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Job 23:1-9, 16-17
“Come, Bring Your Anger to God”

So, as if the last week or two hasn't been dark enough, I've also been living with the Book of Job, in preparation for this month's worship series. I would toggle back and forth on my laptop between Firefox (live feeds of the Brett Kavanaugh Senate confirmation hearings) and Microsoft Word, (where I was taking notes on a hearing that took place more than 2500 years ago, in which a certain man named Job, called upon God to account for his own suffering and that of the world).

The potential overlaps are many. There are many who would say that a righteous Job was falsely accused here in D.C. this month, who had his character called into question, his family put in danger. A man who had it all – wealth and connections and family — stood trial, maintained his innocence, and was vindicated by a jury of his peers. And now all that was in danger for him is safe, and so much more is given to him as a reward.

The arc of the story of Job follows that trajectory, but it's a funny patchwork quilt of a story. The bulk of the book is a long poem, consisting of Job's complaints about the injustice of life, calling God—who he assumes is a God of justice—to account for the injustice and suffering of the world.

At the beginning and the end, this long poem is bookended by a the rather short prose tale of “Job the Pious.” It is this Job we refer to when we talk of the patience of Job.” This part of Job is a mere three chapters of a 42 chapter book. The first two chapters of the book and the last chapter of the book. This part of Job reads almost like a fairy tale. It starts with so much detail about the righteousness of Job, as evidenced by his many children, his huge tracts of land, his flocks and wealth. Not only that, but it even describes how well his children got along with each other, and how Job was so righteous that, even though he thought his children were pretty good, he did elaborate rituals of sacrifice to atone for them, just in case they had cursed God.

Then God and a court of divine beings were hanging out, just looking down on humanity and shooting the breeze, and one of the divine beings, *ha satan*, or “the accuser,” convinces God that Job is only righteous because of his wealth. This “accuser” persuades God that Job's righteousness and loyalty to God needed testing. So, God gives this *ha satan*, permission to test Job, to do anything to him he wanted to, save killing him.

And again, the story reads like a fairy tale: “All is well in the dynasty of Job – his kids are all having a family gathering in one of their tents, when a servant comes to Job and says that neighboring enemies have come and taken away all Job's oxen and donkeys and killed all the servants watching over them.

“I alone have escaped to tell you,” the servant says.

And before he finished speaking another servant came to tell Job that a fire had consumed all his sheep and shepherds

“I alone have escaped to tell you,” the servant says.

And before he finished speaking another servant came to tell Job that the neighboring Chaldeans had taken all Job's camels and killed the servants who'd been tending them.

"I alone have escaped to tell you," the servant says.

And before he finished speaking another servant came, to tell Job that a desert windstorm had arisen and knocked down the tent all his children were in, and his whole family and all the servants died.

"I alone have escaped to tell you," the servant says.

You can hear the rhythm, the grim (Grimm?) litany that begins to foreshadow more and more doom.

Job the Pious responded by ripping off his clothes, kneeling on the ground and worshiping God: "the Lord gave and the Lord took away, blessed be the name of the Lord." In all this, the texts reads, Job didn't sin or charge God with any wrongdoing.

Ha satan, the accuser, reported to God that Job was still faithful, so he asked if he could test him more, and God agreed. Great disease came over Job – boils and sores in horrible detail. And still Job didn't complain to or about God—or "sin with his lips," as the text puts it.

But then the poetry begins. Thirty nine chapters of it, beginning with the words, "and then Job began to curse the day that he was born." After which Job's friends try, one by one, to 'splain his sufferings to him, and Job rhymes some more bitter complaints to God. God is silent for most of book, and by that I mean God was nowhere to be found. But then, all of a sudden, God shows up as a voice from a whirlwind, refuting Job and his friends. God and Job have some back and forth, and then we cut back to the little prose fairy tale.

God chews out Job's friends for their words, but restores the fortune of Job, gives him another ten children and doubles the wealth he'd previously had. And Job lived happily ever after. It's as if the 39 chapters in the middle of Job never happened and the book picks up where it left off at the end of chapter two.

Those center 39 chapters don't flow easily from, or back into, the bookends of Job because they are all about Job's rage and complaint, or the response of others to it; the very things that he wasn't supposed to do in order to pass *ha satan's* test of righteousness and loyalty.

