

Toeholds for Troubling Times
Job 30:16-23

I have been listening to a new podcast while I walk. It's called *Terrible, Thanks for Asking*. It's hosted by a young author named Nora McInerny. This is how she introduces the podcast: "You know how every day someone asks 'how are you?' And even if you're totally dying inside, you just say 'fine,' so everyone can go about their day? This show is the opposite of that." She ought to know. A few years ago, she miscarried, and then her father died, and then her husband died of a brain tumor—all in a span of six weeks. I trust this woman to know what it means to be human and to understand suffering.

I haven't listened to every episode of the podcast, but I've listened to quite a few. I was curious about how anyone gets through that kind of terrible time without faith and with her sense of optimism intact. And I'll tell you, this woman is remarkably composed and emotionally generous. She talks to her podcast audience with empathy, and that kindness that you often see in people who have suffered.

A podcast seems to me like so much of social media, a strangely public way to process your grief. It's as if this person needs an audience to hear her story, to witness her internal coping project. So we listen as she works through her sadness. She talks to other people, but mostly she mines her own internal resources to get through this terrible patch in her life.

I don't want to dismiss the importance of her self-reflection. This is what evolved human beings do. In her situation only the strongest of us would bypass the availability of numbing agents: drugs, alcohol, blame, platitudes about how everything happens for a reason. Only someone with good sense and lots of therapy could dig down deep inside themselves to find the fortitude you need to live with that much loss.

That is good humanness.

It is not faith.

Faith is something else. Faith is trusting that there is someone on the other side of your conversation even without a social media audience. Someone whose strength you lean on even when you feel alone, and when the circumstances of your life suggest that you might actually have been abandoned.

The philosopher Martin Buber called this the difference between living in an *I and It* world, in which we are isolated in our own experience, and a life of *I and Thou*, where our experiences—all of them—call us deeper into relationship, with each other and ultimately with God. The Book of Job, that we are coming to the end of this week and next, is the conversation you have with that 'Thou' in those times when your honest answer to the question "How are you?" is "Terrible."

In so many ways, the Book of Job marks a turning point in the history of human thinking about God and the meaning of suffering. It was written about 500 years before the birth of Jesus. Until then the Jewish people had always believed that when bad things happened to them, it was a signal of God's unhappiness with them, a consequence of their inadequate faith, or their failure to be obedient. Now comes the story of a good man who suffers. Job has done nothing to deserve the terrible things that happen to him. That old explanation of the world simply does not hold any more.

C.S. Lewis noted, decades ago, that ancient people approached God the way an accused person would approach a judge. They came to God conscious of their own shortcomings, afraid of God's verdict on their lives. In modern humans the roles are reversed. We are the judge; it's God who is on trial. We ask 'Why?' and we expect God to present some reasonable defense for being the kind of god who permits war and poverty and disease.¹

Job is the piece of literature that ushers in that modern era. Job is the first prosecutor of God, and he is his own client. But he speaks for everyone who suffers. What we heard this morning was Job's closing argument.

*I cry out, and you don't even answer me.
I am silent, and you do not care.
From your lofty place, all you do is look at me. I think you hate me.
You deliver me pain with every ounce of energy and power you've got.
You toss me around as though my life means nothing to you.
You have set out to destroy me, haven't you?
What kind of god are you, anyway?*

And the unspoken sentence that would finish this argument:

You are not good, God.

It's a little shocking— isn't it?—to hear someone speak to God this way—especially in the Bible. Only someone who believed that God was essentially kind would dare to be so honest. Only someone who believed that God was real would dare to put his image of God on trial, risk having that image shattered. And really, only a person of deep faith would believe that the audience for that indictment is God himself.

