

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
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Glimpsing the Contents
Third in a series: *Enabling the Journey*¹
Job 38:1-42:6
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Job is a story of faith in stages... and what I've been suggesting is that it is an important model. Job helps us recognize patterns of the *journey* of spiritual formation.

And these patterns can guide us as a church. They can give us a framework for how to help one another in our own journey.

Because, as I've been saying this year, helping one another in the journey of becoming more like Christ is the most important work we do as a church.

Job's story begins with Job on top of the world. He has the perfect family. His finances are rock solid. And his faith is secure. There's not a cloud of doubt on Job's religious horizon.

His faith is also his grandma's faith. It's been passed down to him, ***and it is a gift***. He's been given the clear answers from the tradition. He's been given the container. Job says so even here today, near the very end of his story. *"My ears had heard."*

"I've been to VBS."

"I went to Sunday school."

"I've been to youth camp."

Job's ears have heard, and he's been taught the wisdom of the tradition. It's been drilled into him. He aced his catechism; he's the league champ of Bible drill.

He's been taught...

Raiders ride in to steal your oxen, donkeys, and camels and you say,

"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart."

Natural disaster strikes and wipes away your family and you say,

"The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away."

Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Disease infects your body. You break out with all kinds of sores and you say,

"Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?"

Job has his foundation in place at the beginning of the story. He knows the answers. He has a certain assurance about life and faith. It's the container he's been given.

And it's the kind of thing we all ***need*** to begin our journey. In fact, if you aren't given some solid answers to build your life on it early on, you're probably as an adult, going to need to go back and get it.

We need some truths to construct our life on.

¹ Thanks to my friend, Burt Burleson, for this insightful way of reading Job. This series is directly influenced by sermons he preached in 2006.

It is critical that we are teaching our kids and our teenagers the basics of our faith.

Then stage two comes along.

The storms of life are serious storms. It's one thing to hear about them. It's altogether different to experience them for yourself. And Job's foundation begins to crumble. His container cracks. Job sits in the ashes in silence trying to hold on to some meaning.

But borrowed answers will only work for a while.

So, after sitting there day after day, Job begins to cry out to God.

Job is the portrait of a person looking for answers... of a person longing for some meaning in the midst of all the chaos and pain of life. Job cries out, demanding that God make sense of all this suffering.

In stage two, Job is no longer wrestling with himself or the devil, as we said last week. Now Job is wrestling with God. And to continue the story from last week about the old monk who wrestles with God: The young man asked him, "You mean you wrestle with God and hope to win?"

"No." the monk answered. "I wrestle with God and hope to lose."

Job wrestles with God and is hoping to lose, too. The only thing worse than being defeated by the Divine would be to defeat the Divine.

Job hopes to lose this wrestling match with God, because if he were to win, that would mean nothing is really Divine. Nothing is sacred. Life has no meaning after all. Winning would be Job's worst nightmare because there would be nothing left but despair.

So, Job wrestles with God for thirty some chapters. It's long and obnoxious—and remember, last week we said that is part of the point. This takes time. There's no quick fix for a crisis of faith. It won't be taken care of in a weekend or an afternoon.

You can't take a pill for this. Or just read a self-help book....

Or go to a couple of counseling sessions. Those are all helpful tools in their own right, but they can't get you through a wrestling match with God.

It takes time... which is maybe the hardest part of all this. Job's greatest temptation is probably to give up... to get up from the ashes, dust himself off, and walk away.

It's the mistake a lot of people make. They break through the legalism they've been taught, or they encounter a world that doesn't add up... and they just walk away from their faith altogether. That's the hazard of stage two. (By the way, each stage has its hazards.... but that's a sermon series for another time.)

Faith takes time... and it takes patience....

Job has to stay at it if he's going to get anywhere with all this...

And he does. Job stays at it for thirty some chapters because he is not about to let God or meaning off the hook. So, Job goes on... and on... and on, laying it all out there, exhausting himself and exhausting the readers.

Once Job's finally done... once he's said all that needs to be said... God finally speaks.

