

## Holy Abandon

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Job 23:1-9, 16-17

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First, she lost her job. If only it had stopped there. But it didn't. It wasn't only about the money. In the days that followed, her friends scattered. Her husband fell into a terrible sadness. Her daughter was going through a difficult time. She was too downtrodden to offer any help to her own child. And then the bills began to mount in a way they never had before. What was to become of her? What had happened to the life she once knew? Just how far would the unraveling go?

The book of Job walks with us into the valley of pain, straight through the searching mystery of faith and suffering. Job shines a light into the crevices that we hope we never have to look in and often don't until it is pressed upon us. Because it is considered part of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, the life of Job beckons us to distill the wisdom of someone who suffers as much as he does. Today's reading walks on the most tender ground of pain. This is the ground where questions are asked that wouldn't be asked otherwise, where there's no hiding from the hurt, where we ask God questions that aren't polite. Why, God, why?

In the land of Uz, there is a man named Job. He is wealthy and respected, the greatest of all the people in the East. And he is a man of faith, offering prayers and sacrifices to God. Then he loses it all. His seven children die. His donkeys and sheep and cattle and oxen are taken away. He becomes physically sick, covered with sores on his skin. Job's three friends arrive to comfort him. They are practicing what Jews call sitting *shiva*, the customary way of sharing lament and loss with a loved one. They sit with him in dust on the ground for seven days before anyone says anything. Have you ever sat with someone looking together at the inexplicable? It's not easy to do. After the silence, Job's friends speak words of explanation and challenge. It's not very helpful though because they encourage Job to assume that the suffering is his fault, the result of his own wrongdoing and, therefore, deserved punishment from God. Job maintains that he has done nothing to deserve such a degree of pain. In total despair, Job breaks into a long, loud cry of lament to God. "Today" he says "my complaint is bitter." "Oh that I knew where I might find God; he would give heed to me." "If only I could vanish in darkness and thick darkness cover my face." How will it all end? Or will it ever end? This is the valley of pain.

What I want to talk about today is the mystery of the seemingly endless, frighteningly unstoppable, devastating pain of the kind Job encounters. It can't be explained or understood. I'm talking about the kind of suffering where our lives are taken out of our hands. When something happens and the circumstances of our lives are significantly changed – our health, our finances, our hopes for the future, our family composition or responsibilities. The loss of someone we never imagined living without, something for which no preparation could possibly equip us. But it doesn't have to mean death. It could mean simply that our lives are never going to be the same. Sometimes it is someone's fault, and sometimes it is no one's fault and sometimes we can't really know. But even if we did know, the pain refuses to be understood or explained. It just won't go away.

Learning to live by faith doesn't happen if we spend our lives surrounded by soft pillows in a neatly ordered world where we think we generally know what God is doing and we're generally confident we could explain what God is up to. Learning to live by faith happens while we are desperately squinting to see God and his hopes for us. Very often, wisdom comes as we tread the raw ground of human pain. Job's lament and suffering is a meditation on what happens, or what can happen, when we are in such a place. Think about what happens when we encounter this kind of pain. Keep walking, keep talking, just keep moving. Staying still is too excruciating. Crying. Wailing. Falling to our knees. Tearing our clothes. Throwing something.

Lying face down flat on the floor. Unable to speak. Just let me collapse in a heap on the ground; I can't keep going. Job does it all.

It is easy for Job's lament to send us into a dizzy set of questions about why: Why God? Why do you let me hurt? Job is a man deeply respected for his faith and yet he suffers terribly. Because the pain is just so hard to bear, of course we reach for consoling answers. "God sent this to teach me a lesson" or "I know I'm going to be a stronger person because of this." While these answers come from a good place, they somehow aren't enough. We ask the questions that start with why, I believe, when we are afraid of what the pain will do to us. But, the truth is, pain *does* change us. No one who suffers greatly is the same person they were before. The question for people of faith is: In the midst of this, *could God be* making something possible? *Is there a place* where I am being made more like God? *Could there be* deeper grace in God than I have known before?

Whether it is happening to us or to someone we care about, the experience of suffering sends us to search our storehouse for ways to help or to cope or survive. It's as if there is something within us saying, "If I'm experiencing this much pain, then something must be wrong with me." Or, "If I'm experiencing this much pain, then something is wrong with God." And this is because it is so hard simply to let pain be. Why are we so afraid of much hurt and many tears? Because pain, I believe, reveals what's inside a Pandora's box that we really don't want to open. There are a lot of fears inside that box. We're afraid of being obliterated by our hurting. We assume it leads to death, or at least to a life of isolation that is very much like death because it is so lonely. We are afraid that if we are overcome with pain we will simply cease to be. We are worried that underneath it all we do deserve whatever has befallen us because God knows the truth of our waywardness and surely we have to pay a price. [pause]