So, what's going on here? It seems like pretty normal human amnesia to me, actually. I often observe that once one's personal fortunes are restored, a person who had become acquainted with suffering can quickly forget what it really felt like—forget the doubts they had about themselves, whether their suffering was allegedly due to sin or inadequacy.

Although Patient Job is recorded in the little book-ended prose tale to have been very righteous, his view was to himself and his family. What he sacrificed for and went the extra mile for was his family. Patient Job was not pounding at the gates of heaven to know why there was suffering in the world, the very suffering he suddenly saw very clearly when he was suffering himself. In the middle chapters of the long, central poem of Job, he goes off on God for allowing the neglect and

suffering of widows and orphans. But once his fortunes are restored, he seems quite happy to enjoy all his restored fortune and “focus on his family.”

Again, a pretty common phenomenon: once *we’re* doing ok, crying out on behalf of the suffering of others becomes recreational – kind of “extra credit” level righteousness, but not core curriculum or necessary to get the A of salvation.

But what of these 39 chapters on the *Impatience* of Job? Today’s lectionary passage is right smack in the middle of the middle of Job:

“I am still bitter in my complaint—
 God’s hand is heavy, despite all my groaning.
If only I knew where to find the Almighty,
 so I could approach the Judgment Seat!
I would make my case to God,
 and expound my best arguments in my defense.”

Back when Barack Obama was President, comedians Key & Peele created a character called Luther, Obama’s “Anger Translator.” After “Obama” would say something in his classic, understated, non-anxious Obama style, Luther would say what Obama was really thinking and feeling, often screaming and shouting. It was such a popular character that Peele actually performed as Luther alongside the real Obama at Obama’s last White House Correspondents’ Dinner.ⁱ

The Job we read in the long poem that makes up the bulk of the Book of Job, is kind of like the Luther the Anger Translator of the Patient Job in the little bookend fairy tale.

I mean really?????!!!! What is this trial? And why am I required to come to it?????!!!!

Actually, Job wished he had an anger translator, an advocate to speak on his behalf. He lamented that no such advocate appeared. But he couldn’t contain his honest thoughts and feelings, and so when no Luther showed up to speak for him, he channeled his inner Luther and he used that voice in his own defense.

There is so much about this that is so counter to the “good Mennonite” way. First of all, we’re not supposed to make lawsuits in court. Historically, that is *not* appropriate conflict management. And we’re not supposed to be our own defenders; we’re supposed to rely on our community to affirm us, to speak for us and to defend us. Maybe you can complain on behalf of the suffering of others, but complaining about your own suffering is generally frowned upon. No wonder we prefer Patient Job – or at least give him more air time.

But the problem is Patient Job doesn’t exist. You can only get Patient Job by redacting the story. Thirteen fourteenths, or 92.8% of the story, to be precise.

It was *Impatient* Job who named reality.
Who honored the experience of the body.
Who would not minimize or deny pain, be it physical or existential
Who called BS on pretense.

It was *Impatient* Job who got a *seemingly absent God* to show up and make an accounting.

As we have witnessed this week, there are no guaranteed ends, even when you finally get the hearing you demand. But *Impatient Job* says NO, anyway. My righteousness will *not* be measured by the silence I keep in the face of abuse against me.

Impatient Job says, “I will not be silenced by the darkness, nor by the deep gloom that covers my face.” (Job 23:17) ⁱⁱ

Maybe *this* is actually how Job *passed* the test, after all. God’s test, not *ha satan’s*. After all, it was *ha satan*, “the accuser,” who came up with the idea that silence in the face of suffering would mean righteousness.

I don’t know. There are no easy answers or interpretations in Job – it’s not like God’s response to Job was: “Y’know, you’re right. I did you wrong. Thanks for helping me identify a growing edge.” In fact, God eventually had a lot to say, and was pretty defensive about it.

Job scholar Carol Newsomⁱⁱⁱ shares one interpretation. The divine speeches in Job, she writes, “also challenge Job’s understanding of where the presence of God may be found. Like many who suffer, Job experienced himself as godforsaken. In his way of thinking, God’s presence was to be found in the peace and fulfillment of the family circle and the satisfaction of doing good within the community.” And surely, God “*is to be found there.*”

But Job could never sense God’s presence in his desolation – and would refer to himself as a “brother of jackals,” “identifying with creatures who inhabit desolate spaces.”

