

**Beware of Counsel without Knowledge**  
**Wisdom's Word on Suffering: Sermons from Job, Part 3**

Job 38:1-15, 34-41

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First  
 Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on October 18, 2015]

I

A recent internet blog post had the provocative title,  
**“Stupid Phrases for People in Crisis.”**

The article begins:

“Instead of saying ‘God wouldn’t give you more than you could bear,’  
 you could say, ‘Let me come over and do some laundry.’”

The author goes on to list various statements we say when we encounter friends in crisis, consolations that fall flat in the face of human pain...things like,

*“It gets better.”*

*“When God shuts a door, he opens a window.”*

*“Did you pray about it?”*

*“Don’t worry... God’s in charge.”*

*“Maybe it happened for a reason.”*

And my personal favorite:

*“When I think about your situation, I’m reminded how blessed I am.”*

The people who say such things mean well...  
 they want to be helpful..

but their effort falls flat, and worse,  
 they add to the pain of the person in crisis.

## II

For twenty-nine chapters, Job and his three so-called friends have argued back and forth, attempting to make sense of Job's terrible suffering.

His three friends—

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—

are trying to be helpful,

trying to be of comfort to Job,

trying to say the right thing.

But in their insistence that Job's suffering is God's righteous response to Job's sins, both known and unknown, they are adding to Job's pain.

The more they talk, the more Job resists with his own lengthy, impassioned complaint.

He has persistently declared his own innocence,

demanding his day in court,

and questioned God's arbitrary administration of divine justice in the universe.

Most of all, Job has consistently denied and refuted the conventional wisdom—

that in God's design of the universe,

evil and suffering are punishment for sin,

God's righteous wrath at work.

Between last Sunday and today, a fourth character shows up.

His name is Elihu, and he is younger than the other three.

Presumably has been listening in on the lengthy disputation between Job and his friends.

Because he is young, Elihu begins by refuting the notion that wisdom comes with age.

Instead, wisdom is given by God in order to keep humankind from sinning.

If one listens to God's voice,

one can be wise.

But because human beings are not listening,  
God uses illness and other hardship to bring them to repentance.

Elihu goes over much of the same ground his three older colleagues have already covered.

But he adds the idea that the destruction of all Job's property,  
the deaths of his ten children,  
and his terrible skin disease,  
were probably just God's way of helping him to improve his character  
and sharpen his sensitivities.

"He delivers the afflicted by their afflictions," Elihu explains in 36:5,  
"and opens their ears by adversity."

Job is worse than most sinners, says Elihu, because he has added to his sin his false speech about God and God's ways.

What does it matter that Job is righteous?

Simply being righteous warrants no reward from God;  
why should it?

It does not benefit God, just as sinfulness does not hurt God.

Righteousness, like virtue, is its own reward.

If Job will stop his arrogant indictments and accusations against God, says Elihu,  
God will bring Job's punishment to an end.

Elihu counters Job's argument that God is not to be found by contending that God is visible for those with eyes to see.

Glimpses of God are available to humankind through creation.

God provides rain to grow food,  
but also thunderstorms as evidence of God's wrath.

God is good, but also above it all.

How can Job be so insolent and arrogant as to demand that God answer him?

Job should fear God, rather than continue in his own conceit.

Suffering is God's way of putting Job in his place—  
again, more of the conventional wisdom.

Why should God appear to someone as insincere in his prayers as Job is?

Rather than praising God in all circumstances, Job has descended into blasphemy  
in his questioning of the justice of the world.

Elihu has become an even greater burden than Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar  
because Elihu insists that what Job is missing is that God is talking to him,  
urging repentance through suffering,  
but Job is not listening.

This near-death experience is intended to bring Job to repentance.

Instead, in his narcissistic sinfulness, it has only made him arrogant.

Who does Job think that he is,  
challenging God and God's ways?

### III

Job has no chance to respond to these new and comforting insights because at that  
point another speaker arrives on the scene,  
and this time the speaker is God.

Just the way God clears his throat almost blasts Job off his feet,  
and that is only for starters.

Job has insisted that God appear and give an accounting of things,  
and now in chapter 38 God does.

But it is a very different accounting than Job had expected.

Job was looking at the world through the lens of his own limited experience,

tragic as it was.

God looks at it from another perspective:  
the Creator and Sustainer of the cosmos.

And in a stunning series of rhetorical questions, God responds to Job in a way that is, at least initially, startling.

Fred Anderson suggests it is analogous to divine electroshock therapy designed to shake Job out of his depression and lift him into a new frame of reference.