From this story of Job, there grew a whole literary tradition of humans putting God on trial for crimes against humanity. There are stories of this as far back as the mid-1600's. The writer Elie Wiesel carried these stories into the modern era. Wiesel was imprisoned in Auschwitz when he was fifteen. When he was just a teenager, he witnessed unspeakable horrors in that death camp. The Jewish prisoners devised all kinds of small, subtle acts of defiance. Ways to sustain their faith. Ways to test their faith. One night, Wiesel watched as three Jewish scholars in the camp with him put God on trial. They re-created a rabbinic court of law, and they indicted God for the acts of inhumanity they saw happening around them. Witnesses testified. Evidence was presented. And finally, there was a unanimous verdict: The Lord God Almighty, Creator of

¹ From C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*

Heaven and Earth, was guilty of crimes against creation and against humankind. Wiesel wrote later that after the verdict was announced, there was “an infinity of silence.” And then, he said, the scholars looked up and said, “It’s time for evening prayers.” And they all recited the prayers they knew, the prayers they said every night, addressed to the God they had just convicted.²

That night stuck with Wiesel. For years after his rescue from Auschwitz, he struggled to find the best form for telling that story. He finally did it in a play called *The Trial of God*. That play has been performed, and re-interpreted, many times.

In 2008, a writer named Frank Cottrell Boyce rewrote the story again into a British television play called *God on Trial*. It’s a stunning drama. You can find it on YouTube, and if you don’t have the patience to watch the whole thing, watch at least the ten minute scene that is the final argument about God’s guilt or innocence. The verdict is pronounced: God is not good. The evidence supports no other conclusion. Just then SS guards burst into the barracks. The prison doctor begins to read off the numbers of those who will be taken next to the gas chamber. One of the men cries out, “What do we do now?”

“Now,” comes the answer from his comrade, “Now we pray.”

No doubt this play could be translated again, now, into many scenes, different costumes. The prisoners could be dressed in the uniforms of refugees stranded in Syria, or Mexico, or Venezuela. They could be patients in children’s hospitals. Young black men in prisons. Protestors at the General Conference of churches that will not let them in. The amount of suffering in the world does not seem to decrease over time. The ultimate human question, in every time, is the same: What do we do now?

The answer in Job is: Keep talking to God, even when what you feel most clearly is God’s absence. Keep praying, even when all the evidence suggests that your words are met by no sympathy. That’s what it means to have faith.

The most faithful people I know are people who have been through terrible suffering. Africans who have seen civil war rip through their villages and their families. Jail inmates and recovering addicts whose lives have left them without a shred of dignity. Parents who have lost a child. People whose only hope is in a God who must be bigger than the worst moments of our lives.

Faith is not the only way to get through suffering. On that podcast I’ve been listening to I heard the story of a young man who had been through a shocking amount of loss in his life. Literally, everyone he loved, every person in his very messed up family, is gone. He talked about his own ‘post-traumatic enlightenment’. How he worked hard to build himself up from the inside, to construct the emotional armor he needed to keep going. When Nora McInerney finished her narration of his story, she said, “I don’t believe we’re required to make something of the lemons that life hands us. But some of us do. We make lemonade. We make podcasts. We make art. We try to make justice. Not to move beyond, but to move on.”

² From Elie Wiesel, *The Trial of God*

Take your experience and make something of it. Make yourself strong. This is an approach to living that has a very well-developed ‘I’, but no expectation of ‘Thou’.

It can sustain you as long as your mental and emotional muscles hold up.

It can help you move on.

But here’s the question: Is ‘moving on’ enough for you?

Months ago, when we were planning this season of our worship, I titled this sermon *Hang On*. As I was actually writing the sermon this week I realized that the real question isn’t *whether* we hang on through troublesome times; it’s a question of what we hang *onto*.

Lots of good people, people of strong moral constitution, dig deep down inside themselves and find what they need to keep going when life throws bad things at them.

People of faith do something different. People of faith know that their story, whatever it is, will find its meaning only when it’s embedded in a larger story, a story that echoes all the way through history, through humanity. A story that’s about living in a universe that always finds its way back to goodness, no matter how bad things get. A story whose long arc bends toward justice. A story that stubbornly keeps turning toward the God who says “I love you” even when all the evidence appears contrary.

That’s what the rabbis mean when they finish their trial, convict their God, and then resume their prayers. What it means to pray is to search for the connection between your story and that larger story. To look for meaning and hope in your connection with the God who will look back at you through both the wide lens of creation and the tiny, laser-sharp lens that knows every sinew of your body. The God who, even in your darkest moment and despite your harshest judgment, never lets go of you. Hang onto that.