I want to place you in the shoes of a woman here in Durham. She stood at the side of a street. Around her gathered friends, family, and neighbors. Some of the faces she recognized. Some she had never seen before. She knew they had come to remember her daughter. They stood together in a circle at the place where her daughter died. Her daughter had been murdered three months earlier. Police had a suspect but no arrest. All she knew was that her daughter died from multiple gunshot wounds. Someone spoke her daughter's name. Someone else read a psalm, and then offered a prayer. Someone said it was time to share memories of this young woman's life. She wanted to say something about her daughter. What she really wanted everyone to know was how much she loved her child. She began to speak and got through only a few words. And then she wept. She couldn't keep going. She couldn't say another word. There was silence. It was a most holy silence. No one said anything or moved. [pause, then slowly] Until...She looked up and saw another woman walking step by step, step by step slowly but confidently towards her with arms open wide. She felt arms wrapped around her; she was held. And she cried more. The woman who embraced her said, "My son died a year ago in the same way." That was all that needed to be said. In that moment, the two mothers embracing drew the circle more closely together. [pause]

With God, something is possible in the hidden crevices of pain that remains elusive to us when we keep a safe distance. But it happens only when the cries can be sounded loudly without restraint. When the cushions of life are well-stuffed, we don't worry about these things so much. But when the cushions are snatched away and we are sitting in dust and ashes, God may be transforming us in ways that wouldn't be possible otherwise. Job's lament comes from the place where he admits he can't comprehend God. Think about people you know who have given you some true wisdom to help you along. Chances are these are people who have lived without the cushions in one way or another: They've known what it means to pick up the phone at 3am and hear terrifying news. They've received an unexpected diagnosis. They've experienced unimaginable disappointment. In these times, they learned that the life of faith is not to be found on our well-plotted map of how we plan on living with God. Living by faith is so much more than that: and we are blessed by the presence of those who like Job show us another way.

Pain takes us to the very center of the Gospel. The cry of Job in his despair is the cry of Jesus on the cross. It is Psalm 22. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.” The words that come from Jesus’ lips on Good Friday have been on our lips this morning. Remember Job’s lament, “If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right but I cannot see him.” The desperation of need is so much, so immense, so beyond what we usually give ourselves permission to acknowledge. It is raw need. Those who cry in their suffering, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” echo the cry of the Son to the Father. It almost feels profane to say this cry is within God, within the holy Trinity, but it is. It is deep within the relationship between the Father and the Son. We can ask where God was when Jesus was on the cross. Or we can ask why God lets Job weep in ashes. But these questions keep us from thinking about what the unabashed cry of the Son to the Father is really all about. It becomes hard to hear the cry.

For a moment, just let go of the “why.” Let go of the why and hear the cry with me now. Hear it in yourself or in the life of someone you care about. Listen until you really hear. [slow] “My God, my God, O that I knew where I might find you. I cry by day but you do not answer and by night but find no rest.” Let go of the why and hear the cry. “My God, if I knew where I might find you I would come even to your dwelling. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.” That’s lament. That is the lament that draws humble humanity and true divinity together. It is humanity seeking in God what only God can be and searching in God for what only God can do. That’s what the cry is really about. Job’s insistence on crying to God is a guide to us in our own distress: For Job, there is nothing outside of God to save him and nothing outside of God to comfort him. That’s his faithfulness: he insists that all he seeks can only be found in God. Lament is an act of faith for this one reason: it means casting all our hope upon God.

This cry gave birth to the church. This cry is still giving birth to the church today. By God’s grace, could this valley of lament and pain become a gift? When we through our own dark night cry out to God, it is an invitation to the church to live in ways that make isolation impossible. The cries may be profanely raw, the ground may be infinitely tender, the crevices deep, and the valley long, but, my brothers and sisters in faith, the pain will not mean isolation. It will never mean we must be alone. It will never be the end of us. I want you to know that if you are in that kind of a place right now, your cries belong in the church and God has a place for you among his people. Imagine, just imagine, a life where no matter what someone is going through, no matter how inexplicable or frightening or difficult it may be, we can together be the household of God.

Maybe you can’t explain what God is up to. Maybe God isn’t following your well-plotted map. Maybe the cushions have been snatched away. [pause, slow] If you feel God has abandoned you, then abandon yourself to God. That’s right, *abandon*. Cast yourself upon God and hold nothing back. Cast it all upon the Lord. Everything. Keep nothing in reserve as precaution in case God doesn’t come through. That’s what God did for you. God held nothing back in Jesus. God gave up everything to live among us, and Jesus *wholly abandoned* everything to save us. He has cast his very life with us. *He* has shown us *holy abandon*. This is what Job does; he shows us *holy abandon*. So then, *wholly abandon* yourself to God.