

Toeholds for Troubling Times
from Job 2 and 3

I will tell you a secret about myself. Don't tell anyone.

I have always had a hard time with the Psalms. There are some beautiful lines in them, like this translation of the 23rd Psalm:

*The Lord is my shepherd.
I lack nothing.
He lets me rest in grassy meadows;
he leads me to restful waters;
he keeps me alive. (Psalm 23 CEB)*

or this from the 27th:

*The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27 NRSV)*

I recognize that the Psalms are a huge, important part of our spiritual tradition. They're the hymnbook of the Jewish people, the songs of faith Jesus probably sang. But I often can't find in the Psalms words that inspire the faith I'm looking for, the kind of faith that widens my heart and opens my mind, makes my every-day living more compassionate and kind.

I feel bad about this. I feel bad about myself for not adequately appreciating what many other people have found a great resource of faith. But honestly, often the Psalms seem to me pitched at a level of intensity that I don't feel in my every-day, walking-around life. Here, from the 69th Psalm:

*Save me, God,
because the waters have reached my neck!*

*I have sunk into deep mud.
My feet can't touch the bottom!
I have entered deep water;
the flood has swept me up.*

*I am tired of crying.
My throat is hoarse.
My eyes are exhausted with waiting for my God.*

More numerous than the hairs on my head

*are those who hate me for no reason.
My treacherous enemies,
those who would destroy me, are countless.*

The Psalm ends:

*Don't let me be swept away by the floodwaters!
Don't let the abyss swallow me up!
Don't let the pit close its mouth over me!*

*Don't hide your face from me, your servant,
because I'm in deep trouble.
Answer me quickly!
Come close to me!
Redeem me!
Save me because of my enemies!*

Most days, I don't feel like I have any enemies. How often are you about to be swept away by floodwaters?

And then, for this sermon series, I started reading the Book of Job again, for the first time in a long time. The story of this man who had tried to do everything right in his life, lived carefully, followed all the rules. A man who had always before felt the rewards his good life was supposed to bring him. And suddenly everything changes. His children die. His livestock—his business, the source of his wealth and even his sustenance—are stripped from him. Job himself suffers an illness that has no cure. In that over-stated way that the Bible sometimes uses to make a point, Job is miserable. His suffering is immense.

I hope he had the Psalms to read. They are perfect for Job.

This week, maybe because Job's story was in my mind, I heard so many stories that reminded me that everywhere, even in a community as protected and privileged as this one, there is suffering. I'm a pastor, so people talk to me fairly regularly about hard things in their lives. But this week, those stories sounded different to me. And I realized something: we may not think of the hardships and worries of our lives as enemies. We may think our footing is solid enough to keep us from getting swept away in floodwaters. But people suffer, nonetheless—all the time. Which is to say, we feel the pain that comes with living. Sometimes it's the pain of difficult things and losses that happen to us. Sometimes it's pain that we cause ourselves by our worry or failures of character or anger that builds up inside of us. And sometimes we suffer for love—love of another person, for a broken world, even a messed-up church.

It occurred to me as I listened to those stories this week that there's a piece of suffering—maybe the hardest piece, actually—that's about the way suffering messes with your identity, your self-image. It unsettles the self you thought you knew. 'This is not who I am,' the sufferer wants to say.

I heard it in the news reports from New Zealand this week: ‘We are not the kind of country where mass shootings happen.’

I heard it from a gay United Methodist pastor at another church: ‘I know I must be more than my sexuality.’

And then I heard it in a dozen other conversations too:

‘I do not want to be someone who can’t get along with a family member. I am a loving person.

‘I hate being the kind of person who disappoints other people.’

‘I have disappointed myself.’

‘Am I the kind of mother who cannot hold onto her child who’s being pulled under by addiction?’

‘My joy is gone. I can’t even force my face make the shape of a smile.’

‘I am not the strong, capable person I used to be. I hate the ways I am bound by my body, or my less capable mind, or my inability to remember things.’

‘I do not want to be that person who spends every day, every week, fighting to stay alive.’

