

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“The Container Cracks”
Second in a series: *Enabling the Journey*
Job 3-37
August 19, 2018

It's week two in our journey with Job. As you recall, we are digging into Job's odyssey for the month of August... and as we do, we're asking the question: How do we become the kind of church that enables a healthy spiritual journey?

[Remember, I said last week that spiritual formation is the ongoing journey of becoming like Christ and this is our most important work as a church. And what we find in the structure of the Bible and in many of the stories of the Bible is that there are some patterns to this journey. So how do we become the kind of church that enables a healthy journey?]

Last week we talked about the container that Job was given by his community... those basic statements of faith that he learned as a child.... The container holds the great mystery. And the container is constructed of those straight and forward truths that we believe and confess unapologetically as a community of faith.

Job was given that kind of container and it helped him get started on the journey. And it gave him ground to stand on when his world began to fall apart.

It's an important *reminder*, especially for churches like ours that lean deeply into being **open in heart and mind**, as our mission statement says. Creating the container is still essential. And it's a reminder for us as parents when we're making decisions for our kids, when we're making decisions about the patterns our children will live in a week and when we're thinking about what we want to instill in them.

We have to be creating the container for kids, and teens, and even adults, and keep coming back to the container to help one another in the journey of faith. Teresa of Avila says that there is no one in the spiritual journey that doesn't have to repeatedly come back to the beginning.

And so, as a church, as a community of faith, we need to be willing to teach and to share those basic statements of faith with one another... even as we continue to wrestle to understand the depths that is held inside the container, the essence itself of the mystery of God.

And it's this wrestling that we see in Job this week.

Remember, when we left Job last week he was sitting there in the ashes, still holding onto his container. Job was a mess on the outside....

He'd lost his job, his wealth, his family, and his health....

He was painfully shocking to look at—

his clothes torn, sores oozing from his head to his feet.

He was sitting there in a pile of ash that's blowing in his eyes and sores....

On the outside, he was a mess.

But on the inside, he still had all his ducks in a row. He was all buttoned up in his Sunday best... and holding onto his faith. **“The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord,”** he says.

It’s what he learned in VBS...

It’s what he’d been taught to do and to say in times like this...

And he was holding onto that container like a lifeline on a sinking ship.

Job’s friends hear about his misfortune and decide to come and comfort him... but they aren’t ready for this Job.... They see him from a distance and it’s as if the wind is knocked out of them. They can’t believe it. This man whom they have admired and looked up to and even envied now looks worse than a beggar on the street.

So, at the sight of him they weep, tear their robes, and throw ashes on their own heads. These three guys plop down right next to Job and sit with him for seven days and seven nights in silence... **“because they saw his pain was so great,”** the text says.

For a whole week, they say nothing...

They show amazing self-restraint by not breaking Job’s needed silence.

At the beginning, no one tries to cheer him up. **“Well, Job I’m so sorry to hear about your loss... why don’t you go shopping... or how about a vacation, Job? It will make you feel better. I promise.”**

There’s no prodding, no fixing. **“Job I’ve got a few extra camels and donkeys to help you get back on your feet....”**

There’s no idle chit-chat to break the uncomfortable silence, **“So, Job how about those Cardinals? Think they’ll go all the way again this year? God does work miracles.”**

Nope, none of that. Like good friends, they are simply present to his pain. They sit there in silence with him... and it must have been an uncomfortable silence too...because Job is waiting... **for God.**

Job’s sitting in his ashes. He’s holding onto his bumper sticker faith. “The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away,” and he’s sitting there waiting because he knows God will surely do something. If he’s silent long enough, surely God will speak to him...

So ,he waits... and waits... and waits... and doesn’t hear anything... which may be the worst suffering.

Thoughts start creeping into his mind... Thoughts like:

This isn’t fair.

You don’t deserve this....

And at first Job pushes them back... They creep up and he repeats his bumper stickers like a mantra.

The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away.

The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away.

Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Shall we accept good from God and not evil?

He's repeating his mantras, but pain has a way of pounding on you, doesn't it? And after a while his mantras aren't able to hold back the floodwaters of doubts.

Wave after wave of questions, and doubts, and uncertainties start to erode the foundation of his faith...

And the questions and thoughts get stronger.

"Maybe God can't hear me.

Maybe God doesn't care. After all, in the vast scheme of the universe, who are humans that God would be mindful of us?

Or Maybe God isn't real."

The questions get louder and louder, *[a little more playful here]*

and in a moment of torment you can picture Job getting up from his ashes, ripping the bumper stickers off his camel cart and slapping on a new one

"Life is a joke. Then you die."

Job's container is cracking. The faith he's been taught, doesn't add up to what he thought.

Remember, in the first two chapters, all we heard from Job's mouth were simple statements of faith. But then... after seven days of suffering and waiting in silence... Job finally speaks again, and his words are very different.

It's no longer, **"The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Shall we accept good from God and not evil?"**

Now it is,

"I wish I had never been born.

Cursed is the day of my birth.

My life is a cruel joke!"

