

Job's Outrage vs Eliphaz, Bildad's & Zophar's Piety"

Job 13: 1 – 15

Makemie Presbyterian Church

March 22, 2009 Fourth Sunday of Lent

¹³"Look, my eye has seen all this, my ear has heard and understood it. ²What you know, I also know; I am not inferior to you. ³But I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God. ⁴As for you, you whitewash with lies; all of you are worthless physicians. ⁵If you would only keep silent, that would be your wisdom! ⁶Hear now my reasoning, and listen to the pleadings of my lips. ⁷Will you speak falsely for God, and speak deceitfully for him? ⁸Will you show partiality toward him, will you plead the case for God? ⁹Will it be well with you when he searches you out? Or can you deceive him, as one person deceives another? ¹⁰He will surely rebuke you if in secret you show partiality. ¹¹Will not his majesty terrify you, and the dread of him fall upon you? ¹²Your maxims are proverbs of ashes; your defenses are defenses of clay.

¹³"Let me have silence, and I will speak, and let come on me what may. ¹⁴I will take my flesh in my teeth, and put my life in my hand.

¹⁵See, he will kill me; I have no hope; but I will defend my ways to his face. This ends the reading.

In this season of Lent, part of our journey to Easter is the road through the dark of Maundy Thursday & the grief of Good Friday. And the story of Job; is of a man's suffering in a contest of good & evil, of suffering from a cup God has put before him, of true turning to God, are strong themes in the weeks of Lent.

I think one of the hardest things in the world is knowing what to say to someone who is raw with grief. All the cards at the Hallmark store fall short. The ones with sunsets & bouquets of flowers with their inadequate phrases: "In deepest sympathy," "thinking of you in your time of need," it's not enough, is it?

In many ways the religious cards can be even worse with their easy assurances of eternal life. However much we believe that – we can say it too soon. Grief needs time – to drink the full bitter cup of loss. Grief needs time to thrash around on the floor & howl. If we try to pick it up too soon, it will bite you. Sometimes the best thing we can do is just register our presence; sit there with our mouth shut & wait.

When Job's friends first heard what happened to him that's what they did. Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite & Zophar the Naamathite, all of them from Edom, famous for its gurus. They met

together to console & comfort Job, the Bible says. But when they got to Job's place all they saw was a blistered old man with a shaved head, sitting on an ash heap with a pot shard in his hand. They didn't even recognize him at first. And when they saw what had become of their friend they went into mourning with him. They tore their clothes to match his; they dunked ashes on their own heads so they looked as ruined as he did. Then they sat there on the ground by him for seven days & nights; they sat there without saying a word to him; while he dug at his sores with his pot shard. And they saw his suffering as very great. It might have gone on like that a lot longer if Job had remained speechless, but on the seventh day like a volcano that had been building up heat under those ashes he erupted; abandoning the rational prose that had held him together at the start. He exploded into fiery poetry, cursing the day he was born.

“Why was I not buried like a still born child, like an infant that never sees the light” (5:52).

Job was far too devout to blame God outright; but he did the next best thing, he flung the gift of life back in God's face.

“This sorry existence is no gift” Job howled, “but the worst possible nightmare from which I begged to be excused.”

When Job’s friends hear this their tongues are loosened; their compassion for him dissolves. Job’s outrage loosens their tongues & one by one they line up to defend God.

“God is just” they tell him, “therefore you must be guilty. The Almighty One judges the souls of mortals; who hands down both rewards & punishments, that One does not make mistakes. If you are in pain, then you must have done something to deserve it.”

They actually mean well. Eliphaz states off ever so gently, “If one ventures a word with you, will you be offended” (4:1)? And he goes onto open Job’s ears by telling Job what a help Job has been to other people.

“You have instructed many, you have strengthened weak hands. Your words have supported those who were stumbling & you have made firm feeble knees” (4: 3 – 6).

Eliphaz takes a breath, lets his concern show on his face & says, “But now it has come to you & you are impatient; it touches you

& you are dismayed. Is not your fear of God your confidence & the integrity of your ways your hope?”

Now, I hate to admit it but I've used that one. People say “Why me?” And I've said, ever so gently, “Why not you?”

None of us are innocent so who are we to complain when misfortune comes our way? Eliphaz reminds Job “that human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward” (5:7).

The thing is to let it open you up to God. The thing is to take responsibility for whatever wrong you might have done and suffer the consequences.

Apparently the look on Job's face doesn't change because Eliphaz tries tact.

“How happy is the one whom God reproves,” he says to his friend Job, “therefore do not despise the disciplines of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he binds up, he strikes, but his hands heal. He will deliver you from six troubles; in seven no harm shall touch you” (5: 17 – 19).

This is what you might call the “Vaccination School of Pastoral Care.”

“I know how hard this is for you but think how much stronger it will make you in the end.

“God’s only doing this because God loves you.”

“Think what a help you’ll be when others go through the same thing.”

But Job is not helped; and he can tell whose side Eliphaz is on & he feels abandoned.

Next, Bildad has his turn & he’s not as gentle as Eliphaz was.

“How long will you say these things & the words of your mouth be a great wind? Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert right (8: 2 – 3)?