**“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?”**

That question is really directed at Job's four friends,  
for each them "darkened counsel by words without knowledge.”

Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and finally, Elihu, claimed to know more about God and God's ways than humans can possibly know.

They were so intent on protecting God’s reputation  
and justifying God's ways,  
that they were actually misrepresenting God.

This is one of the perpetual warnings of the Book of Job and one of its central tenets of wisdom:

God does not need our defense,  
our protection,  
or our justification.

After all, who among us knows enough about God to truly explain God's ways beyond what God has revealed to us?

When God speaks to Job, it is out of the whirlwind—  
a traditional sign of God’s presence in the ancient world.

God proceeds to ask a series of questions designed to remind Job of the radical difference between the two of them.

*“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?  
Tell me, if you have understanding.*

*“Who determined its measurements—surely you know!  
Or who stretched the line upon it?*

*On what were its bases sunk,  
or who laid its cornerstone  
when all the morning stars sang together  
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? (38:4-7)*

*“Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,  
so that a flood of waters may cover you?*

*Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go  
and say to you, “Here we are”? (38:34-35)*

God's questioning goes on for three chapters, and it is some of the most vivid and powerful poetry in the history of poetry.

We have read only portions of it today;  
I encourage you to read all of it for yourself.

What you will notice when you do is that never once does God even come close to addressing Job's question, “Why?”

Rather, God presses the point:  
"Can you do this?  
Where were you when I did this?"

Job, of course, has nothing to say.

He thought he wanted this encounter with the deity...  
he thought he was ready to have his day in the divine court.

But now he recognizes how absurd his demands were.

It reminds us to be careful what we ask of God...  
be careful what we pray for.

It is parallel to Isaiah's warning about contending with our Maker (45:9),

*"Does the clay say to the potter,  
What are you doing;  
why have you made me thus?"*

In the words of the 1982 Broadway musical,  
*"Your Arms are Too Short to Box with God!"*

God ends the divine monologue saying

*"Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?  
Anyone who argues with God must respond." (40:1-2)*

Driven to silence, Job can only say,

*"See, I am of small account;  
what shall I answer you?  
I lay my hand on my mouth.  
I have spoken once, and will not answer;  
twice, but will proceed no further." (40:3-5)*

Job has spoken long and passionately,  
but now he shuts his mouth;  
he will say no more.

#### IV

Earlier this month, a gunman went on a shooting rampage at a community college in Roseburg, Oregon, killing nine people and wounding eight others, before killing himself in a shoot-out with police.

And we were again reminded that there have been more deaths from guns in the United States since 1968 than in all U.S. wars combined.

Meanwhile, millions of Syrians were fleeing from the civil war in their country that has claimed over 250,000 lives.

These are sobering facts.

But it is also true that we are living in the most peaceful and least violent time in human history.

Just like it is true that hunger and hunger-related diseases kill 21,000 people every day...

it is also true that fewer people are hungry than ever before, and that through political advocacy and charity, the number of people suffering from hunger around the globe has been cut in half since the 1960s.

Yes, there is the terrible civil war in Syria,  
the rise of the Islamic State in that same region,  
and Friday President Obama announced that America's longest war  
would continue a little longer.

At the same time polio has been all but eliminated from the earth...  
and the people of Tunisia are celebrating the awarding of the Nobel Peace  
Prize to the National Dialogue Quartet as they work to build an inclusive  
democratic society.

From one perspective, the world is on fire with suffering and violence.

From another, it is being healed and we are making amazing progress.

It can be hard to hold both truths in your head much less your soul.

But both are true and each has its own wisdom to teach us in the life of faith.

## V

That is the paradox of the heart of the Book of Job,  
a book of immeasurable tragedy and suffering  
and the most extraordinarily beautiful poetry in all of Scripture.

At first glance, God's speech appears to be an incredibly strange and bewildering response to Job's painful suffering and his searing indictment of God.

Just a few chapters earlier, Job had taken up his case against God and demanded a hearing.

In a very real sense, Job is putting God on trial,  
indicting God for crimes against humanity via divine indifference.

And who can blame him?

His children have all died,  
his body is afflicted with leprosy and boils,  
and he has become an impoverished beggar.

Job looks around the world and sees it as a dangerous place,  
full of hard, sharp edges that cut at both the body and the soul.

The world has become a place of hopelessness  
and all Job can see is its ugliness and suffering.

After the wounds of loss and grief, it's understandable.

In fact, Job's anger is a deep, primal form of faith—  
the kind of faith that trusts God enough to raise one's fist to the Almighty.

In essence, Job demands to know why God has forsaken humanity.

