

the best thing to do,
 really the only helpful thing to do,
 is to be present as Job's friends were present with him.

This is the most faithful way to respond to those who feel totally forsaken.

Sometimes the only thing we can say in a time of tragedy is,
"I am so sorry."

And many times a warm embrace, a hug, holding a person in his or her grief,
 speaks far louder than the most eloquent words we could ever utter.

In December 1997 I returned from Wisconsin where I had the sad task of planning and helping to officiate my brother Doug's funeral following his tragic death in an automobile accident.

I spent the four days there doing all I could to support his wife Susie and Ian, Lucas, and Caitlyn, my father, and my other two siblings.

On the Thursday after we came home, a friend invited me to come to Ft. Wayne to attend a men's support group, part of men's work that I had been involved with since the previous August.

And there, surrounded by the loving support of those men, I finally allowed myself to grieve, and as I wept those men held me, and no one needed to say anything.

I have heard people ask, "What do I say to someone going through a tragedy?"

The best answer,
 really the only answer,
 is "nothing."

Say nothing—especially if there are no real answers to be had.

For the victims of the mass shooting at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon...

for those who lost their homes and possessions in the wildfires of California and the flooding of South Carolina...

for victims of violence and natural disasters everywhere,
 silence is far better than giving wrong answers—

such as attributing the suffering to something the person has done,
or, even worse, attributing the situation to God.

Last week one of the presidential candidates responded to a question about the Roseburg shooting by saying “Stuff happens.”

“Stuff happens” is what you say when you get a flat tire on your way to work,
or your washing machine breaks down,
or you have to go to the hospital for unexpected surgery.

Trivializing a terrible manifestation of human evil like Roseburg as “stuff happens,”
or telling someone in a time of disaster or tragedy, “It is God’s will,”
are the least helpful things one can do.

Blaming the victim,
trivializing the suffering,
explaining it away as “God’s will”—these things are never helpful.

Even if the one going through the ordeal is trying to verbalize her or his own faith that all will be well because God is in control,
the notion that this is God’s will is a pious absurdity.

This is precisely what the Book of Job was written to refute.

As Job laments his misfortune and articulates his complaint against God,
his friends’ anxieties increase,
and finally they respond.

They feel they must speak for God, and therein lies the danger for them and for each of us.

When one is suffering, no answer is always better than the wrong answer.

III

Eliphaz is the first to venture a response,
and it is essentially a rehash of the conventional wisdom of his day.

Clearly, Job has done something to deserve all this misfortune.

After all, we reap what we sow.

Job's wickedness must be very great, says Eliphaz,
else this terrible calamity would not have come upon him.

It is, of course, pious nonsense.

And like all pious nonsense,
it is offered by Eliphaz in an attempt not only to explain what has happened
to Job,
but even more, to keep Eliphaz's own belief system intact.

He and the other two are really talking to themselves,
trying to ease their minds.

That is frequently the case when we try to explain the inexplicable.

Often what we say when we encounter tragedy in another is meant more for our
own peace of mind than for theirs...
more for our own reassurance than to reassure them.

And so we attempt to justify our understanding of how the world works...
and how we think God should work.

This back and forth between Job and his three friends goes on for 29 chapters—
some of the greatest poetry in Hebrew or any other language.

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar repeatedly try to convince Job that his own egregious
sins are the cause of his calamitous misfortunes.

Jewish rabbi Robert Gordis describes Eliphaz as the most urbane and sophisticated
of the three.

Bildad is a traditionalist who mostly restates the conventional wisdom.

Zophar, probably the youngest of the three, possesses the brashness and dogmatism
of youth and never lets facts interfere with his theories.

The more the three so-called friends press their point,
the more Job comes to his own conclusion:

Since he knows he is innocent,
it is clear that God has mistreated him.

For Job, there can be no other explanation.

He knows he has done nothing to deserve what has happened to him.

By the time we get to chapter 23, a lot of water has gone under the bridge.

Fed up with the conventional wisdom and the pious platitudes of his friends,
Job demands his day in court.

He wants to take his case directly to God.

Surely, Job reasons, if God can be found
and Job can present his case,
God will listen and vindicate him.

Firmly convinced of God's justice and his own innocence,
Job in 23:10 says, "*When he has tested me, I shall come out like gold.*"

IV

"*When he has tested me....*" Do you hear the irony in Job's words?

It is startling; testing is precisely what is taking place.

God is allowing his chief quality control officer to test Job's metal.

Job is absolutely right, more than he can possibly know.

Unwittingly, he names what is taking place—
Job is being tested at the core of his being—
"skin for skin." (2:4)

That is the reason Job cannot yet have his day in court—
Job cannot be vindicated until the time of testing is over.

This is the reason God is not to be found.

Nonetheless, Job remains steadfast in the certainty of his own innocence...
and that God will vindicate him in the end.

The Epistle of James calls it "the patience of Job." (James 5:11)

But Job is anything but patient.

He is defiant,
 demanding
 and persistent,
almost impertinent in his insistence that he is innocent,
 and obstinate in the certitude that he has an advocate
 who will at some time or place appear to redeem him.

Job has not succumbed to the popular notion that God can be co-opted or appeased
in such a way that God becomes compliant to our every whim.

God's hand can be heavy.

Job knows what the author of Hebrews will later say:

"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Hebrews 10:31)

Still, Job searches—
 backwards and forwards,
 to the right and to the left—
 but God is not to be found.

God is cloaked in obscure silence.

