

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
"The Container"
First in a series: *Enabling the Journey*
Job 1 & 2
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In May we spent several weeks unpacking what spiritual formation is. And if you were around most weeks, you heard me repeat again and again my definition. *Spiritual formation is the **ongoing journey of becoming** like **Christ**: at one with God, enlivened by the Spirit, enacting shalom.*

And one of my deep convictions about the church is that this work, of becoming like Christ, is at the center of our life. If we aren't helping one another become more like Christ, then I'm not really sure why we're here.

Spiritual formation, ***helping one another, in the ongoing journey of becoming more like Christ, is the most important work we do. The more we become like Christ, everything else falls into place.***

So, for the next month we're going to be exploring the ***journey*** part of spiritual formation, in particular. And to do that, we're going to follow the story of Job.

The Book of Job dabbles in all kinds of theological questions... but over the 42 chapters, it is essentially a story about Job's spiritual journey.... It's Job's odyssey.

A long time back I heard a series of sermons from my friend Burt Burleson on this topic. And he helped me to see Job's story as a pattern for the journey...so I want to give Burt credit for this series, as well as Rohr and Brueggemann who have shaped my thinking.¹

And as we read this story together, we're going to be asking a very particular question. What kind of church do we need to be in order to nurture people on their own odyssey? How can we be the kind of place that enables a healthy spiritual journey? That's the question we're asking.

The story begins with Job on top of the world. He was a good man and life was good to him. He was blameless and upright. He feared God and shunned evil.

You might say that Job was a Boy Scout of sorts...

He's an outstanding citizen.

He's religious and faithful ...and... rich...

He fits the mold of a man blessed by God.

He's got the ideal family: seven sons and three daughters. It's the ancient world's version of "The Brady Bunch."

On top of that, his business is booming: Seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels... not to mention the five hundred oxen and five hundred donkeys.... and all the servants to run the place...

He's the Bill Gates of the Ancient Near East...

Life is good.

¹ See also Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon As a Model for Biblical Education*, 2nd ed (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015); Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

But more important than Job's estate is Job's faithfulness. He offers sacrifices for himself and sacrifices for his kids on the off chance that one of them has sinned. This guy is covering all his bases. He's there every time the church doors are open. He's a faithful attendee and a faithful giver....

Job does it right....

His family is ideal.

His business is booming. His faith is steadfast.

Life is good... but not for long.

One of the blessings and one of the curses of being on top of the world is that you get noticed. You're in the limelight. People pay attention to you... sometimes more attention than you want. Job is noticed... by the people of the Near East and by the heavenly council.

God and Satan make this friendly wager. It's one of those uncomfortable parts of the story. But it's in there.

"Job's only faithful to you because you've blessed him," Satan, or in Hebrew "The Accuser," accuses God. **"Job's got it all! Take it away and he'll curse you to your face!"**

"I bet he won't." God says.

"Bet he will."

"I bet he won't."

"Bet he will."

"Ok, you're on."

And life is about to go down the toilet for Job. This part of the story makes us squirm in our seats, doesn't it?

And for good reason, too.

If we're not careful, we could make God out to be real petty here. It looks like God's just using Job... toying with Job to make a point.

But remember, not all scriptural literature is to be read in the same way.

We don't read Genesis and Exodus the way we read the Gospels.

And we don't read the Gospels the way we read the Prophets.

And we don't read the Prophets the way we read the Epistles.

And we don't read the Epistles the way we read The Wisdom Stories of the Old Testament...

and Job is part of the Wisdom Stories.

Not all scriptural literature is to be read in the same way.

So be careful here.... especially when we start talking about evil, and Satan, and God.

Remember, we understand who God is and what God is like by looking at Jesus. That's what makes us Christian. If you want to know what God is like, don't look at Job. Look at Jesus.

Be careful what you read into this part of Job.

You know,

maybe it's enough to say that evil rains down on the righteous and the unrighteous alike.

Maybe it's enough to say that the Evil One is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to destroy.

Maybe it's enough to say evil is out there. It's real. We should not be naïve about that.

And Evil is looking for any place and any person it can find to bring about destruction.
And no amount of goodness, no amount of tithing, or faithfulness, or Sunday School can protect you from it.

It's the part of Job's story that flies in the face of conventional wisdom. And it's no accident that Job is smack dab in the middle of the Old Testament. This whole story is pushing against some of the theology you find in other places in the Old Testament... a theology that says, **"God looks after the righteous. Life will be good to you if you're faithful to God."**

And this whole story is pushing against the prosperity theology you'll find on a lot of bookshelves today and TV preachers today... preachers like Joel Olsten.

Job tells a different story, doesn't it? Evil just is.
It's not partial to the righteous and the unrighteous.
We can't always find a reason for it.