These too are words that hold suffering.

Who are we when we suffer? What happens to our humanity? Does it get reduced, shrink us to the size of the thing that is wrong? Like a fun-house mirror, suffering distorts the size and shape of everything in front of it.

When C.S. Lewis’ wife died, he wrote a book called *A Grief Observed*. He wrote,

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing.

At other times it feels like being mildly drunk... There is a sort of invisible blanket that hangs between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want the others to be around me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. If only they would talk to one another and not to me.

And no one ever told me about the laziness of grief...I loathe the slightest effort. Even reading a letter is too much. Shaving, impossible.

Meanwhile, where is God? ...it feels like a door is slammed in your face, a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence.

That sounds a lot to me like by being swept away by floodwaters. Swallowed by the abyss. I know that grief.

Suffering confuses us. When we suffer we are inclined to ask ‘Why?’. We have to ask; it’s the human thing to do. But I think that when we ask that ‘why’ question it’s not actually an answer we want. In fact, every answer would seem inadequate, even insulting, too small. ‘Why’ is a word that is there simply to hold our protest, our confusion. It’s our insistent statement, ‘This is all wrong.’

And that is how Job prayed. The phrase ‘the patience of Job’ is a misreading of this story. Job wasn’t patient. He railed at God. You heard it in the words we read this morning: Job cursed the day he was born. He said, ‘I have become someone I do not recognize. This is not who I was born to be.’

That kind of prayer is called *lament*. Lament is an old word. It means sorrow put into words, but it’s more than that; it’s words that hold something more like a moan, or a wail. Lament is a prayer big enough to hold confusion and ‘why’ and ‘this is not who I am.’ Job’s prayers were laments. His words accused God. They shouted his outrage at what his life had become.

*What crime have I committed? How have I sinned against you?
Why do you hide your face as if I were your enemy?
Will you frighten a withered leaf or hunt down a piece of straw?
It seems like you count up all my errors and convict me for the sins of my youth.
If only you would hide me away till your anger has passed, then come and release me.
All my days in prison I would sit and wait for that time.
You would call me—I would answer;
you would come to me and rejoice,
delighting in my smallest step like a father watching his child.
But [you do not come.] cliffs fall to the ground; boulders crumble away; mountains are
turned to dust.
You have destroyed my hope.*

The Psalms too—many of them—are laments. They too are complaints addressed to God that life is not as it should be. If you read a handful of those psalms, you can begin to see that there’s a pattern in them. Every one of them is a sort of dialogue, beginning with the writer pouring out his trouble. Almost always overstated, because that’s how pain makes us feel—like nothing else matters. The psalm demands God’s attention. ‘Save me!’ it shouts. ‘How could you not do something if you see me like this?’

Then—you can watch it happen in every psalm, and we will see it in the story of Job—when the hurt and demand and outrage are fully voiced, something shifts. The anger is spent. The complaint is heard. And then the healing can begin. The God who seemed not to care comes

back into view and is busy again with the work of healing, fully engaged in the repair of this life that had seemed irretrievably broken.

The psalms tell us what the story of Job tells us: you do not have to apologize for resisting your suffering. There is no mileage in measuring your words or in maintaining politeness with God. What will lead you back to yourself, set things right again, is a full-throated conversation with God, a prayer that honestly speaks everything you've got inside of you, no matter how ugly it sounds.

The Psalms still don't always speak what I feel. I have had days when I felt terrible disappointment or outrage or soul-splitting grief, but not every day is like that. On the days when I can't imagine or remember my own suffering, I'm using the Psalms these days as empathy exercises. I read them and ask: Who is it that's speaking those words today? What's happening that is making someone feel like that? What does that person need from me today?

And then I ask: How can my prayers speak with the same kind of spontaneous, heartfelt honesty that I hear in that lament? Because just in case God has stopped listening to me, maybe gotten a little bit tired of my perfunctory, obligatory prayers, I'm pretty sure it is honesty that will always catch God's attention again.