

Job 23 (NRSV) Then Job answered:

- ²“Today also my complaint is bitter;^[a]
his^[b] hand is heavy despite my groaning.
- ³Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his dwelling!
- ⁴I would lay my case before him,
and fill my mouth with arguments.
- ⁵I would learn what he would answer me,
and understand what he would say to me.
- ⁶Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No; but he would give heed to me.
- ⁷There an upright person could reason with him,
and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.
- ⁸“If I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;
- ⁹on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
I turn^[c] to the right, but I cannot see him.
- ¹⁰But he knows the way that I take;
when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold.
- ¹¹My foot has held fast to his steps;
I have kept his way and have not turned aside.
- ¹²I have not departed from the commandment of his lips;
I have treasured in^[d] my bosom the words of his mouth.
- ¹³But he stands alone and who can dissuade him?
What he desires, that he does.
- ¹⁴For he will complete what he appoints for me;
and many such things are in his mind.
- ¹⁵Therefore I am terrified at his presence;
when I consider, I am in dread of him.
- ¹⁶God has made my heart faint;
the Almighty^[e] has terrified me;
- ¹⁷If only I could vanish in darkness,
and thick darkness would cover my face!

Kerra Becker English

October 11, 2015

Praying in the Dark

Job 23, Psalm 22

Angry prayers. Bitter prayers. Prayers that wonder out loud if God is real. Prayers that question whether God even pays attention to our plight. Prayers of complaint. Prayers of lament. Prayers of “I’ve had enough and I’m not going to take it anymore.” Prayers for deliverance. Prayers for fairness. Prayers that call God to action and accountability for all the suffering in the world. If God is oh so powerful and loving, why do we still have to deal with all this mess? These are the prayers that demand an answer to the question: “How long, O Lord, how long?”

The blueprints for all these prayers are included in the Bible, though many of us have not been given permission, let alone have ever been taught, how to pray this way. I remember talking with a bright, sensitive, woman of my mother’s age in one of my first churches who asked me, a newbie pastor at the time, if it was OK for her to laugh in church. She had been taught not to. Many of us have been taught not to laugh, and not to cry, and not to get angry, and to accept without any commotion, whatever it is that God hands to us. We were told that’s what “good” Christians do. However, I’m calling that bluff – today! That’s about our human discomfort with such emotions. It has nothing to do with what God can handle or not handle. We can take it all, and I mean ALL to God, and there are Bibles all over this church that can prove it.

I am glad to say that in spite of how cool Job seems to be at handling things in the beginning of this book, it doesn’t take very long before he loses it with his friends, and with God.

That humanizes this story for me. He's heard his three friends give the most pathetic excuses for why all those bad things happened to him. And then, rightfully so, he refuses to be convinced that any of their reasons are correct. Even a fourth character is added in chapter 32, a younger guy who waits until his elders have had the chance to speak before he takes his stab at convincing Job why he's been in the wrong. Elihu is just as bad if not worse than the rest of them. He says what we all assume to be true about younger generations – he admits that he is so full of words that he is “like wine that has no vent, a new wineskin about to burst.” (32:18-19) He too has to give Job his opinion about what he should or shouldn't be saying to God. He criticizes Job, saying “God is greater than any mortal. Why do you contend against him?” Scholars say this was probably a later addition to the book, and that makes sense. It actually reminds me of the comments section after any internet article. It reiterates what has already been said and is so full of such opinions that it just might burst off the page!

But I've gotten ahead of myself a bit. Elihu doesn't get to give his speech until after we contend with Job's prayer in chapter 23, which is where I want us to spend some time. Job is praying in the dark. He is complaining, and arguing, and contending with God – and feels he has every right to do so. How refreshing is that! He is willing to wrestle with the unfairness of the Almighty. He is willing to tell God to God's face – *Hey! I don't deserve any of this!* He talks about the stress of not being able to connect with God, of feeling God's absence. And he challenges God to act. He prays in the dark, and he prays for the dark. If it's going to be this dismal, he prays, “If only I could vanish in the darkness, and the thick darkness would cover my face!”

What I love, love, love about this book is that no matter how unfair, or unjust, or unloving God appears to be – Job is relentless about maintaining the relationship. He demands

answers, and still trusts in God's character even when it seems as though he shouldn't. No matter how difficult it gets with those who would judge him from the outside, he hangs in there, shaking his fist in God's face. Early on, he says, "The arrows of the Almighty are in me and my spirit drinks their poison." (6:4). Can you feel the weight of that sentence? Job has been pierced and poisoned, by God.

Who else has felt pierced and poisoned by God? I have tasted Job's bitterness, albeit briefly in my quite comfortable life. But what about Jesus? In Mark's gospel, Jesus tells the disciples, *I don't know*, it seems like at least once a chapter or so, that he's going to be mocked, condemned, tortured, humiliated, and killed for what he's trying to do in the world. Jesus knows that he's been singled out for a brutal life that will be cut short by the religion that raised him and the friends he would trust to stay with him. "The arrows of the Almighty are in me and my spirit drinks their poison." I'm sure it felt that way for Jesus too. We still feel the sting of those arrows anytime we dare whisper the thought that Jesus died for us, and probably because of people just like us. What we will find out both with Job and with Jesus is that it's not quite that simple to think of God as a punisher, as someone who hates our sin so much that he is willing to cause suffering to absolve us from it.

Through this week's Job sermon, God has been awfully quiet. I can't hear anything over Job's friends making all the noise. And yet, Job just keeps crying out, and crying out, and crying out. It's just like Jesus crying out from the cross as the world went dark. In those pitch black moments of despair, God can seem awfully silent, so silent in fact that we can read God's punishment into it. God turns his back. God is nowhere near. God must be giving us this hell as retribution for something that we've done. We have to be cautious though in our interpretation. Atonement theories can come oh so close to replicating the mistakes Job's friends make in their

critique of his actions. Job must be being punished for doing something bad. Jesus hung on the cross, a righteous man, for all the bad things that we've done. We make the same mistakes as Job's friends do.

And yet, the righteous pray in protest. They often do. Job launches into his bitter complaint. Jesus yells the words of Psalm 22 in horror from the cross. At times such as these, we need prayer more than we need apologetics. Even with our best theology, there comes a point where we don't know. We are terrified and wish to vanish in the dark, and be covered up in our cloud of thick darkness. It's troubling to not have the answers, but maybe it's even more troublesome to come up with answers that don't quite fit the situation. If we rush too quickly to certainty, we might miss a few things about God's true character.