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Job 38:1-7, 34-41
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The Promises of God

Trevor Hudson, a South African pastor working outside of Johannesburg, says to all of us who seek to follow Jesus Christ, “Never forget that everyone you meet sits by a pool of tears.” Everyone you meet sits by a pool of tears.

The book of Job is chock full of tears. So full of tears that even a quick glance at the book sends the tears of Job flooding off the pages and mingling with the tears in our own lives. One does not have to live very long to become familiar with suffering. Each of us can name the names of those close to our hearts, good people, innocent people, who have suffered terribly. For some of you it was all you could do get out of bed this morning and come to worship, the weight of grief and sadness so heavy in your lives. Why do bad things happen? Why is their suffering? These questions are among the greatest of mysteries, and the book of Job wrestles with them from cover to cover. If we were to begin sharing the stories of our tears this morning we would be here for weeks. Yes, all of us, every single one of us, sit by a pool of tears.

Job is a long book and our text comes to us from near its close. Job, whom everyone agrees is an upright and righteous man, a man with great integrity, a large family, and an abundance of land and livestock, is used as a fast ball down the middle in a World Series game between God and Satan. Satan says to God, “Take away his farm, his health, and his children, and Job’s faith will crumble into nothingness. He will turn on you God and curse the day he was born.” God says, “Not my faithful Job.” And with that, the drama of Job begins.

Life turns quickly for Job. It is not pleasant and it is certainly no game. He loses his land and livestock. Sickness ravages his body. His children die. In the moral compass of Job’s world, none of it computes. He is innocent of wrong-doing and he knows it. Bad things should not happen to good people, and Job is certainly one of the good people. The emotional pain is overwhelming and in the midst of his pain, three friends, doing what friends should do when a loved one is grieving, arrive. For a week the four of them sit in silence. No words. They simply sit next to Job’s pool of tears.

It is a good model of care-giving, going to someone who is hurting and simply being with them in the silence, not trying to fix it, not trying to answer unanswerable questions, simply being in silence; silence that makes space for the pain to do its surgery; silence that allows for honesty and the right words to surface. For seven days, Job and his friends sit and weep in silence.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, who teaches theology at Yale, wrote the following about his own suffering, and how others responded to it, after the death of his 25 year old son, Eric. “Please, don’t say it is really not so bad, because it is. Death is awful; demonic. If you think your task as comforter is to tell me really, all things considered, it is not so bad you do not sit with me in my grief but place yourself off in the distance, away from me. Over there, you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how

painful it is. To comfort me you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.”

For a week Job’s friends sit with him on his mourning bench. Unfortunately for Job, it doesn’t stay that way. One after another, his friends begin to speak. They shouldn’t have. With their words, they change from loving friends to amateur theologians. “How dare you question God, Job?,” say his friends. “Surely, Job, you must have done something to deserve this. We know there is no such thing as unjust suffering. We cannot understand the will of God, Job. You must accept your circumstances and move on.”

Those in the depths of despair know that pithy statements about God’s will or platitudes of sentimentality rarely soothe the broken heart. Suffering comes through love and love demands more than hallow words and quick-fix answers and Job knows it.

After his friends have had their say, Job turns his anger, his suffering, his questions on God. For some 37 chapters, Job rails against God. Chapter after chapter, Job refuses to let God off the hook. Job screams and cries, not as a philosopher or a skeptic, not as a bookish theologian, but as a lover, as a believer, as one firmly committed to God’s reign of justice and peace. What keeps Job going is his steely determination not to let God go, to hold God to God’s promises.

For Job is a Jew and at the heart of Jewish faith, at the heart of Christian faith, is the word “covenant,” that God and Israel, and therefore God and the church, are in a real relationship, a relationship of love that involves dialogue, learning, growing, offending, weeping, forgiving and reconciling. Most of all, God has promised never to abandon humanity. Nothing short of God’s covenant is on the line at this moment and Job will not give up on what God has promised. Job is determined to know if God can be trusted to keep God’s promises. Job’s tenacity does not paper over his suffering. It is enhanced by it. It is in the midst of his suffering and his rage at God, and his determination never to let God go, to wrestle an answer out of the Almighty, that we see a movement in Job, a glimmer of transformation, a beacon of hope.

Until this moment in the story, God has been silent. For 37 long-winded chapters, through all the silences, all the unhelpful advice, all of Job’s agonizing demands, prayers, and wails storming the heavens, God has been silent. At last, at the beginning of chapter 37, God speaks. When God finally speaks, God speaks out of a whirlwind. God’s response is more poetry than legalism, more about danger, and awe, and beauty, than the rigorous views of right and wrong Job had imagined, and until that point, had constructed his life around. God speaks not of righteousness and justice, but the foundations of creation and the song of the morning stars. God does not speak of innocent suffering and justice gone awry. Rather God asks Job about the water skins of heaven and the insatiable appetite of young lions. God does not answer the existential questions of “why,” but responds with images of lightning and clouds and the cornerstones of the earth.

Job is convinced that his moral innocence, his well-lived life, should have warded off disaster because he believes in a world that is a manageable place, run by a demanding but nonetheless predictable God who owes the righteous a good time, a happy, healthy and prosperous life. Instead, God’s involvement with the world expresses itself in dramatic, unapologetic, almost incomprehensible delight in a creation whose

quality is magnificence. God expresses power and freedom on a scale that is bewildering, terrifying, and beautiful.

What does all of God's bluster mean for Job? Ellen Davis puts it like this, "You cannot tame all that frightens you without losing the beauty. God calls Job to look at the world for a moment from God's point of view, to look at a ravishing, dangerous world where only those who relinquish their personal expectations can live in peace. The price of peace is the surrender of our own assumptions about God, which are always too small for the magnificent gift of freedom built into the system. The final question that God's speech out of the whirlwind poses for Job and every other person of integrity is simply this: Can you love what you do not control?" Is it possible to love completely without complete understanding? Is it possible to trust God, to love God fully, even knowing that God will not protect us from tragedy, pain, and suffering?

The book of Job never does answer the questions, "Why do bad things happen? Why is there suffering in the world?" The answers to those fundamental questions remain shrouded in mystery. Nowhere in the New Testament are the answers to those questions given, either. Rather, the arc of the Christian story points not to an answer, but a promise.

In April of 1943, Thomas Merton was a novice monk at the Abby of Gethsemane in Kentucky. On the Tuesday after Easter, he received word that his brother, a pilot in the US Air Force, had been killed in action, shot down over the English Channel. Overwhelmed by grief, Merton wrote these words to his brother:

For in the wreckage of your April Christ lies slain,
And Christ weeps in the ruins of my spring:
The money of Whose tears shall fall
Into your weak and friendless hand,
And buy you back to your own land:
The silence of Whose tears shall fall
Like bells upon your alien tomb.
Hear them and come: they call you home.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's promise that in Christ all things are held together, that there will come a day when everything will be made new, when weeping and crying will be no more, and God will wipe away every tear.

On the night before Jesus died his own violent death, he went to a quiet place and there in the midst of his fear and grief, Jesus wept a pool of tears. On Easter morning God drank that pool to its dregs, and in the resurrection of his Son, God will transform our tears of sadness into rivers of peace and beauty; a promise that we can trust.

Amen.

I am indebted to Dr. Ellen Davis, and her book, "Getting Involved with God" for much of this sermon's inspiration.