

## **Come Close: A lesson in being a friend to those who suffer**

If you missed the sermon or adult formation hour last week, let me attempt to catch you up to speed on what we covered. We're taking a deep dive into the Book of Job – and so far, this is what we know. A respectable and faithful man named Job has lost all of his children in a fire and all of his possessions in a windstorm and Job is currently covered from head to toe in sores. The reason for this suffering is a wager, made between God and a character called Satan, who are curious to see if Job is only faithful to God because his life is great. What will Job do if his life is not roses, is their question. But Job, we assume, does not know about this wager and is only aware of the painful suffering, both physical and emotional, he is currently enduring.

The plot is moved along today by Job's three friends who hear about Job's situation and come visit. We assume that Job was likely regarded as a leader in the community – was admired and influential – and so the news of his misfortune likely spread like wildfire throughout his community, like gossip in a small town.

Today's sermon is not so much about Job, but about these 'so-called friends' (Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar) who have left their homes to visit him in hope of offering comfort. When they arrive, they see Job's suffering from a distance and immediately begin practicing mourning rituals – they tear their clothes, sprinkle dust on their heads, and sit with him for seven days.

Part of why interpreting the Bible is so difficult is because we only have so much information to go on about individuals' actions and it can be hard, impossible even, to know what the true intention is behind an action. Did the friends do these rituals because they thought Job had sinned and therefore were trying to get God to do something about it through showing repentance on his behalf? Did they do it because they assumed Job was on the verge of death and were only following a burial ritual? Did they sit in silence with him because that's what good friends do? Or did they sense the evil lurking in the land and were too afraid to say

anything? It's hard to say the intention, but let's give them some credit for at least coming over.

What happens next – and honestly goes on for the next 30 or so chapters – is the friends try to explain Job's suffering, and whatever credibility they have for being a good friend goes out the window. Each of them takes their turn, in long poetic chapters, explaining away Job's situation. They want answers to why this is all happening, easy and concise answers that don't leave much room for follow up questions or arguments. Answers that say 'this is the way it is, end of story.' Answers that make sense to them, but not to people who are Job. They seem more concerned with their thesis statement, and not really all that concerned about Job

- Eliphaz begs Job to confess what he's done to deserve this, because suffering is a consequence of sin and Job must've done something to deserve this fate. "Who, being innocent, ever perished" he claims.
- Bildad echoes the same view but brings it further along and chimes in that God punishes the wicked and if only Job will repent, God will take this all away.
- Zophar is even more direct and thinks that actually Job deserves even worse than he has it, and believes that whatever he's done God has gone easy on him compared to what he actually deserves.

And if those answers we're not excruciating enough to sift through for 30 chapters, we get another friend to join the argument, Elihu who believes that God gives suffering as an opportunity for growth. It's like saying to Job, I know you've lost your children, but God is trying to teach you something so cheer up already.

It's an answer similar to saying 'everything happens for a reason' which is only relatively easy to believe when good things happen. For the person with the terrible thing, everything happens for a reason is a half-truth meant to make others feel like there is order in the universe.

While all of their responses do provide an answer as to why Job is suffering, they also don't provide an answer that satisfies Job, who maintains his innocence. Job's friends use answers to distance themselves from Job's suffering, it's as if it's too much for them, and the answers (as problematic as they are) give them the illusion that the system is still working, when clearly it has fallen apart. Job, as we'll see in the weeks to come, isn't buying any of it. Job says actually I'm not just going to take this and pretend I'm okay with it.

It's easy to give Job's three friends a bad rep – I even struggle to use the words friends to describe them when their response was anything but compassionate and supportive.

Righteous Job certainly deserves better friends. If I were him, the first thing I would do once I got rid of my sores would be to cut them loose. They might sit with Job in silence, but they do not sit with him in his suffering – that is kept at distance, rationalized away. But on the other hand, who can blame them for doing so?

- Who doesn't desperately want a world where there is order and predictability? Where we alone are in charge of our fate?
- Who wouldn't trade everything to get to control what happens to the people we love?
- Perhaps the friends just represent what so many of us want: an orderly and explainable world.

While I was in the process of being ordained, I took a job as a Chaplain at a hospital for a year in a place called Kalamazoo, Michigan. It was the only Tier I trauma unit for miles and so our emergency room saw everything – gunshot wounds, boating accidents, self-harm, car and bike collisions, drug overdoses, everything. As the Chaplain, I was paged whenever the ambulance was on its way, or whenever someone (no matter the age) was close to the end of life. Often, I would ask them (the patient, the family gathered) if I could hold their hand, if they would like me to pray, or sometimes we just sat together to wait for the news. To my great surprise, most people (no matter their

religious identity) when confronted with any type of loss, fear, or the end of life were wildly open to holding hands, and most often saying a prayer together. It took me months to realize that my job was not to fix anyone's pain (or to be the expert with answers about that pain) but to make the completely unbearable slightly bearable by being in it with someone else.

Lucky for us, Job's friends are not the only example in the Bible of people who come visit a friend when news hits that something horrible has happened. The crucifixion must have been a terrible thing to witness, the humiliation, the violence, and insensibility of the whole thing.

Who could blame Jesus's disciples for wanting to run away from it? I might have.

In three of the four of the Gospels, Mary Magdalene is seen at the crucifixion or in taking care of Jesus's body after his death. She was in it. She came close to it, refused to keep it at a safe distance. She witnessed the grief and pain with him, and physically took care of his body in the aftermath. It is perhaps only because of her dedication to be with Jesus, even in the darkest moments, that Mary is first to witness the resurrection. The whole reason she finds the empty tomb is because she was on her way to take care of his broken body.

The invitation in the Gospel is to come close to the suffering, the brokenhearted, not because God is trying to teach you a lesson, but because even in the suffering we will find that God will be with us.

We can't, unfortunately, have a world where everything makes sense -where order and logic reign supreme, but we do have God who does not keep us distant, but says "Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Amen.