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*A man there was in a far off land  
- Job was his name;  
and that man was whole in heart  
and straight of path,  
and fearing of God  
and turning from evil.*

Job is perhaps the most recognized,  
least well known story in all of scripture.

42 chapters it goes on.  
We know the beginning:  
the heavenly wager between the tempter and the deity.

The tempter might best be thought of,  
not as Satan,  
but as the one who plays devil's advocate.

God believes that Job will be faithful;  
the tempter believes that Job is only faithful  
because things have been going his way.

Even by the end,  
it is unclear who was right about Job.

I started the sermon with a more poetic translation  
by Edward L. Greenstein.  
Robert Alter offers another way to see Job,

*A man there was in a far off land  
- Job, his name.  
And the man was blameless  
and upright  
and feared God  
and shunned evil.*

*Blameless,  
upright,  
whole in heart  
and straight of path.*

I do not want to face Job's fate;  
I do not want to be tested as Job was,  
but I covet the kind of praise he receives.

Would that we all might be known in that way,  
*upright and whole in heart.*

Job's story is famous,  
not only in church  
but it is often the story studied in world literature classes.  
Most people know the story.

He is blameless,  
upright.  
He is also richly blessed.

Those blessings are taken from him in a most unusual way  
- the heavenly wager.

As part of the wager,  
Job loses his wealth,  
then his children,  
and finally his own health,  
sitting in a heap of ashes,  
covered in sores,  
scratching himself with a broken piece of pottery,  
the only comfort he has left.

Very quickly,  
Job's wife is clear what Job should do,  
*You still hold fast to your wholesomeness?  
Curse God and die!*

Only she doesn't really say curse.  
She is sarcastic.  
Her words might best be translated,  
*::Bless the God you love so dearly,  
the God you once thought loved you,  
Bless O bless that mighty God,  
and then be done with the life he gave you.::*

And yet,  
in all this time,  
Job did not sin.

And that is where our reading today ends.  
With Job's grief,  
and his wife's desperate advice.

I cannot blame her for what she says.  
It is difficult to watch those we love suffer.  
And she has suffered losses of her own.  
Her own wealth would dissipate with his,  
her own children are gone.  
Job's grief is also her grief.

She is bitter,  
perhaps justifiably so.  
Job seems oddly accepting,  
even as he sits in his grief.

Into this grief,  
into the loss,  
come Job's friends.  
And they are friends indeed.

*Job's three friends heard of all this evil that had overcome him;  
... They sat down on the ground with him  
for seven days and seven nights,  
and no one spoke a word to him,  
for they saw that his pain had grown very great.*

That's all you can do,  
when you are confronted with great loss.  
You sit with them.  
You climb down into the hole,  
you sit down on the ash heap  
and perhaps scrounge for another piece of broken pottery  
to offer your friend.

There are no words.  
There is no sense that can be made of such loss,  
    such grief.  
There is only holy silence in the face of such great pain.

    Job has wonderful friends.

...Until he doesn't.

I suppose we all reach the limits  
    of our ability to tolerate pain.

Even if we know that silence is the right choice,  
    we eventually open our big mouths.

    Eventually,  
    our friend's loss reminds us of the losses we will one day face,  
        the fact that we will certainly  
            one day  
                find ourselves adrift,  
    where once we had felt only solid rock beneath our feet.

Empathy is good and holy,  
    but eventually we think of ourselves.

And that is the moment  
    where silence is most required.

Instead...

Job's friends begin to explain things to themselves,  
and to Job.

*You have been a good man,  
but surely your grief comes from your own sin.  
No man is perfect  
and so must pay the price for that imperfection.*

No matter how out of balance this loss seems,  
they want to pin it on him.

I suppose it's a natural human thing.  
If Job's grief is the result of his sin,  
then perhaps they can avoid those same sins  
as a way to avoid a similar fate.

Trying to make sense of Job's pain  
becomes a way for them to try to avoid it.

Job is confident.  
Humble,  
but confident of the truth.

He reminds his friends  
that he made his sacrifices,  
that he offered food and comfort to the stranger  
and gave away a 10th of all that he ever earned.

And we know the truth of this.  
We know that Job was *blameless and upright...and did not sin.*

He is not bragging;  
he is simply telling the truth.

There are 42 chapters in the Book of Job.  
About 3 or 4 of story at the beginning  
and about 3 or 4 of beautiful poetry at the end,  
when God comes crashing into the scene.

In between there are some 30 chapters  
of Job's friends brutalizing him with their words.

If we speak of the patience of Job,  
it is because he was able to suffer his friend's awful answers  
for so, so long.

Their awful answers  
to his unspoken question.

Last week, I invited you to offer your questions.  
I don't know exactly what we'll do with them.

A few will lead me to reach out,  
if you put your name on it.

I want to come and sit with you,  
in a holy silence  
while we seek the grace of God  
in the face of the mystery of your questions,  
even the ones we cannot articulate.

Ultimately, Job is pondering an unanswerable question.

*Why has something bad befallen someone so fundamentally good?*

We may as well ask,

why must we age?

or why does every person I ever love have to one day die?

The questions we ask as children do not go away;  
they linger in our hearts.

Those questions are not immature or off limits.  
But who has ever found a satisfying answer to those questions?  
And why would **we** expect to be any different?

Job thought he wanted the answer to an unanswerable question.

And by God,

it seemed like he was about to get it.

*The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind.*

But it's not answers Job gets.

Instead,

the Lord answers Job

with another series of unanswerable questions.



The questions that the Lord offers  
are about the glories of creation,  
about the wonders of the universe.

And they are entirely without answer.

It is not only the grief and the horror that cannot be answered,  
but also the wonder and the joy.

If I ask myself why I couldn't get more time with my grandfather  
or why my first marriage crumbled beneath us,

I may as well ask why I am loved by my wife and my daughters  
or why a Cherry Coke tastes better on a road trip.

I may as well ask why on earth God would be born in a stable  
or die on a cross,  
how in God's name  
bread and wine  
are made sign  
and symbol  
and very presence of God.

....I may as well ask.  
...and I will.

And God will keep answering  
...out of the whirlwind.