Chapter 38 begins, “Then the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm....” In fact, God speaks twice to Job and both times we read, “The Lord spoke to Job out of the storm.”

Which is to say, God’s response comes from within the storm Job is in... not outside of it where the sun is shining. It comes from within the storm, from within the wrestling.

The only real answer you’re going to get will come from the storm itself. The only meaning that will mean anything at all will come from the storm. The truth Job needs... the only truth that is big enough for Job’s experience... will come from Job’s experience...

We hear that wisdom throughout the scriptures.

“The stone that is the stumbling stone will become...eventually... the corner stone.” Those who have walked through some great suffering redemptively can tell us something about this.

The cross that becomes yours... leads to life. It’s the central truth of our faith. God speaks to the world in a moment that seems like meaningless suffering. “The cross is foolishness to some...” Paul writes to the Corinthians, “but to us it is our salvation.”

Job knows this, and I have gotten the impression that some of you do too. God speaks to us out of the storm. And when God does, there are a few things about God’s speech that we need to recognize.

First, God never scolds Job. There’s no “Shame on you, Job. You should have known better.” In fact, at the end of the story God tells Job’s friends that Job was right all along. Job was innocent. And God was silent.

God doesn’t scold Job, *but...* **And here’s the second thing we need to notice:** God never explains either.... God never really answers Job’s questions.

Instead, God speaks as a poet... not as a philosopher... not as a theologian... and not as a preacher, thank goodness! God speaks as a poet.

This is the longest of God’s speeches in the Bible and it’s poetry.... That’s worth noticing. It tells us something about how God speaks to the soul.

God speaks through the beautiful.

And so here, God’s words come in rhythm and image, after image, after image.... The form is important here. Job won’t be led back by arguments, or proof texts, or three points that all begin with the same letter.

When you’re in the storm, you can’t think your way out. Rationality and reason aren’t going to be enough. There is no textbook here. No scientific explanation. Remember last week I said that when you’re in the storm, you’re at the point where you’ve gotten to the edge of reason.

And if you hang on long enough, like Job did, you’ll come to discover what Pascal meant when he said, “Reasons’ last step, is to recognize that an infinity of things lies beyond it.”²

The only way out of the storm is through something deeper than logic...a deeper kind of wisdom that only art, and poetry, and beauty can point to.

² Quoted in Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 229.

So, God doesn't answer Job's question. Instead, there is simply an invitation to close his mouth and open his eyes in wonder.

And God shows him... image after image. Just close your eyes for a minute and picture what Job saw: the morning light... the sea... the showers of rain, and hail, and snow... the majesty of the stars and mystery of constellations...

The life of the lion and goat... the moth and donkey... the wild ox and horse... the soaring hawk and the soaring eagle...

God goes on and on.

Job listens... and begins to see all that is around him... and sense through it what is beyond him. As one writer puts it, "He feels it, the mysterious rhythm and rhyme of creation... the fathomless nature of the cosmos." (Burlleson).

He begins to feel it deep in his own body.

Job begins to sense his oneness with it all...
and the life of God pulsing through it all.

God goes on and on and Job begins to encounter God's grandeur... God's otherness beyond all knowing... and also God's intimacy and presence in all things.

This is what moves Job in his journey.

God's poetic speech... the art of creation... it reaches some deep place that was closed off and pulls on Job... in a way he didn't expect. That's what art and beauty does. John O'Donohue has this great line in his book on beauty:

"*The wonder of the Beautiful*," he writes, "The wonder of the Beautiful is its ability to surprise us. With swift, sheer grace, it is like a divine breath that blows the heart open."³

This is what Beauty, in all its forms (art, music, poetry, creation), this is what it does.

And so, God's poetic speech begins to blow Job's heart open. And it begins to pull on Job. It's mysterious. It begins to change him. And at the end of God's speeches, Job confesses, "My ears had heard of you, but now... now my eyes have seen you" (42:5). Now Job sees, and he knows in a way that wasn't possible before.

This Job sounds so different from the Job we read about in chapters 3-31, doesn't he? And this Job is radically different than the Job we read about in chapters 1 and 2. He has moved to a new level of faith. It's no longer borrowed or inherited. Now it is direct.