But it was in a whirlwind, in the midst of his most desolate season, that Job was finally able to hear the voice of God.^{iv}

Newsom argues that the language in the divine speeches of “satisfying the desolate wastelands with rain, speaking in loving terms of the nurture of and pleasure in the animals of the wasteland” is, in fact, a loving response to Job, who had likened himself to a creature of desolate places.

I would never have come to that conclusion myself, as an unlearned reader. For me, it is hard to hear much comfort in God’s replies to Job. I wonder if Job was able to connect those dots and feel heard or comforted?

At the very least, though, God’s words are a strong counter to the neatly tied up packages of the Proverbs, which Job and Ecclesiastes follow in the Bible, and Proverbs’ confidence that blessing follows righteousness, as effect follows cause. If anything, the divine speeches seem to say, at great length, there is a larger context to your story and to your suffering. I, God, am working at the scale of all creation. The divine speeches seem to re-frame Job’s way of seeing the world in terms of justice vs. injustice, and instead invite a way of seeing that acknowledges that chaos is a also part of creation; that chaos is, ironically, a part of the order of things.^v

As one writer put it: “God is teaching Job the wisdom of bearing the pain that can neither be avoided nor abolished but can be shared when there is a whole living creation to absorb it ... “ ^{vi}

If it’s hard to interpret the divine speeches, it’s equally hard to interpret Job’s response to them. His responses are exceedingly short compared to his long rambles

to his friends, or to his long rambles to God when he didn't think God was listening. It almost reads like, "Ok, whatever. I get it, you win. You're God, after all."

It's hard to read between the lines about whether Job is really convinced, though.

He seems to switch gears, back to keeping his most honest thoughts private.

So, what is there for us from this ancient story? I would benefit, as in Job's words from today's passage: "by hearing the answers, and get[ting] a grip on what is behind all this."

As I pondered this text in light of sharing communion today, I thought at first: *how jarring it will be to move from Job to communion! This book about squabbling friends, and divine and human discontent.* Traditional Anabaptist notions of communion involve taking very seriously the writings in I Corinthians about being in right relationship with the folks you share communion with. I always took that to mean I should try to *smooth things over* with people before communion—apologize, swallow my pride, be good like Patient Job.

Impatient Job, though, also wants to experience communion with God, but chooses a very different route. Impatient Job wants authentic connection, emerging out of his true experience of life. It's hard to even imagine, socialized as I am, confronting someone about an injustice they've done to me as a precursor to our taking communion. It's always been presented to me as something that is initiated by the person who has done the wrong, not the wronged person.

So, I invite you, as you prepare for communion today, to think about what it would mean to bring your *authentic* selves to this table. To bring your authentic selves to the tables you sit around daily.

What if we came to the table, as if the songs Louise led us in earlier this morning were our invitation from God and one another?

Come, bring your anger to God.

Come bring your anger to God.

Come bring your anger to God, for Jesus will never say no.

Come, bring your sorrow to God.

Come bring your sorrow to God.

Come bring your sorrow to God, for Jesus will never say no.

Come bring your loud voice to God.

Come bring your loud voice to God.

Come bring your loud voice to God, for Jesus will never say no. ^{vii}

Might such honesty might be the most precious gift we can give, the best chance we can give to being in meaningful relationship with God and one another?

ⁱ Keegan-Michael Key, of *Key & Peele*. As Luther, Obama's Anger Translator, with President Barack Obama at the April 25, 2015 White House Correspondents' Dinner. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HkAK9QRe4ds&t=213s>

ⁱⁱ This is the translation recommended by Carol A. Newsom, in the *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. pp. 509-510.

ⁱⁱⁱ Carol A. Newsom, "The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Vol. 4. Abingdon Press, Nashville. 1996. pp.

^{iv} Carol A. Newsom. *NIB*. p. 632.

^v Carol A. Newsom. *NIB*. p. 336

^{vi} Newsom, *NIB* p. 632, quoting E. Kohak, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 45-46.

^{vii} Verses adapted by Louise Ranck. "Come, bring your burdens to God." *Sing the Story*, #50.