I’m afraid I’ve said something like that to. When people tell me what is happening to them is wrong; I suggest as tactfully as I can – right & wrong are hard to see from our perspective. God’s ways are not our ways; nor are God’s thoughts our thoughts. The same rain that washes away my crop of newly sprouted tomato plants is the

same rain that ends the drought for the farmers in our county. I can't see the whole picture so it's sometimes hard for me to know what's right & wrong. Sometimes I have to let God determine that.

But Job is not helped. Job says, in reference to this contest between him & God – well God should pick on someone his own size. Job says, “there is no umpire between us” (9:33). I'd like to know what umpire is in Hebrew; wouldn't you?

“There is no umpire between us who might lay his hand on us both. If God would just take his rod away from me & not let dread of him terrify me then I would speak without fear of him. I know that I am not what I'm thought to be” (9: 33 – 35).

Finally its Zophar turns. Sounding very much like God's trial attorney, he cuts Job's feet right out from underneath him.

“Can you find out the deep things of God?” he asks, “Or find out the limit of the Almighty? It is higher than heaven – what can you do? It's deeper than Sheol – what can you know” (11:7)?

In verse 12 – Zophar says, “But a stupid person will get understanding, when a wild ass is born human.”

While this is a little hard to decipher, it certainly sounds like an insult to Job. Now as far as I know I have never said that to a single living soul. But I have sat with people who were so genuinely in pain, yet were so exasperating in their unwillingness to see any what out of it, that I at least thought unkind things about them. Whoever wrote the book of Job had apparently undergone quite a bit of pastoral care.

The thing that unites the speeches of Job's so called friends is their insistence that he has done something wrong. And if he will only admit it & surrender himself to God, things will start to get better. Only Job knows he is not guilty; & so does God. What is happening to him defies all human logic which his friends can't stand – so they cope with Job's pain by coming up with pious clues to explain it. The more he suffers, the more they talk, until Job can't take it anymore.

“What you know I also know” he reminds them, “I'm not inferior to you. But I would speak with the Almighty. I would argue my case with God. As for you, you whitewash with lies; all of you are worthless physicians. If you would only keep silent, that would be your wisdom” (13: 1 – 5).

Job's outburst I think is not only a rejection of his friends it's also a rejection of their religion; which has no room in it for the profundity of his experience. His friends know their scripture are full of wisdom & have ready answers for all of Job's questions but they are not as loyal to Job as they are to their system of words about God. Their system begins & ends with the moral nature of creation, based on the moral nature of God; which is why it is impossible to dismiss these friends as mere buffoons. The writer of Job never does that; never turns them into cartoon characters. Their speeches are beautiful in their own way; they exhort Job to prayer, to self examination, to penitence. But all their advice is based on their fundamental belief that all God's math always comes out even; there are no fractions or remainders in it. If Job has experienced subtraction; there is a reason for that. If Job wants what he has lost to be added back then all he has to do is find his fault & correct it. While Job lies flattened on the ground they drop their cookie-cutter on top of him, press, snipping away any parts that don't fit their pattern. Job says he's innocent. But he can't prove that. So they snip, snip, snip – Job says, "Innocent people suffer all the time."

"Well, that's because they're not really innocent." Snip.

Job says, “God does not seem to care.”

“Oh, that’s blasphemy.” Snip, snip. Snip, snip.

The friends are devoted to making life fit their beliefs but Job will have nothing to do with beliefs that do not fit with lives of others like him who suffer for no reason.

Job would rather come face to face with a lying cheating gambling mob than to pretend with his friends that life is always fair and all justice is an illusion.

In many ways I think this story is about the failure of religion, if religion be defined as a human system for domesticating the divine. Eliphaz, Bildad & Zophar do a lot of that. The aim of their speeches is to comfort Job by clarifying God’s intentions towards him. But Job is not comfort – able; because religion has failed him. It has first of all failed to protect him, failed second of all to explain his experience, leaving Job no choice but to go straight to the source. While all his friends’ speeches are directed at him, most of Job’s speeches are directed to God.

“See” Job says, “He would kill me, I have no hope. But I will defend my ways to his face. “

Job will listen to God, or Job will listen to no one. And meanwhile he prefers God’s silence to the comfort of his friends. And when Job finally gets his answer it shuts him right up. God comes back at Job with about four chapters of – who do you think you are? And Job really does repent. In a small voice Job says,

“See I am of small account what shall I answer you. I lay my hand on my mouth.”

But in the surprise ending of all surprise endings God prefers Job’s outrage to the piety of his friends.

“My wrath is kindled against you & your friends” God says to Eliphaz the Temanite, “for you have not spoken of me what is right. My servant Job has.”

Go figure.

God will spare the three friends, God says, if they will take seven bulls & seven rams to Job & ask Job to pray for them. Which

Job does. But wouldn't you have loved to have seen the expression on Job's face when he did?

For all of us who like Job's friends are reaching out to someone who is raw with grief sharing our own religion may not be the best idea; especially if it comes with ready made answers about why things happen the way they do.

A better idea might be to act out of our own faith. By sitting down as near the ash heap as we dare & holding our tongues. Faith that relationship is superior to religion. That God is never far away, not even, well especially not, when our lives are in ruin.

And nothing, neither pain, nor doubt, nor loss, nor fear, nor sores, nor ashes, nor pious friends, nor our own outrage, nor anything else in all of creation can separate us from the love of God, whose ways confound us even as they bring us life. Amen.