Now Job *knows* at a different level. It's not rational. There are still no answers given. It's not as if Job says, "Oh, I get it. I was confused there for a bit but now... well, that really clears things up." Nothing is cleared up... but now, somehow, Job understands. As Jesus put it, now Job has "eyes to see."

³ John O'Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 7.

And what Job sees, what he glimpses... is the ***mystery of the contents***, the mystery that the container had been previously holding for him.

This is how a healthy journey of faith works. First, he was given the container, then it cracked, and now he's glimpsing the contents himself. "At first I heard. I've heard about it and known about it for years... but now I see." That's where the dark night was always taking Job.

That's why John of the Cross describes the dark night of the soul as "sheer grace." ... as a "guiding night, a night more lovely than the dawn."

The gift of the dark night is that it is giving you new eyes... and leading you to a deeper knowing, an encounter with the flame of love... burning at the heart of the universe... and you begin to see that same flame of love that is burning deep in the caverns of your own soul. And you're alive with that flame.

Now, we're asking—remember—what kind of church we need to be to enable that kind of journey.

At first, we said that we've got to be creating the container. We've got to nail some things down and confess our faith without being wishy-washy. There are certain truths that we need to hold and repeat without being nervous about it.

But then we also have to allow the container to crack. Last week we talked about being the kind of place with enough room for people to come and ask their questions.... We need to be the kind of place that is so full of grace, and compassion, and faith that we don't get pushy or anxious when others struggle and wrestle in the darkness...

But today we are asking, "Is there anything we can do... to help people move past that dark night?" How do we help one another move from something we've heard to something we see... from simply "learning about God" to "encountering"?

This story of Job gives us some clues. The Divine poem is the road map.

"Have you ever given orders to the morning?"

"Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth?"

Line after line, God uses beauty to point Job to a reality beyond himself... to something larger.

And that's what we need if we're going to keep moving on this journey. We need a church that points us to something bigger than ourselves... to the sacred... to the holy. We need a place that wakes us up to the transcendent... that moves us over and over again to reverence... and awe... and mystery.

And beauty is how we get there.

That's why God invites us to explore the beauty of creation,
and it's why God's language is artful poetry, not prose.

The God that Job discovers is best encountered through beauty,
which means God is best spoken about in the hidden and potent language of poetry,
not prose.

It is also why our prayers and liturgy are more effective in opening the heart when they are poetic, simple, and light, rather than heavy prose, thick with theological ideas.

“Beauty blows the heart open,” O’Donohue says.
And that includes music and art.

In fact, I’ve been thinking more and more in the last year or two about the need to incorporate more art in our worship. It’s why we used art in our Good Friday service this year. And I’ve been wondering about what it would be like to have different sacred art around our sanctuary and around our building.

What I know, is that if we want to help Job when he’s stuck in the ashes,
if we want to glimpse the mystery of the contents ourselves,
then in worship, we’re going to have to be poetic... and artful.

We don’t water down, and explain, and leave no room for mystery. Instead, we lift one another’s hearts and open our eyes
with music and imagination,
with liturgy and story,
with crosses and tables,
all expressions of beauty,
all that point to something deeper that the soul is longing for...
all that lead us to the One our soul is longing for.

O God, help us to be this kind of place. Stir our creativity and imaginations. Grant us depth and wisdom large enough to touch the transcendent... so that we might not only learn about you but encounter you.

*In the name of the Incarnate One we pray.
Amen.*

Silent Reflection:

*“The wonder of the Beautiful is its ability to surprise us.
With swift, sheer grace, it is like a divine breath that blows the heart open.”⁴*

*O Splendor of God's glory bright,
From Light eternal bringing light,
O Light of life, the living Spring,
True day, all days illumining.
Dawn's glory gilds the earth and skies;
Let Him, our perfect Morn, arise,
The Word in God Almighty one,
Creator imaged in the Son. Amen.
Ambrose of Milan, 339-397*

⁴ John O’Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 7.