And his four so-called friends,  
like people who try to comfort someone by saying something inane like,  
“God won't give you more than you can bear,”  
serve mostly to rub salt into the wounds.

Nowhere does God condemn Job;  
rather, God condemns Job's friends.

They are the ones who darken counsel by words without knowledge.

Job's reputation as a man of integrity and righteousness continues,  
not in spite of his doubt and questioning of God...  
but because of it.

But God does respond to Job's indictment.

God just doesn't give him an answer.

God doesn't try to explain it all.

God doesn't even contradict Job's accusations.

Instead, God responds with an awesome display of the power, beauty, and glory of creation.

Job cast a vision of a world overshadowed by pain and suffering.

God responds by showing him the beauty and hope of that same world.

And here's the thing: these are not competing views.

The one does not negate the other.

God doesn't respond with beauty to cancel out or disregard Job's suffering.

That is why God doesn't exactly answer Job's question about suffering.

Because no answer—

not even one from God—

is ever satisfactory in the midst of our pain and grief.

Nothing solves suffering.

Nothing answers it.

But neither is suffering and grief the whole story of our lives and of the world.

There is beauty and grace and hope in the world also,

existing simultaneously,

in paradox,

side-by-side.

Both are incomplete without the other.

Job is trying desperately to draw God's eyes to the plight of humanity,

and God is trying desperately to draw Job's eyes beyond humanity and suffering to the larger world around.

Humanity needs the rapturous divine,

and the rapturous divine needs the gritty realities of humanity.

## VI

That's the change we see at the end of the Book of Job.

God and Job finally see each other, eye to eye.

At the beginning Job and God are far removed from one another.

In the heavenly court, God appears to be a distant observer,  
considering his servant Job from afar.

For Job, God is a distant provider,  
showering wealth and blessings upon him.

But by the time the book ends, things have changed.

The divine courtroom,  
where God and the satan, the Accuser wagered,  
has been replaced by an earthly one where Job and God argue.

And the picture we see of God is no longer that of a remote, aloof being  
but of a God who is intimately involved in and present in every corner of the  
earth...  
from the most insignificant creatures to the most massive ones.

God has become integrated with creation before Job's eyes.

God is no longer above humanity,  
but alongside,  
so much so that Job can say,  
*"Before I had only heard about you.  
Now I have seen you."*

Beauty and suffering held in tension,  
a dance between the divine and the human,  
the rapturous beauty and the constant wounding,  
a courtroom argument between God and humanity in which  
neither loses  
and both discover what they had been missing.

Just as Job is pleading with God to look at the world and bear witness to its suffering and pain,

God is pleading with Job to look at the world and bear witness to its beauty and glory.

Job and God *need* each other in this story,  
to learn from the wisdom and experience each offers to the other.

God needs to see Job's prophetic grief.

Job needs to see God's prophetic beauty.

If all we experience is prophetic grief like Job,  
we can spiral into despair,  
paralyzed by the overwhelming nature of the earth's suffering.

But if all we see is prophetic beauty,  
we can spiral into lofty ideals and become so detached from the reality of human pain that we become just as paralyzed.

## VII

And so that, my sisters and brothers, is my challenge to you today...

to cultivate an awareness of and compassion toward human suffering...

*and* to cultivate an awareness of the glorious beauty of the world God made.

Because in the place where those two meet is the place where we just might find Jesus—

the One who came not to be served but to serve,  
and to give his life as a ransom for many.

In Jesus we find the fullness of God's glory  
fully embracing the depth of human suffering.

And that is Wisdom's word on suffering.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

## Sources:

Fred R. Anderson, "Wisdom's Word on Suffering: Beware of Counsel without Knowledge," sermon preached October 21, 2012, New York City, retrieved from <http://www.mapc.com/worship/sermons/2012/10/21/wisdoms-word-on-suffering-beware-of-counsel-without-knowledge>.

Frederick Buechner, "Job," <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/content/weekly-sermon-illustration-job>.

Amy Butler, "Losing My Religion: True Colors," sermon preached October 11, 2015, New York City, retrieved from <http://talkwiththepreacher.org/2015/10/11/true-colors/>.

David R. Henson, "What Job and God Learn from Each Other: Prophetic Grief Meets Prophetic Beauty," October 15, 2015, retrieved from <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2015/10/what-job-and-god-learn-from-each-other-prophetic-grief-meets-prophetic-beauty-a-homily/>.

"Stupid Phrases for People in Crisis," September 28, 2015, blog posting at <http://communicatingacrossboundariesblog.com/2015/09/28/stupid-phrases-for-people-in-crisis/>.