

In the name of God, the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer. Amen.

This fall, we've been traveling through a story from the Old Testament about a man named Job. And if you haven't been here, I'll catch you up on his story really quick. He's a good and faithful man who's lost everything he holds dear. And he's physically suffering from head to toe, completely covered in sores. And Job wants to know why this whole thing is happening, and he's desperate to find these answers of why. Unlike Job's friends who think that Job is suffering because he is doing something wrong, Job maintains that his suffering is unfair and asked to take his case up with God, whom he surely believes will vindicate him from this mess. But like all best laid plans, things are not working out as Job thought they would or as Job thought they should.

In our last sermon on Job, God appeared to be silent amongst his suffering. In fact, we're on chapter 23 and we haven't heard a peep from God since chapter one. "Speak up, God.", Job begs. "Give me an answer that has some weight.", but the silence continues.

I am afraid this week that things have taken a turn for the worst for our friend Job. His suffering remains, but God's not only silent, he's moved on to absence, Job feels. In previous chapters, it was as if Job had been talking to God on the phone, and while God didn't say anything back to him, Job at least felt as though he was getting through. At least the phone on the other end was answered, and maybe Job could hear God breathing from time to time.

This week, Job dials God's number, but a voice on the other end says, "The number you're trying to reach has been disconnected." Wait, what? That can't be right. I just called him. "I'm sorry. The number you're trying to reach has been disconnected."

The God that Job has been so faithful to is nowhere to be found, Job feels. Unreachable, not just silent, but absent - left town with no forwarding address in the middle of Job's hour of need. What kind of God would that be? That would be Job's worst

nightmare. What if the God that he's been so faithful to his whole life actually doesn't care about what he's going through? Job wants to lay his case before him, but even the most sound legal argument doesn't stand a chance of winning if the judge refuses to come into the office and won't pick up the phone. How is Job supposed to be proven innocent if no one will hear him out? Is he supposed to just sit here suffering and now also abandoned by his God?

It's a harrowing theology, but one that's not unique to Job. Perhaps, the reason why Job's story is in the canon and why his story resonates with so many people is because there are times when we wonder if God is sleeping on the job, times when we shake our fist up at God and want to scream, "Hey! Hey! Me down here, are you going to do something about this?" But nothing's done, nothing changes. It's the kind of prayer that we say when a diagnosis comes and it's not the good news that we were hoping for. It's the kind of prayer parents say for children who are suffering or in pain. It's the kind of prayer a soldier might say in a foxhole.

For years, when I was a teacher, I taught the memoir *Beyond Band of Brothers*, written by Major Dick Winters, in my theology and history course. Winters writes a fascinating memoir full of incredible leadership as commander amongst the famous Easy Company and the paratroopers of the 101st Airborne Division in World War II. He was a person of deep faith and his memoir recounts story after story of sacrifices from him and others that depict heroic and noble men. Winters writes about the bloody battle of Bastogne, which included a heavy snowfall, a lack of supplies, all during Christmas no less.

Winters would always ask for volunteers to do patrol every night before assigning someone to do it, a task that I'm sure no one would want to. But every night Steve Mycock would volunteer to go. Winters writes, "If I live to be a hundred years old, I will never forget Steve Mycock standing there with dark circles underneath his eyes, which told me how dead tired he was, and when asked if anyone wanted to go responding, 'I'll go.' He later earned

two bronze stars, but it should have been a dozen.", Winters writes.

Amongst all the stories of undeniable heroism and courage in his memoir are glimpses of how terribly difficult it was and the emotional toll it took on the lives of the soldiers, including their spiritual lives. How could it not? Winters writes that after the particularly terrible battle in Bastogne, that he dropped off in writing to his pen pal. He says, "I didn't feel like writing anymore. I couldn't explain why, but the only emotion that I could arouse were feelings of anger. And after staying mad all day and half the night, I was just plain tired." Mad at what? "Just about everything", he says.

It's a shame that Christianity can often be perceived as a way of putting rose-colored glasses on everything, and confusing being pleasant or happy with being allowed full access to the range of human emotions or explaining away every hard moment of life like one of Job's friends, never being able to have a doubt or a legitimate complaint. But if Job or any soldier who has ever seen the cruelty of war can teach us anything, it's that a life of faith doesn't mean that doubt makes us weak or that we have to be strong or brave at every possible minute. That's an impossible task. Even Jesus on the cross cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We get to shake our fists at God and trust that God can handle it, because we know it's not how the story ends.

Amen.