hugged us when we cried and didn’t feel the need to say a word. Sometimes the best thing we can do is simply *be present* with those who are suffering, not trying to make sense out of it, but suffering *with them*. Is that not what Jesus did?

Our reading from Hebrews starts off with this famous verse, “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Most of the time when we hear that, we think of the “word of God” as scripture. The *written* word of God to us. And that is *one* way to understand it. But the word of God was made *flesh* in Jesus Christ. That’s what John’s gospel says, right? “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word *was* God. The Word became flesh and lived among us.”

So Hebrews is saying, “Jesus Christ is living and active, able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare.” It is saying, “Jesus Christ sees us as we are,” in all our sin, in all our pain and suffering. But he does so, it goes on to say, with *sympathy* for our weaknesses; with mercy and grace in times of need. That is how Christ is with *us*, and as Christ’s followers, that is how *we* are called to be with *each other*. To *see* each other as we are, laid bare, in all our sin and pain and suffering, and to do so with *sympathy* for weaknesses, showing mercy and grace in times of need.

Job could not find God in his grief and pain; he had no sense of God’s presence. Sometimes, *we* are called to bear God’s presence to those in grief and pain. But to do it in the way of Jesus – with mercy and grace, sympathizing with their weakness. Suffering *with* them. Not seeking to “fix” them or explain it all away or make sense out of it all, but seeing them as they are – letting them be who they are, exactly where they are – in all their grief and pain, accepting them and loving them. *That* is the kind of friend Jesus is. And it is the kind of friend he calls *us* to be. In *that*, they will *still* suffer, and they will *still* have pain, but they will know that they are not alone. That *we* are with them, and God is, too.