When Job says in verse 3,

*"Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
 that I might come even to his dwelling,"*

it is not only a plea for vindication,
 but the ultimate expression of resignation to his circumstance.

Job spells this out in verses 12-14:

*What right have we to make a claim on God,
 even if we have kept God's ways,
 not departed from God's commandments,
 and treasured God's word?*

God stands alone; who can dissuade him?

God does what God desires, and that's that.

No wonder he confesses to being terrified and in dread.

But does Job truly wish that he could vanish in the darkness?

He wants an arbiter,
 a "redeemer,"
 to intercede on his behalf.

He is utterly convinced that if he can get someone to plead his case to God,
 then he will be vindicated.

And honestly, it's really hard not to side with Job on this one.

If Job were to get his day in court,
 what would God say?...

That Job lost his fortune, his family, and his health on a bet...
 with the devil?

And Job is just as adamant in declaring his own innocence.

He remains confident that God knows of his innocence too.

But the longer God stands apart,
 the more Job despairs of changing God's mind.

So by the end of chapter 23 Job falls into complete and bitter resignation—
 a kind of religious fatalism—
 that what God has planned for him is going to take place, no matter what.

God will complete what God has appointed for Job.

With that, Job's heart sinks even deeper into the abyss of terror and despair.

*God has made my heart faint;
the Almighty has terrified me;
If only I could vanish in darkness,
and thick darkness would cover my face. (23:16-17)*

Though Job has complained about God's absence,
now he begins to dread God's presence.

When God arrives, what will God do?

Will Job have any recourse?

And so chapter 23 ends with Job apparently pleading for thick darkness to conceal him from God's sight.

V

However, a closer reading of verse 17 reveals an important textual problem:

The verb in the sentence can be translated one of two ways:
either "be destroyed" or "be silenced."

The New Revised Standard Version opts for the former,
rendering Job's words as an expression of utter hopelessness:

*"If only I could vanish in darkness,
and thick darkness would cover my face!"*

This portrays Job overwhelmed by despair,
seeking death as the solution,
and puts him but a hair's breadth from following his wife's advice:
"Curse God and die."

But there is another possible translation of the verb—*"to be silenced."*

This gives us a very different picture,
as Job says, in the translation of the New International Version:

*"Yet I am not silenced by the darkness,
by the thick darkness that covers my face."*

This is far more in keeping with the Job that we have seen thus far—
in the darkness of God's absence and the dread of God's silence,
Job will not give up.

Job has become a man whose faith and integrity have been forged into defiance.

He insists that God show up in court and give an accounting of what has taken place.

You may recall Job's famous words from chapter 19,
beautifully put to music by G. F. Handel in the soprano aria from *Messiah*...

Job knows that his Redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
and after Job's boil-covered skin has been destroyed,
then in his flesh Job will not only see God,
but will see God on his side. (Job 19:25-27)

Job clings to his belief that God is faithful,
despite all evidence to the contrary.

No, this is not patience we are seeing in Job.

This is bold,
courageous,
steadfast,
defiant faith in the face of darkness.

Against all odds, Job refuses to abandon either his faith in God's sovereign justice and goodness or his belief in his own faith and integrity.

It is Job's *hope for the forsaken*—
his defiant and steadfast conviction that God is a God of justice
and will not leave us forsaken.

VI

But is this enough?

The Book of Job is, of course, a dramatic story of unmatched poetry,
a totally unique literary masterpiece.

Further, the story raises an awful question:

What does it mean that God gets drawn into this scheme just to prove Job's
faithfulness?

If this were the only biblical voice on faithful suffering,
we too might wish to vanish in darkness.

But in the larger biblical context, Job's defiant faith is ultimately rewarded and
resolved in an astonishing way.

The God whom Job cannot find finally appears,
not just speaking out of the whirlwind—
which we will take up next week—
but beyond the pages of Job as a man very much like Job.

God appears in the flesh as Jesus, the Son of Man,
the Word of God incarnate,
who enters this world to live alongside the suffering,
to know rejection, ridicule, and scorn,
and to experience forsakenness to its fullest extent.

Hanging on the cross in the obscuring darkness between heaven and earth,
Job's plea finds its way to the lips of Jesus via the words of today's psalm:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus was no more abandoned on that cross than Job was abandoned in his test.

But like Job, the test must run its full course.

The Accuser must be given full reign if he is to be silenced, once and for all.

In the cross of Jesus Christ we see precisely that—

God not only identifying with unjust, innocent human suffering and pain and taking it upon God's self to the uttermost,

but in the resurrection becoming triumphant over it.

God permits God's beloved Son to endure from Satan what he denies the Accuser doing to Job—
taking his life.

From the beginning we, the readers, know that Job's life will be spared.

Not so for the Son of Man.

Jesus offers his life for the life of the world
and in so doing, is raised and crowned as Lord of life.

Having shared in both our life and our death,
this Sovereign Christ is ever able to sympathize with our weaknesses.

Like Job, he maintained his integrity and was tested as we are,
yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

Now he has the power to give us life in the midst of death.

He is the source of mercy and grace,
especially when our whole world comes unhinged.

VII

Toward the end of his life Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethge:

"God allows himself to be edged out of the world and on to the cross. God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which [God] can be with us and help us."

My friends, this is God's faithful response to the times when we feel godforsaken in life...

when the worst possible stuff happens,
and our world comes crashing down upon us:

In life and in death we belong to God.

*With believers in every time and place,
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

There is no greater hope than this!

Amen.

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