

Job 3:1-10; 4:1-9; 7:11-21

Over the past three months, people have experienced a variety of emotions associated with the Coronavirus. They include feeling anxious over contracting this deadly disease, frustrated by the restrictions put in place to keep us healthy and safe and grief over our inability to experience everyday life and milestone events the way we did before this pandemic hit. We've had to adapt our expectations and plans to fit into a world infected by COVID-19. On a good day, we understand why these adjustments need to be made. But on those days when we have to watch our grandkids open their birthday gifts over Zoom, or we can't read a label because our glasses are fogged up from wearing a face mask...we may find ourselves feeling irritated...even angry over a situation we didn't choose and can't control.

Most of us have lived long enough to know that life doesn't always go the way we hoped or planned. For the most part, we're able to deal with the inconveniences and disappointments that come our way. But when our world is disrupted by an unexpected event, or our life is turned upside down by illness or death, we may find ourselves feeling overwhelmed with anger or regret. These moments can rattle our faith and shatter our hope. We may try to pretend like everything's okay. But deep inside, we know that's not the case. We may want to take our frustration out on God...but aren't sure how or if we should go there.

The reading this morning shows us that we can express our feelings when grief and suffering disrupt our life. Job's story invites us to talk to God about the challenging events that affect our life. We can express our joy as well as our sorrow. Our trust as well as our doubt. It's often through these hard and honest conversations we experience the reality of God's love and grace.

Before we explore this invitation, I want to catch us up on what's been going on in Job's life. Last week, we heard how Job's idyllic life came crashing down after a conversation between God and The Satan. Not only has Job lost his children and possessions, he's also lost his health. In Chapter Two, we're told that Job was struck down with a terrible skin disease that caused itchy and oozing sores to break out over his entire body. Instead of overseeing his crops and livestock, Job now spends his days sitting in an

ash heap scratching his sores with a broken piece of pottery. Job's condition is so dire, that when his friends come to console him, they don't even recognize him. The man who once declared, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" is engulfed in deep, heart wrenching grief.

At first, Job's friends do what good friends do when someone they love is suffering. They kept their mouths shut. Job's friends recognized his need for presence...not platitudes. And so they sat with him in complete silence for seven days and seven nights. Their quiet, nonjudgmental vigil reminds us that one of the greatest things we can do for a suffering friend is to simply be there for them in a quiet, nonjudgmental way.

In Chapter Three, Job breaks the week-long silence by cursing the day of his birth. Job isn't asking to die here...he's struggling to make sense of everything that's happened to him. Job's world was constructed around a system of reward and punishment. He's struggling to make this paradox of cause and effect work. Job can't understand why he's suffering. After all, he's devoted his life to fearing God and turning away from evil.

In Chapter Four, one of Job's friends speaks up. I believe that Eliphaz had the best of intentions. There isn't any malice in his words and there isn't any reason to think he spoke in an accusatory tone. That will come later on in the story. For now, Eliphaz is trying to comfort his friend and bring him out of his dark place.

Eliphaz reminds Job that he has always helped other people by offering a word of comfort. He wonders why doesn't Job take those same words to heart now? He encourages Job to hold onto the promises of God with hope and confidence. If Job does that...things will get better soon.

On a good day, Eliphaz' words might have brought Job comfort. But this is not a good day. Job has sunk so deep into the darkness of his situation that he can't begin to comprehend the hope his friend is talking about. The only thing Job can do is lament.

When the trials of life overwhelm us, sometime the only thing we can do is lament. To lament is to express deep regret, grief or sorrow through words and actions. When we lament, we're in good company. The Bible is filled with texts that articulate grief, hopelessness, and the desire that makes us want to pull the covers over our head and pretend the day doesn't exist. There's even a book in the Old Testament named for this heart wrenching practice.

The Book of Job invites us to pray this type of honest and heartfelt prayer. It gives us permission to grieve when we experience tragedy and loss. This kind of permission is sorely needed in a culture that isn't comfortable dealing with suffering and loss. When someone we love dies or our life is turned upside down by an unexpected diagnosis or world event, our culture tells us to put on a brave face and pretend like nothing is wrong. But ignoring our pain doesn't take that pain away. It only brushes it under the carpet.

Job reminds us that we can pick up the rug and bare our frustration before God. There aren't any feelings too raw or queries too strange for the God who loves us and promises to hear our prayers. And that's a beautiful thing, because sometimes we need to vent. Prayers of lament allow us to remove the veil of religiosity from our faith and be truthful to God and ourselves. They can be healing and freeing prayers. Later we may be ashamed of what we said and feel the need to ask for forgiveness. God never withholds that forgiveness. God always embraces us with mercy and grace.

Job continues his lament in Chapter Seven when he asks God, "Why don't you just forgive my sins and start me off with a clean slate?" This is where it's important for us to remember that Job is ancient story. Job thought that he needed to earn God's favor. He didn't know that faith in Jesus Christ allows us to live in the freedom of mercy and grace.

Thankfully, these are words that we never need to speak. Unlike Job, we know that we are forgiven through Jesus' death on the cross. We know that Jesus' resurrection frees us from the fear of death, and allows us to experience a relationship with God both now and in eternity. Even in the middle of our trials and tribulations, we can give thanks for the forgiveness we receive through this amazing gift of grace. We can lift up our thoughts and feelings in prayer knowing that there is nothing in this world or the next that can separate us from God's amazing and unconditional love.

Let's pray...Good and gracious God, there are times when our fears and frustrations cause us to be angry with you. Thank you for inviting us to express our laments to you and for not turning away no matter what we say. We also thank you for making all things new through Jesus Christ. Empower us to live every day in response to this gift of mercy and grace. In his name we pray. Amen.