But for our purposes, I'm much more interested in Job's response to the tragedy. ***Did you notice how he reacts?***

The first servant runs up to Job out of breath and says, **"Your oxen and donkeys have been stolen and your servants destroyed."**

Before he can finish, another servant runs up to Job, **"Fire from heaven came down and burned up all your sheep and...."**

Here comes another one, **"The Chaldeans made off with all your camels and killed your servants and...."**

But before he can finish... before any of them finish, before Job can get a word in, servant number 4 runs up, **"A tornado hit your oldest son's house.... All your children were in it.... They're all dead. There's nothing left."**

In rapid fire succession, Job's servants bring him the news. One moment life is good. The next moment, everything is destroyed. And what does Job do? Curse God? Have a heart attack? Scream? Nope.

He tears his robe, shaves his head, and the text says, he falls to the ground in worship. Strange, isn't it? Job's first response is to start quoting sacred poetry. You'll notice in your Bibles it changes from prose to poetry here.

**Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart.
The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away.
Blessed be the name of the Lord.**

You see— Job is probably in a bit of shock and it's like an automatic response.

He doesn't think.

He doesn't question.

He can't think at this point.

It's almost as if he can't process what he's just heard. Instead, he goes into autopilot. He simply reacts with what has been ingrained in him.

He does what he's been taught to do when tragedy attacks.

**The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away.
Blessed be the name of the Lord.**

Chances are this is what Job's been taught since he was a child. He probably grew up hearing his grandma say it when her camel-meatloaf came out of the oven burnt. **"Well Job, the Lord gives, and the Lord takes away."**

Or maybe it was the theme of VBS one year. You can hear all the kids saying it together: **"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart." "Say it with me children!"** You know, they had little popsicle-stick people with construction paper clothes they took on and off....

One way or another, it got in him.
Job is quoting from the sacred tradition.

And then, he does it again in chapter 2.

In round one Job loses his wealth, his business, and his children. In round two Job loses his health. Satan afflicts Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. Job has lost everything. And he sits there in the ashes... scraping his sores with broken pieces of pottery.

He's so miserable that his wife tells him to curse God and die!

But even then, Job comes back with another one-liner. It's another nugget of wisdom he's learned along the way. Something that has been ingrained deep in him along the way.

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

These are the things Job has been taught. He's heard them and repeated them hundreds of times. These are the one-liner nuggets of wisdom. He probably had a few of them on a bumper sticker slapped on the back of his camel cart.

They are the basics of his faith.
It's the container of faith that he's been given... and they are a gift to him from the tradition.

At least here in the beginning they prop him up. They give him a framework to deal with what life is handing him. This container is essential for Job. It helps him get started on the journey.

That's where a healthy journey of faith always begins. It begins with some concrete truths that we can hang our hats on. There are some basic statements that help us get started on the journey.

We see this kind of thing all over the Old Testament.

For example, the slaves in Egypt.

It's the same thing for the Ten Commandments given at Mt. Sinai: a container to help get started in their life with God after being in Egypt for generations. They are simple one liner truths for their lives with God.

And we see the same pattern at the beginning of Job's spiritual odyssey. He has these nuggets of wisdom that have been ingrained in him by his community...

And they are a gift.

When tragedy strikes, when profound questions come, we need something to lean on. We need something concrete and solid to help us get our footing.

We need words like.... Psalm 23— **“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside the still waters, he restores my soul. Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.”** These sacred words are woven deep into our minds and hearts.

It’s why we read Psalm 23 at funerals instead of having a philosophical discussion on the nature of evil. That’s not the time or place. We simply need to know, and to say, and to remember these sacred words. That’s what we need at first.

So, let’s go back to our original question. How do we, as a church, nurture a healthy journey of faith?

For starters, we have to be a community that’s willing to create a container.

There are certain truths that we need to be willing to say and teach without wavering... because they are part of our tradition. They are the container that has been passed on to us, that we are called to pass on to the next generations.

We don’t come every Sunday to reinvent our theology. Sure, any one of us may come with questions and doubt, but as a community our invitation is not to make up our theology as we go, but to dig deeper into the mystery of our theological grounding.

If we want to help nurture a healthy spiritual journey, then as a church, we need to be confessing the basic truths of the Christian container. We need to be willing to confess and to teach our scriptures and our theology.

Now, I know there are some of you who are starting to squirm in your seats. You aren’t real comfortable with talk of Christian theology and dogma... and probably because you’ve seen it used as a weapon for exclusion rather than an invitation to blessing.

For now, let me just say, ***please*** come back next week... because I know there is another side to this story and we’ll get there. I promise.