Job's friends... start hyperventilating. They can't believe what they're hearing. After all, Job was like Pope Francis and Billy Graham rolled into one. You can imagine what it would be like to hear either one of them curse life.

Job's friends are about to have a heart attack here.

So, once they catch their breath and regroup... they try to talk Job down. **"Now Job, let's not get carried away. You know that God can work miracles. Just pray about it and God will take care of you."**

Or at least that's how it starts... in those 30 some odd chapters.

There's some gentle prodding and nudging at first.

But Job won't have any of it. In fact, the more they try to talk him down, the more they reason with him... the more outrageous Job becomes. Not only does he curse his life, he starts going after God.

"God mocks the innocent..." Job shouts. [8:23]

"God gnashes His teeth at me." [16:9]

"God carries out decrees against me." [23:14]

"Well, I'd sure love to talk to God about this, but God's nowhere to be found. *[looking up, shouting at God]*

The only guaranteed thing in life... is that God is absent!"

Of course, his friends are looking up at the sky listening for thunder.... They're pretty sure they don't want to be standing next to Job when God answers. So, they take a few steps back as they try to "reason with Job."

The truth is—they start preaching at Job, don't they? They're getting really nervous about his blasphemy.

"Job, you don't want to mess with God. Just confess those skeletons in your closet. We know you have to have some hiding in there!"

"Job, you'd better watch what you're saying!"

[more emphatic]

"Job, God only does this to the wicked. Repent!"

"Job, we know God must be punishing you for your sins...fess up."

On and on they go... back and forth for **thirty some chapters....** This is the longest conversation recorded in scripture, and it gets so monotonous, doesn't it? It could have been all condensed down to, "and then Job and his friends argued about God and the problem of evil."

That would have been a lot simpler... but the monotony of their conversation, the monotony of their preaching at Job is part of the point.

Scripture and other good literature will do this. Sometimes the structure of the writing is used to make a point. That's what's happening here. 30 chapters!

It's long and obnoxious.

They cover every possible angle here.

It's critical to a healthy understanding of the Old Testament that we realize what's happening. Job's friends are preaching the theology of the day, a theology that permeates the Old Testament, and a theology that permeates a lot of American Cultural Christianity today.

If you sin, God's going to get you.

Sinners are easy to spot. They are sick or poor.

Disaster must be the hand of God against you. (We heard a lot of that about New Orleans when Katrina happened)

Sinners have a miserable life,

but be obedient to God and you'll be wealthy, healthy, and happy... Because God wants to bless you and give you everything.

I'm sure you've seen it... It's infecting most of the sermons you hear on TV. And yes, as I said last week, it's there underlying most of what Joel Olsten and other sweet preachers like him preach... with their sappy smiles and shallow theology and deep pockets.

And of course, these preachers, they are popular.

Because, you see, we like that theology. We'd rather not admit it, but we do. It's simple, and clean, and easy. It makes sense to us. Who in here hasn't made a bargain or two with God along the way? I have...

"God I'll read my Bible and pray more if you will just..." (fill in the blank).

“God I will go to church and give 10% of my income if you will just....”

“God I’ll stop that sin in my life, if you will help me out here....”

It’s a way of thinking and a theology that dies hard. But right here, in the middle of the Old Testament is this monstrous story of Job, and for thirty some chapters that way of thinking is refuted. For 30 some chapters it goes on and on **because** that kind of theology dies hard.

But Job insists that it die.

He doesn’t quit.

Job stomps all over that kind of thinking.... as he sits there in the ashes.

Job’s done everything right. Job’s made the bargains.... Remember, back in chapter 1, Job made sacrifices... and not just for himself. He made sacrifices on the off chance that his kids had sinned... and still... it’s all been stripped away.

And now, with his container cracked, Job begins to demand something more from God and from this world. Something more than a quid-pro-quo formula for faith.

He’s demanding something more than the outside of the container.

He’s demanding something larger than what will fit onto a bumper sticker. His life and his pain won’t be reduced to something so trite. To a slogan. To a simple formula.

So, Job takes on his friends.

And he takes on the container he’s been given.

He takes on this world view... and in ***all this Job is really taking on God.***

There’s an ancient story where a man walks up to a beloved elderly monk. And the man asks the old monk, **“Do you still wrestle with the devil?”**

“No. I’m old and tired, and so is he,” the monk replies.

“So... your life must be easy now.... now that you’re past all that.”

“No...” says the monk. **“It’s much harder now. Now I wrestle with God.”**

That’s where Job is in his journey. He has moved into the darkness, and he is wrestling with God. And that’s where an honest to God journey of faith will almost always take us.

Do you remember the story of Jacob? back in Genesis?

As a young man, Jacob steals his brother, Esau’s blessing.

He runs for his life and lives for years with his uncle Laban. During that time, Jacob becomes wealthy. He marries Leah and Rachel and has lots of children. But there comes a time when he has to go home... to reconcile with this brother Esau.

On the night before he encounters Esau, Jacob wrestles with God. It's a turning point in his story. And Jacob limps for the rest of his life, from that wrestling match. He's never the same. He's been humbled in a profound way.

