

Sermon 24 March 2019
Job's Friends—"Reject Easy Answers"

Will you pray with me?

God, whether because of my words or in spite of them, may your word be spoken. And whether we come with willing hearts or stubborn ones, help us to receive. Amen.

I came across this cartoon recently. Two eagles are sitting around, reading the paper and drinking their morning coffee. And one eagle says, "Do you think the owl is a predator?" "Of course not. He's never bothered me." comes the reply. "Exactly." says the first eagle. "No idea what Mr. Mouse was going on about."

It's funny, as long as we don't think too much about it. Because, in reality, it's not funny at all. *This* is how we so often go about our lives. Our experience and the world we have built around that experience dominate our way of thinking. The problem is, so often, when someone shares with us an experience that does not fit into what our experience has been, our response is to discount *their* experience because if *their* experience is true, it disrupts our entire worldview.

Is the owl a predator? I don't think so—he's certainly always been kind to me.

Job's friends hear about all of the terrible things that have happened to him and they do what any good friend would do—they show up. When they arrive, things are worse than they imagined. In an ancient sign of mourning they rip their clothes, sprinkle dust on their heads, and sit in silence for seven days and seven nights. Their first act is a good act—they don't try to explain the suffering away, they don't belittle what has happened, and no one dares say, "well at least..."

And then, at the end of the seven days, we hear Job's voice for the first time in this story. He cries out in lament, cursing the day he was born, wishing to undo the story of his creation. And that's where Job's friends take a turn from being the friends who show up when it matters, to being... something else.

"Hey, Job..." says Eliphaz, "No offense, but when have you ever seen something bad happen to someone good?" *That* is Eliphaz's response to Job's great lament. Basically, "Job, you don't know what you're talking about. Bad things don't happen to good people." And then Bildad jumps in, "You know, Job, God answers prayer. You probably should have prayed for things to be different." Meanwhile, Job is responding, defending his innocence, telling them that he hasn't done *anything wrong*. Zophar jumps in and says, "Woah woah, you're saying that you didn't do *anything wrong*?! You think you didn't deserve this? That you're without blame?! I'm sure if God showed up right now, God would be able to tell you all that you've done wrong and you'd *realize* how much you deserve all of this."

You see, the way that people saw the world was that *everything*, good or bad, happened as God's response to your actions. If you did good things, God made good things happen to you. If you did bad things, then you could expect God to deliver bad things in return. Suffering was

thought of as a punishment for having disappointed God. There are plenty of places in the Bible that say, more or less, "If you do good things, if you work hard, good things are going to come your way."

The Lord doesn't let the righteous starve,
but he rejects the desires of the wicked.
Laziness brings poverty;
hard work makes one rich.
Proverbs 10:3-4

And guess what? This mind set, while it has shifted in many places and many ways, is still incredibly prominent. Joel Osteen says, "When you focus on being a blessing, God makes sure that you are always abundantly blessed." And you and I are not Joel Osteen, but we say things like, "Everything happens for a reason." Often what we mean is that we genuinely believe that everything will work out in the end. Which may be true. But it certainly doesn't mean that everything happens for a reason. If everything happens for a reason, that means that God is orchestrating great calamity and great tragedy in my life and the life of others in order to work out some great unseen plan. And I just can't settle with that idea, I can't imagine that a just God, a good and just God, would ever cause tragedy to teach a lesson. I can believe that God is bigger than all of life's ups and downs without believing that everything happens for a reason.

Job has seen immense suffering. Things have gotten about as awful as they could possibly get. And so, he cries out in lament. And instead of sitting with him, his friends jump straight to the easy answers. "Come on now, friend. We know things are bad here, but you *must* deserve this." "Job, you did the right thing for a long time and God clearly took care of you for that. But you were bound to slip at some point. Now that you're the one who's suffering, *now* is when you decide that's not how God works?" his friends ask. "That's totally how God works! Everything in our experience tells us that's how God works!"

"That has never been our experience," his friends argue. And there sits Job, who may have argued like his friends at some point, but now he has experienced something different. He has seen something else. And now, easy answers are out. Sure, it would be simpler if the answers were easy, but the easy answers don't fit anymore, because things are complex.

As I read this story, it seems that I am very comfortable in identifying with Mr. Mouse, who has declared that the owl is, in fact a predator. It feels very comfortable to roll my eyes at the eagles who just don't get it, and at Job's friends who are satisfied with easy answers. It feels comfortable to sit back and think, "yeah, they don't get it. They're not as evolved as I am." And this gives me pause, because rarely is it wise to decide that your place is amongst the hero of the story. Job's friends' easy answers over-simplify the complexities that Job is in the middle of. But, I too, am prone to over-simplification.

Too often, I look at a Bible passage and I think, “Ok, this is complex. How can I make this simpler so that everyone can understand it?” I work to root out all the complexities of Christianity so that it is really very simple. How can we take the meaning of life, the cause of suffering, the best and the worst parts of life and make them simple and understandable in a five-point outline?

We may not over-simplify by saying that good things happen to good people, but we certainly oversimplify. We make it simple—God is love. But the truth is, life is not simple. Life is difficult and messy and full of complexity. We reduce God to a vending machine that delivers a bag of hope when I need a little pick-me-up, a bar of happy when I’m having an off day, and a can of “everything’s going to be fine,” when I’m feeling overwhelmed. But God is bigger than the boxes we’ve constructed for God to fit into. The experiences of other people can’t be neatly placed into single categories. It can’t all be wrapped up and made to look nice and easy and simple.

So what do we do with this life that feels out of control if we can’t tidy it up, like Job’s friends? What do we do with this God of ours who doesn’t neatly fit in any of the boxes we’d like God to fit into? Easy answers can feel tempting when we face a month like this one with floods and cyclones and horrendous shootings. Isn’t there a way to tidy this all up—make it easy, make it manageable even?

I think perhaps we are called to dig into the complexity in troubled times— to live in the messy, muddy middle of it all and to find that the God who can’t be reduced to a single thing isn’t found in the easy answers anyway, but walks with us, instead, through the complexities of a full life. May we reject the easy answers and look, instead, for where God is showing up in the midst of this intricate world.