And I’d guess that there are some who are really glad to hear me say this, because you want things nailed down. You don’t like fuzziness.

Let me just say to you, ***please*** come back next week too... you might not be quite as comfortable but there is more you need to hear.

For now, it’s enough to say that we do need to be creating the container to help people get started on their journey.

If we want our children to have a healthy and life-giving spirituality, we have to teach them the basics of our faith as parents and as a community

If we want our teenagers to have a healthy spirituality,

if we want our adults who are newer to the faith to have a healthy spirituality,

then we need to nail some things down for them.

We do not give one another a gift by creating wishy-washy shallow theology. We give one another a gift by taking each other deep into the ground of our tradition.

Now the container is going to start off with some pretty basic things. Things as simple as:

Jesus loves me, this I know...

Great is Thy Faithfulness...

For God so loved the world....

and Christ is the image of the invisible God.

The container—it includes some basics from our Bibles.... And it includes some basic doctrines that have been held by most Christians in every tradition and in every age...

In fact, I want to give you just 5 basic things that I see as part of the essential container. This isn't an exhaustive list. It's more representative, but I want to name a few for us: You don't get numbered lists from me very often, but here you go:

1. Jesus Christ is the Incarnation of God – fully God, fully human.

Which is to say, Jesus shows us what God is like

and Jesus shows us what it means to be fully human.

This is an essential part of the Christian container.

2. God is Trinity: 3 in 1,

As confusing as that is, the point is to say, God is relationships. God is love itself, or as the Ancient Christians would say, God is the dance of life, the energy between lovers.

God is Trinity.

3. The Scriptures are Inspired by God:

That doesn't mean that they are factually perfect.

That's not to say they are a science book, or a historical encyclopedia, or an answer book for every question you have.

But they are *inspired*, the breath of God flows through them

and God's Spirit speaks to the church and to our souls through these writings in a unique way.

In these sacred stories and ancient wisdom, we find our own sacred story.

The Scriptures are inspired by God.

4. Gathering as a church for worship is essential to the Christian life:

Not because it's required for God to love you,
but because

we are formed by the wisdom of a community, more than our own.

We learn how to love when we are committed to a community, more than when we are committed to ourselves

and most importantly, in worship our hearts and minds are recalibrated toward God's Kingdom, God's ways, God's life in us and around us.

Worship is essential to the Christian life.

5. Jesus calls each of us to give your whole life to God, just as he did.

Not because you will be punished if you don't.

Not because God is out to get you.

But because

you are created by God *out of love*.

You are called by God *into love*.

And so, Jesus calls you to give your whole life (body, mind, and heart) to God, just as he did.

This is all part of the container.

They are some of the simple basics we need to teach and pass on without wavering.

One of the ways we've tried to model a container here at Dayspring, is to read together the Apostles Creed whenever we have a baptism. The Apostles Creed is the most ancient confession of faith we have

and in the history of the church, it's become the basic container of faith for the Christian household.

Most recently, we've been using an updated version that comes from the Iona worship book. It's printed on the front of your WG, and so, as we think about creating a container today,

I want to invite all of us,

no matter where you are in your faith journey,

no matter what you think you know or don't know,

I want to invite all of us to read this together now.

**We believe in God above us, maker and sustainer of all life,
of sun and moon, of water and earth, of male and female.**

**We believe in God beside us, Jesus Christ, the word made flesh,
born of a woman, servant of the poor, tortured and nailed to a tree.**

A man of sorrows, he died forsaken.

He descended into the earth to the place of death.

On the third day he rose from the tomb.

**He ascended into heaven, to be everywhere present,
and His kingdom will come on earth.**

**We believe in God within us, the Holy Spirit of Pentecostal fire,
life-giving breath of the Church, Spirit of healing and forgiveness,
source of resurrection and of eternal life.**

Amen

This is a beautiful example of the Christian container.

In fact, I think it would be great if we, as a church, made this our basic statement of faith... and took it upon ourselves to memorize it... and to help our children memorize it and our youth to memorize it.

We all need a container at some point.

Job had one... here at the beginning of his story... and it saved his soul....

It gave him the foundation to get past Chapter 2, into the depths of what is to come, that we will explore in the coming weeks.

Let's Pray:

O God, we thank you for the clear and simple truth. We thank you for the basics that we can hold onto when everything else is falling apart... For the rocks piled up by our forebears... For the reminders along the way.

And we remember those who taught us... those churches, those parents and Sunday School teachers and saints in our lives that we may not completely agree with, but they made us learn our sacred scripture and sacred songs deep down inside, and for that we're grateful.

For all those who helped us get started on this journey of faith, we give you thanks... through Christ our Lord, the rock of our salvation.

Amen.