But on that night, he demands a blessing from God, and so he is given the name "Israel" which means, one who has struggled with God. It's where the name first shows up in the Bible. And that name is then carried forward throughout the Old Testament for the whole people of God. They are Israel. They are those who have wrestled with the Divine.

That's what happens in a growing, maturing, faith. It doesn't stay as pretty one-liners. It doesn't stay all buttoned up in a nice perfect system of belief. It's gutsy, and messy, and honest...

But like Jacob and Job, a maturing faith doesn't give up. It won't stop wrestling with God... it demands a blessing, it demands a deeper knowing of the Divine.

It demands to discover what has been hidden inside the container.

What is the essence beyond the walls of the container we've been given?

There comes a point in our journey of faith where each of us... will have to stand up in the face of life and have the honesty and the integrity to demand that life and our faith mean something more.

That may mean letting go of some truths that have served you well along the way.... Sometimes those simple truths aren't enough to carry you into the next part of your journey.

Do you know what I'm talking about? When the truths that served you well for a time aren't enough?

And you can't go on pretending they are...?

When you've got to be honest and real?

Something happens... Life brings you something painful or difficult.... Some loss. Some suffering... It may be internal. It might be external... or both.

But something happens... there's a death in your life... a divorce... something happens to your children... and the container cracks.

Maybe you pick up the newspaper one day and you realize that the suffering and carnage you read about on the other side of the river, or the other side of the world is happening to people.... just like you. You are part of your suffering.

And the world isn't nearly as simple as it used to be.

Or maybe you start to feel like a failure at something that mattered so much to you...

These moments come to all of us, and when they do, Job has a lot to teach us.

- 1) For one thing, it's going to take time... thirty some chapters, remember? You're not going to be able to make sense of it... right away.

2) And Job's going to teach us (as we'll see more next week) ...you're not going to solve this in your head. Job's friends try to argue theology with him. They try to show him chapter and verse what's going on... But these are the moments when you run into the limitations of intellect and reason.

The answers to your questions won't suddenly hit you one morning.... "Wisdom comes to us in a different way and Wisdom isn't going to be nice and neat..." (Burleson).

3) Job's story also gives us hope. There is more to come on the other side of this dark night he is in. We've got two more weeks, remember. There is hope, but this isn't an easy story. It's not an easy journey. ***It's not a journey that is going to come to us on our terms.***
The only way out of the darkness is through it. We have to sit in the ashes...
and wrestle with the Divine.

So, we have to ask, "What kind of church must we be to allow people to wrestle in the darkness?"
That's what it takes to be on this journey, and there are Jobs sitting in sanctuaries all over our city...
And there are more Jobs among us than you realize.

For some of us the container has cracked... and for some of us the container is beginning to crack.
So, what does it take to be a church that confesses a container, that helps, creates, and holds the container week after week, while allowing it to crack at the same time?

Can we do both?

I think we can. And we'll discover more about it next week and the coming weeks.

But for now, let me just say that we can hold the container and allow it to crack at the same time by being honest about life, and faith, and the struggles in-between.

We can do both by confessing what we believe as a church ***without being pushy***... or superior in some way.

And we do it by learning to ***listen without being anxious***.

We also need to be willing to sit in the ashes with each other... even longer than Job's friends do... and be silent even when Job cries out against God. When someone is suffering, when someone is hurting, your presence is far more profound than your words can ever be.

Our presence, in the ashes, in the questions, is the greatest gospel gift we can give.
But it's hard.

And so, we need to ask ourselves, **"Can we do that?"**

Can we allow someone the space and time to struggle and question for more than a week or two or even a few months without getting anxious or pushy?

Being this kind of church also means we remember that it's not our job to defend God. Job's friends tried that, and it actually makes God pretty angry by the end of the story. We'll hear that in another couple weeks. We will be told that in all this, Job never sins... but his friends do.

They take the Lord's name in vain. That is what taking God's name in vain is all about, you know... chitchatting about the Divine as if God's in our back pocket. Assuming you know what God is up to.

“The Lord this... and the Lord that... And God told me this... it really is that simple, Job”

That’s what taking the Lord’s name in vain really sounds like, and that’s not what Job needs.

What Job needs is a community with enough faith to not be afraid of the doubts and questions. Job needs a community that’s willing to sit in the ashes... and take enough risk to enter the darkness with him.

Job needs a community that will listen and help him explore his questions and deepest desires. Job needs a wise community that knows God is often at work the most when the night is the darkest.

**What Job needs is an honest to God,
honest to life,
flesh and blood church.**

May we be that.

O God, may we be that kind of place. Help us to confess our faith together. To teach it well, without being apologetic.... but help us to do so with grace, and love, and humility.

Make us the kind of church that can create the container and allow it to crack at the same time.

May we have enough faith in you to be anxious for nothing...

May we have enough trust in you to allow Job the space and time and place to wrestle in the darkness.

We ask these things in the name of Christ our Savior, the light of the world. Amen.

*(Thanks to my friend, Burt Burleson, for this insightful way of reading Job.
This series is clearly influenced by sermons he preached in 2006.)*